

ACTS

Matthew
Mark
Luke
John
Acts
Romans
1 Corinthians

2 Corinthians
Galatians
Ephesians
Philippians
Colossians
1 Thessalonians
2 Thessalonians

1 Timothy
2 Timothy
Titus
Philemon
Hebrews
James
1 Peter

2 Peter
1 John
2 John
3 John
Jude
Revelation

OUTLINE

Key theme: The expansion of the church in the world
Key verse: Acts 1:8

I. THE MINISTRY OF PETER (1—12)

- Jerusalem the center
- Ministry primarily to Israel
- A. Peter and the Jews—1—7
- B. Peter and the Samaritans—8
- C. The conversion of Paul—9
- D. Peter and the Gentiles—10—11
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II. THE MINISTRY OF PAUL (13—28)

- Syrian Antioch the center
- Ministry primarily to the Gentiles
- A. Paul's first missionary journey—13—14
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CHAPTER ONE

Acts 1

THE FAITH OF THE FIRST CHRISTIANS

A famous Hollywood producer once said that for a movie to be successful, it must start with an earthquake and work up to a climax. Luke certainly didn't follow that formula when he wrote the book of Acts. Except for the ascension of Jesus Christ, events recorded in Acts 1 are anything but dramatic. After all, what is exciting about a business meeting?

Then why record these events? Why didn't Luke just start with the story of Pentecost? For several reasons.

To begin with, Luke was writing volume two of a work that started with what we call the gospel of Luke (see Luke 1:1–4), and he had to begin with the proper salutation and introduction. We don't know who Theophilus was or even if he was a believer, but Luke's salutation suggests that he may have been an important Roman official (see Acts 23:26; 24:3; 26:25). Likely Theophilus was a Christian or at least a seeker who was carefully studying the Christian faith. His name means "friend of God," and we hope he lived up to his name.

But even more important, Luke had to build a bridge between his gospel and the book of Acts (Luke 24:50–53). At the close of his gospel, he had left the believers in the temple, praising God. Now he had to pick up the story and explain what happened next. Imagine how confused you would be if, in reading your New Testament, you turned the last page of the gospel of John and discovered—Romans! "How did the church get to Rome?" you would ask yourself; the answer is found in the book of Acts.

The book of Acts is also the account of the work of the Holy Spirit *in* and *through* the church. The gospel of Luke records what Jesus "began both to do and teach" in His human body, and the book of Acts tells us what Jesus *continued* to do and teach through His spiritual body, the church. Even today, congregations can learn much about church life and ministry from this book, and this even includes the business meetings!

In this chapter, we see the believers taking care of "unfinished business" and getting ready for Pentecost. What they said and did reveals to us the faith of the church. In what did they really believe?

The Believed in the Risen Christ (1:1–11)

After His resurrection, Jesus remained on earth for

forty days and ministered to His disciples. He had already opened their minds to understand the Old Testament message about Himself (Luke 24:44–48), but there were other lessons they needed to learn before they could launch out in their new ministry. Jesus appeared and disappeared during those forty days, and the believers never knew when He might show up. It was excellent preparation for the church because the days were soon coming when He would no longer be on earth to instruct them personally. We believers today never know when our Lord may return, so our situation is somewhat similar to theirs.

The Lord taught them several important lessons during that time of special ministry.

The reality of His resurrection (v. 3a). Some of the believers may have had their doubts forty days before (Mark 16:9–14), but there could be no question now that Jesus had indeed been raised from the dead. To strengthen their faith, He gave them "many infallible proofs," which Luke did not explain. We know that when Jesus met His disciples, He invited them to touch His body, and He even ate before them (Luke 24:38–43). Whatever proofs He gave, they were convincing.

Faith in His resurrection was important to the church because their own spiritual power depended on it. Also, the message of the gospel involves the truth of the resurrection (Rom. 10:9–10; 1 Cor. 15:1–8), and, if Jesus were dead, the church would be speechless. Finally, the official Jewish position was that the disciples had stolen Jesus' body from the tomb (Matt. 28:11–15), and the believers had to be able to refute this as they witnessed to the nation.

These believers were chosen to be special witnesses of Christ's resurrection, and that was the emphasis in their ministry (Acts 1:22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:30–32). Most of the people in Jerusalem knew that Jesus of Nazareth had been crucified, but they did not know that He had been raised from the dead. By their words, their walk, and their mighty works, the believers told the world that Jesus was alive. This was "the sign of Jonah" that Jesus had promised to the nation (Matt. 12:38–41)—His death, burial, and resurrection.

The coming of His kingdom (v. 3b). This refers to the reign of God over the hearts and lives of those who have trusted Him (see Matt. 6:33; Rom. 14:17; 1 John 3:1–9). When you read the four gospels, you discover that the apostles had a strongly political view of the kingdom and were especially concerned about their own positions and privileges. Being loyal Jews, they

longed for the defeat of their enemies and the final establishment of the glorious kingdom under the rule of King Messiah. They did not realize that there must first be a spiritual change in the hearts of the people (see Luke 1:67–79).

Jesus did not rebuke them when they “kept asking” about the future Jewish kingdom (Acts 1:7). After all, He had opened their minds to understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:44), so they knew what they were asking. But God has not revealed His timetable to us, and it is futile for us to speculate. The important thing is not to be curious about the future but to be busy in the present, sharing the message of God’s *spiritual* kingdom. This is another emphasis in the book of Acts (see Acts 8:12; 14:22; 20:25; 28:23, 31).

The power of His Holy Spirit (vv. 4–8). John the Baptist had announced a future baptism of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33; and see Acts 11:16), and now that prophecy would be fulfilled. Jesus had also promised the coming of the Spirit (John 14:16–18, 26; 15:26–27; 16:7–15). It would be an endowment of power for the disciples so that they would be able to serve the Lord and accomplish His will (Luke 24:49). John had spoken about “the Holy Spirit and fire,” but Jesus said nothing about fire. Why? Because the “baptism of fire” has to do with future judgment, when the nation of Israel will go through tribulation (Matt. 3:11–12). The appearing of “tongues of fire” at Pentecost (Acts 2:3) could not be termed a “baptism.”

Acts 1:8 is a key verse. To begin with, it explains that the power of the church comes from the Holy Spirit and not from man (see Zech. 4:6). God’s people experienced repeated fillings of the Spirit as they faced new opportunities and obstacles (Acts 2:4; 4:8, 31; 9:17; 13:9). Ordinary people were able to do extraordinary things because the Spirit of God was at work in their lives. The ministry of the Holy Spirit is not a luxury; it is an absolute necessity.

“Witness” is a key word in the book of Acts and is used twenty-nine times as either a verb or a noun. A witness is somebody who tells what he has seen and heard (Acts 4:19–20). When you are on the witness stand in court, the judge is not interested in your ideas or opinions; he only wants to hear what you know. Our English word *martyr* comes from the Greek word translated “witness,” and many of God’s people have sealed their witness by laying down their lives.

We hear a great deal these days about “soul winning,” and the emphasis is a good one. However, while *some* of God’s people have a calling to evangelism (Eph. 4:11), *all* of God’s people are expected to be witnesses and tell the lost about the Savior. Not every Christian can bring a sinner to the place of faith and decision (though most of us could do better), but every Christian can bear faithful witness to the Savior. “A true witness delivereth souls” (Prov. 14:25).

Acts 1:8 also gives us a general outline of the book of Acts as it describes the geographical spread of the

gospel: from Jerusalem (Acts 1–7) to Judea and Samaria (Acts 8–9), and then to the Gentiles and to the ends of the earth (Acts 10–28). No matter where we live, as Christians we should begin our witness at home and then extend it “into all the world.” As Dr. Oswald J. Smith used to say, “The light that shines the farthest will shine the brightest at home.”

The assurance of His coming again (vv. 9–11).

Our Lord’s ascension into heaven was an important part of His ministry, for if He had not returned to the Father, He could not have sent the promised gift of the Holy Spirit (John 16:5–15). Also, in heaven today, the Savior is our interceding High Priest, giving us the grace that we need for life and service (Heb. 4:14–16). He is also our Advocate before the Father, forgiving us when we confess our sins (1 John 1:9–2:2). The exalted and glorified Head of the church is now working with His people on earth and helping them accomplish His purposes (Mark 16:19–20).

As the believers watched Jesus being taken up to glory, two angels appeared and gently rebuked them. Angels play an important role in the ministry described in Acts, just as they do today, even though we cannot see them (see Acts 5:19–20; 8:26; 10:3–7; 12:7–10, 23; 27:23). The angels are the servants of the saints (Heb. 1:14).

The two messengers gave the believers assurance that Jesus Christ would come again, just as He had been taken from them. This seems to refer to His public “coming in the clouds” (Matt. 24:30; 26:64; Rev. 1:7) rather than to His coming for His church “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye” (1 Cor. 15:51–52; 1 Thess. 4:13–18). Regardless of what views different people may take of God’s prophetic program, Christians agree that Jesus is coming again and that He can come at any time. This in itself is a great motivation for faithful Christian service (Luke 12:34–48).

They Believed in Each Other (1:12–14)

They obeyed their Lord’s commandment and returned to Jerusalem “with great joy” (Luke 24:52). It is likely that the group met in the Upper Room where the last Passover had been celebrated, but they were also found at worship in the temple (Luke 24:53).

What a variety of people made up that first assembly of believers! There were men and women, apostles and “ordinary” people, and even members of the Lord’s earthly family (see Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3). His “brethren” had not believed in Him during His ministry (John 7:5), but they did come to trust Him after the resurrection (Acts 1:14). Mary was there as a member of the assembly, participating in worship and prayer along with the others. The center of their fellowship was the risen Christ, and all of them adored and magnified Him.

How easy it would have been for someone to bring division into this beautiful assembly of humble people! The members of the Lord’s family might have claimed special recognition, or Peter could have been criticized

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for his cowardly denial of the Savior. Or perhaps Peter might have blamed John, because it was John who brought him into the high priest's house (John 18:15–16). John might well have reminded the others that *he* had faithfully stood at the cross, and had even been chosen by the Savior to care for His mother. But there was none of this. In fact, nobody was even arguing over who among them was the greatest!

The key phrase is “with one accord,” a phrase that is found six times in Acts (1:14; 2:1, 46; 4:24; 5:12; 15:25; and note also 2:44). There was among these believers a wonderful unity that bound them together in Christ (Ps. 133; Gal. 3:28), the kind of unity that Christians need today. “I do not want the walls of separation between different orders of Christians to be destroyed,” said the godly British preacher Rowland Hill, “but only lowered, that we may shake hands a little easier over them!”

It is not enough for Christians to have faith in the Lord; they must also have faith in one another. To these 120 people (Acts 1:15) the Lord had given the solemn responsibility of bearing witness to a lost world, and none of them could do the job alone. They would experience severe persecution in the days ahead, and one of them, James, would lay down his life for Christ. It was not a time for asking, “Who is the greatest?” or, “Who committed the greatest sin?” It was a time for praying together and standing together in the Lord. As they waited and worshipped together, they were being better prepared for the work that lay before them.

They Believed in Prayer (1:15, 24–25)

Prayer plays a significant role in the story of the church as recorded in the book of Acts. The believers prayed for guidance in making decisions (Acts 1:15–26) and for courage to witness for Christ (Acts 4:23–31). In fact, prayer was a normal part of their daily ministry (Acts 2:42–47; 3:1; 6:4). Stephen prayed as he was being stoned (Acts 7:55–60). Peter and John prayed for the Samaritans (Acts 8:14–17), and Saul of Tarsus prayed after his conversion (Acts 9:11). Peter prayed before he raised Dorcas from the dead (Acts 9:36–43). Cornelius prayed that God would show him how to be saved (Acts 10:1–4), and Peter was on the housetop praying when God told him how to be the answer to Cornelius's prayers (Acts 10:9).

The believers in John Mark's house prayed for Peter when he was in prison, and the Lord delivered him both from prison and from death (Acts 12:1–11). The church at Antioch fasted and prayed before sending out Barnabas and Paul (Acts 13:1–3; and note 14:23). It was at a prayer meeting in Philippi that God opened Lydia's heart (Acts 16:13), and another prayer meeting in Philippi opened the prison doors (Acts 16:25ff.). Paul prayed for his friends before leaving them (Acts 20:36; 21:5). In the midst of a storm, he prayed for God's blessing (Acts 27:35), and after a storm, he prayed that God would heal a sick man (Acts 28:8). In almost every chapter in Acts you find a reference to

prayer, and the book makes it very clear that something happens when God's people pray.

This is certainly a good lesson for the church today. Prayer is both the thermometer and the thermostat of the local church, for the “spiritual temperature” either goes up or down, depending on how God's people pray. John Bunyan, author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, said, “Prayer is a shield to the soul, a sacrifice to God, and a scourge to Satan.” In the book of Acts, you see prayer accomplishing all of these things.

They Believed in God's Leading (1:16–23)

The Lord Jesus was no longer with them to give them personal directions, but they were not without the leading of the Lord, for they had the Word of God and prayer. In fact, the Word of God and prayer formed the foundation for the ministry of the church as recorded in the book of Acts (Acts 6:4).

Peter has been criticized for taking charge, but I believe he was doing the will of God. Jesus had made it clear that Peter was to be their leader (Matt. 16:19; Luke 22:31–32; John 21:15–17). Peter was “first among equals,” but he was their recognized leader. His name is mentioned first in each listing of the apostles, including Acts 1:13.

But should Peter and the others have waited until the Spirit had been given? We must not forget that the Lord had previously “breathed” on them and imparted the Spirit to them (John 20:22). When the Spirit came at Pentecost, it was for the purpose of filling them with power and baptizing them into one body in Christ.

We must also remember that the Lord had opened up their minds to understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45). When Peter referred to Psalms 69:25 and 109:8, he was not doing this on his own, but was being led by the Spirit of God. These people definitely believed in the divine inspiration of the Old Testament Scriptures (Acts 1:16; and see 3:18; 4:25), and they also believed that these Scriptures had a practical application to their situation.

A radio listener once wrote to ask me, “Why do you teach from the Old Testament? After all, it's ancient history and it's all been fulfilled by Jesus!” I explained that the only “Bible” the early church had was the Old Testament, and yet they were able to use it to discover the will of God. We need both the Old and the New; in fact, the New Testament writers often quote from the Old Testament to prove their point. St. Augustine said, “The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is by the New revealed.”

Certainly we must interpret the Old by the New, but we must not think that God no longer speaks to His people through the Old Testament Scriptures. “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable” (2 Tim. 3:16, italics mine). “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4, italics mine). We must use the whole Bible and balance Scripture with Scripture as we seek to discover the mind of God.

“But it was wrong for them to select a new apostle,” some claim, “because Paul was the one who was chosen by God to fill up the ranks. They chose Matthias and he was never heard of again!”

Except for Peter and John, *none of the original Twelve* are mentioned by name in the book of Acts after 1:13! Paul could not have “filled up the ranks” because he could never have met the divine qualifications laid down in Acts 1:21–22. Paul was not baptized by John the Baptist; he did not travel with the apostles when Jesus was with them on earth; and, though he saw the glorified Christ, Paul was not a witness of the resurrection as were the original apostles.

Paul made it clear that he was *not* to be classified with the Twelve (1 Cor. 15:8; Gal. 1:15–24), and the Twelve knew it. If the Twelve thought that Paul was supposed to be one of them, they certainly did not show it! In fact, they refused to admit Paul into the Jerusalem fellowship until Barnabas came to his rescue (Acts 9:26–27)! The twelve apostles ministered primarily to the twelve tribes of Israel, while Paul was sent to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:1–10).

No, Paul was not meant to be the twelfth apostle. Peter and the other believers were in the will of God when they selected Matthias, and God gave His endorsement to Matthias by empowering him with the same Spirit that was given to the other men whom Jesus had personally selected (Acts 2:1–4, 14).

It was necessary that twelve men witness at Pentecost to the twelve tribes of Israel, and also that twelve men be prepared to sit on twelve thrones to judge the twelve tribes (Luke 22:28–30). From Acts 2–7, the witness was primarily to Israel, “to the Jew first” (see Rom. 1:16; Acts 3:26; 13:46). Once the message had gone to the Gentiles (Acts 10–11), this Jewish emphasis began to decline. When the apostle James was martyred, he was not replaced (Acts 12). Why? Because the official witness to Israel was now completed, and the message was going out to Jews and Gentiles alike. There was no more need for twelve apostles to give witness to the twelve tribes of Israel.

Peter’s account of the purchase of the land and the death of Judas appears to contradict the record in Matthew 27:3–10, but actually it complements it. Judas did not buy the field personally, but since it was his money that paid for it, in that sense, he was the buyer. And, since the thirty pieces of silver were considered “blood money,” the field was called “the field of blood” (Matt. 27:8). It was not Judas’s blood that gave the field its name, for the Jews would not use as a sacred cemetery a place that had been defiled by a suicide. Judas hanged himself, and apparently the rope broke and his body (possibly already distended) burst open when it hit the ground.

The believers prayed for God’s guidance before they “voted,” because they wanted to select the man that God had already chosen (Prov. 16:33). Their exalted Lord was working in them and through them from heaven. This is the last instance in the Bible of the cast-

ing of lots, and there is no reason why believers today should use this approach in determining God’s will. While it is not always easy to discover what God wants us to do, if we are willing to obey Him, He will reveal His will to us (John 7:17). What is important is that we follow the example of the early church by emphasizing the Word of God and prayer.

Not all our Lord’s followers were in the Upper Room, for there were only 120 present and 1 Corinthians 15:6 states that at least 500 persons saw the risen Christ at one time. Bible scholars do not agree on the size of the population of Palestine at that time, and their estimates run from 600,000 to 4 million. But regardless of what figure you select, the 120 believers were still a minority, yet they turned their world upside down for Christ!

What was their secret? The power of the Holy Spirit!

Dr. Luke explains this in Acts 2.

CHAPTER TWO

Acts 2

POWER FROM HEAVEN!

We are not going to move this world by criticism of it nor conformity to it, but by the combustion within it of lives ignited by the Spirit of God.”

Vance Havner made that statement and he was right. The early church had none of the things that we think are so essential for success today—buildings, money, political influence, social status—and yet the church won multitudes to Christ and saw many churches established throughout the Roman world. Why? Because the church had the power of the Holy Spirit energizing its ministry. They were a people who “were ignited by the Spirit of God.”

That same Holy Spirit power is available to us today to make us more effective witnesses for Christ. The better we understand His working at Pentecost, the better we will be able to relate to Him and experience His power. The ministry of the Spirit is to glorify Christ in the life and witness of the believer (John 16:14), and that is what is important. Acts 2 helps us understand the Holy Spirit by recording four experiences in the life of the church.

The Church Waiting for the Spirit (2:1)

Pentecost means “fiftieth” because this feast was held fifty days after the Feast of Firstfruits (Lev. 23:15–22). The calendar of Jewish feasts in Leviticus 23 is an outline of the work of Jesus Christ. Passover pictures His death as the Lamb of God (John 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:7), and the Feast of Firstfruits pictures His resurrection from the dead (1 Cor. 15:20–23). Fifty days after Firstfruits is the Feast of Pentecost, which pictures the formation of the church. At Pentecost, the Jews celebrated the

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giving of the law, but Christians celebrate it because of the giving of the Holy Spirit to the church.

The Feast of Firstfruits took place on the day after the Sabbath following Passover, which means it was always on the first day of the week. (The Sabbath is the seventh day.) Jesus arose from the dead on the first day of the week and “became the firstfruits of them that slept” (1 Cor. 15:20). Now, if Pentecost was fifty days later—seven weeks plus one day—then Pentecost also took place on the first day of the week. Christians assemble and worship on Sunday, the first day of the week, because on that day our Lord arose from the dead, but it was also the day on which the Holy Spirit was given to the church.

On the Feast of Firstfruits, the priest waved a sheaf of grain before the Lord, but on Pentecost, he presented two loaves of bread. Why? Because at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit baptized the believers and united them into one body. The Jewish believers received this baptism at Pentecost, and the Gentile believers received this baptism in the home of Cornelius (Acts 10). This explains the presence of two loaves of bread (see 1 Cor. 10:17). The fact that there was leaven (yeast) in the loaves indicates the presence of sin in the church on earth. The church will not be perfect until it gets to heaven.

We must not conclude that this ten-day prayer meeting brought about the miracles of Pentecost, or that we today may pray as they did and experience “another Pentecost.” Like our Lord’s death at Calvary, Pentecost was a once-for-all event that will not be repeated. The church may experience new fillings of the Spirit, and certainly patient prayer is an essential element to spiritual power, but we would not ask for another Pentecost any more than we would ask for another Calvary.

The Church Worshipping the Lord (2:2–13)

As we study the events of Pentecost, it is important that we separate the accidentals from the essentials. The Spirit *came* and the people heard the sound of rushing wind and saw tongues of fire. The Spirit *baptized* and *filled* the believers, and then *spoke* as they praised God in various languages. The Spirit *empowered* Peter to preach, and then He *convicted* the listeners so that three thousand of them trusted Christ and were saved. Let’s consider these ministries one by one.

The Spirit came (vv. 2–3). The Holy Spirit had been active prior to Pentecost and had worked in creation (Gen. 1:1–2), in Old Testament history (Judg. 6:34; 1 Sam. 16:13), and in the life and ministry of Jesus (Luke 1:30–37; 4:1, 14; Acts 10:38). However, now there would be two changes: the Spirit would dwell in people and not just come on them, and His presence would be permanent, not temporary (John 14:16–17). The Spirit could not have come sooner, for it was essential that Jesus die, be raised from the dead, and return to heaven before the Spirit could be given (John 7:37–39; 16:7ff.). Remember the Jewish calendar in Leviticus 23: Passover, Firstfruits, and then Pentecost.

There were three startling signs that accompanied the coming of the Spirit: the sound of a rushing wind, tongues of fire, and the believers praising God in various languages. The word *Spirit* is the same as “wind” in both the Hebrew and the Greek (John 3:8). The people did not *feel* the wind; they heard *the sound* of a mighty wind. It is likely the believers were in the temple when this occurred (Luke 24:53). The word *house* in Acts 2:2 can refer to the temple (see Acts 7:47). The tongues of fire symbolized the powerful witness of the church to the people. Campbell Morgan reminds us that our tongues can be set on fire either by heaven or by hell (James 3:5–6)! Combine wind and fire and you have—a blaze!

The Spirit baptized (1:5). The Greek word *baptizo* has two meanings, one literal and the other figurative. The word literally means “to submerge,” but the figurative meaning is “to be identified with.” The baptism of the Spirit is that act of God by which He identified believers with the exalted Head of the church, Jesus Christ, and formed the spiritual body of Christ on earth (1 Cor. 12:12–14). Historically, this took place at Pentecost; today, it takes place whenever a sinner trusts Jesus Christ and is born again.

When you read about “baptism” in the New Testament, you must exercise discernment to determine whether the word is to be interpreted literally or symbolically. For example, in Romans 6:3–4 and Galatians 3:27–28, the reference is symbolic since water baptism cannot put a sinner into Jesus Christ. Only the Holy Spirit can do that (Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 12:13; see Acts 10:44–48). Water baptism is a public witness of the person’s identification with Jesus Christ, while Spirit baptism is the personal and private experience that identifies the person with Christ.

It is important to note that historically, the baptism of the Spirit took place in two stages: the Jewish believers were baptized at Pentecost, and the Gentiles were baptized and added to the body in the home of Cornelius (Acts 10:44–48; 11:15–17; and see Eph. 2:11–22).

The Spirit filled (v. 4). The filling of the Spirit has to do with power for witness and service (Acts 1:8). We are not exhorted to be baptized by the Spirit, for this is something God does once and for all when we trust His Son. But we are commanded to be filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18), for we need His power constantly if we are to serve God effectively. At Pentecost, the Christians were filled with the Spirit and experienced the baptism of the Spirit, but after that, they experienced many fillings (Acts 4:8, 31; 9:17; 13:9) but no more baptisms.

Occasionally someone says, “What difference does it make what words we use? The important thing is that we have the experience!” I doubt that they would apply that same approach to any other area of life such as medicine, cooking, or mechanics. What difference does it make if the pharmacist uses arsenic or aspirin in the prescription, just so long as you get well? Or if the mechanic installs an alternator or a carburetor, just so long as the car works?

The Holy Spirit has revealed God's truth to us in *words* (1 Cor. 2:12–13), and these words have definite meanings that must not be changed. Regeneration must not be confused with justification, nor propitiation with adoption. Each of these words is important in God's plan of salvation and must be defined accurately and used carefully.

The baptism of the Spirit means that I belong to His body; the fullness of the Spirit means that my body belongs to Him. The baptism is final; the fullness is repeated as we trust God for new power to witness. The baptism involves all other believers, for it makes us one in the body of Christ (Eph. 4:1–6); while the fullness is personal and individual. These are two distinct experiences and they must not be confused.

The Spirit spoke (vv. 5–13). Note that the believers were praising God, not preaching the gospel, and that they used known languages, not an “unknown tongue” (Acts 2:6, 8). Luke named fifteen different geographical locations and clearly stated that the citizens of those places heard Peter and the others declare God's wonderful works *in languages they could understand*. The Greek word translated “language” in Acts 2:6 and “tongue” in Acts 2:8 is *dialektos* and refers to a language or dialect of some country or district (Acts 21:40; 22:2; 26:14). Unless we are instructed otherwise in Scripture, we must assume that when “speaking in tongues” is mentioned elsewhere in Acts, or in 1 Corinthians, it refers to an identical experience: believers praising God in the Spirit in languages that are known.

Why did God do this? For one thing, Pentecost was a reversal of the judgment at the Tower of Babel when God confused man's language (Gen. 11:1–9). God's judgment at Babel scattered the people, but God's blessing at Pentecost united the believers in the Spirit. At Babel, the people were unable to understand each other, but at Pentecost, men heard God's praises and understood what was said. The Tower of Babel was a scheme designed to praise men and make a name for men, but Pentecost brought praise to God. The building of Babel was an act of rebellion, but Pentecost was a ministry of humble submission to God. What a contrast!

Another reason for this gift of tongues was to let the people know that the gospel was for the whole world. God wants to speak to every person in his or her own language and give the saving message of salvation in Jesus Christ. The emphasis in the book of Acts is on worldwide evangelization, “unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). “The Spirit of Christ is the spirit of missions,” said Henry Martyn, “and the nearer we get to Him, the more intensely missionary we must become.”

Apparently the sound of the wind drew the people to the temple where the believers were gathered, but it was the praise by the believers that really captured their attention. The careless listeners mocked and accused the believers of being drunk, but others were sincerely concerned to find out what was going on. The people were perplexed (Acts 2:6), amazed (Acts 2:7, 12), and they marveled (Acts 2:7).

It is interesting that the mockers should accuse the believers of being drunk, for wine is associated with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18). Paul relates the two *in contrast*, for when a man is filled with strong drink, he loses control of himself and ends up being ashamed, but when a person is filled with the Spirit, he has self-control and glorifies God. Strong drink can bring a temporary exhilaration, but the Spirit gives a deep satisfaction and a lasting joy.

The Church Witnessing to the Lost (2:14–41)

Peter did not preach in tongues; he addressed his audience in the everyday Aramaic that they understood. The message was given by a Jew, to Jews (Acts 2:14, 22, 29, 36), on a Jewish holy day, about the resurrection of the Jewish Messiah whom their nation had crucified. The Gentiles who were there were proselytes to the Jewish religion (Acts 2:10). Peter would not open the door of faith to the Gentiles until he visited Cornelius (Acts 10).

There are three explanations in Peter's sermon.

He explained what happened: the Spirit had come (vv. 14–21). The joyful worship of the believers was not the result of too much wine; it was the evidence of the arrival of God's Holy Spirit to dwell in His people. Orthodox Jews did not eat or drink before 9 a.m. on the Sabbath or on a holy day, nor did they usually drink wine except with meals.

Peter did not say that Pentecost was the *fulfillment* of the prophecy of Joel 2:28–32, because the signs and wonders predicted had not occurred. When you read Joel's prophecy in context, you see that it deals with the nation of Israel in the end times, in connection with “the day of the Lord.” However, Peter was led by the Spirit to see in the prophecy an application to the church. He said, “This is that same Holy Spirit that Joel wrote about. He is here!” Such an announcement would seem incredible to the Jews, because they thought God's Spirit was given only to a few select people (see Num. 11:28–29). But here were 120 of their fellow Jews, men and women, enjoying the blessing of the same Holy Spirit that had empowered Moses, David, and the prophets.

It was indeed the dawning of a new age, the “last days” in which God would bring to completion His plan of salvation for mankind. Jesus had finished the great work of redemption, and nothing more had to be done except to share the good news with the world, beginning with the nation of Israel. The invitation is, “Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21).

He explained how it happened: Jesus was alive (vv. 22–35). News travels fast in the East, and probably most of the adults in Jerusalem, residents and visitors, knew about the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. They also had heard rumors of an “official announcement” that His followers had stolen the body of Jesus just to make people think that He had kept His word and been raised from the dead.

But Peter told them the truth: Jesus of Nazareth

Acts 2

had indeed been raised from the dead, and the resurrection proves that He is the Messiah! Peter gave them four proofs of the resurrection of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, and then he called on them to believe on Christ and be saved.

His first proof was the person of Jesus Christ (vv. 22–24). Peter’s audience knew that Jesus was a real Person from the town of Nazareth and that He had performed many signs and miracles. (On “Jesus of Nazareth,” see Acts 2:22; 3:6; 4:10; 6:14; 10:38; 22:8; 26:9; also 24:5.) It was clear that God’s hand was on Him. They had heard Him speak and had watched His life. They had even seen Him raise the dead, yet they could find no fault in Him—and these things were not “done in a corner” (Acts 26:26)!

It was incredible that such a Man should be defeated by death. From one point of view, the crucifixion of Jesus was a terrible crime (Acts 2:23), but from another point of view it was a wonderful victory (Acts 2:24). The word translated “pains” means “birth pangs,” suggesting that the tomb was a “womb” out of which Jesus was “born” in resurrection glory (see Acts 13:33).

Peter’s second proof was the prophecy of David (vv. 25–31). He quoted Psalm 16:8–11, verses that obviously could not apply to David who was already dead and buried. Being a prophet of God, David wrote about the Messiah, that His soul would not remain in hades (the realm of the dead) or His body in the grave where it would decay.

The third proof was the witness of the believers (v. 33). After His resurrection, Jesus did not appear to the world at large, but to His own followers whom He had commissioned to give witness to others that He was alive (Acts 1:3, 22). But were these people dependable witnesses? Can we trust them? We certainly can! Prior to Christ’s resurrection, the disciples did not even believe that He would be raised from the dead, and they themselves had to be convinced (Mark 16:9–14; Acts 1:3). They had nothing to gain by preaching a lie, because their message aroused official opposition and even led to the imprisonment and death of some of the believers. A few fanatics might be willing to believe and promote a lie for a time, but when thousands believe a message, and when that message is backed up by miracles, you cannot easily dismiss it. These witnesses were trustworthy.

Peter’s fourth proof of the resurrection of Christ was the presence of the Holy Spirit (vv. 33–35). Follow his logic. If the Holy Spirit is in the world, then God must have sent Him. Joel promised that one day the Spirit would come, and Jesus Himself had promised to send the gift of the Holy Spirit to His people (Luke 24:49; John 14:26; 15:26; Acts 1:4). But if Jesus is dead, He cannot send the Spirit; therefore, He must be alive. Furthermore, He could not send the Spirit unless He had returned to heaven to the Father (John 16:7); so, Jesus has ascended to heaven! To back up this statement, Peter quoted Psalm 110:1, a verse that certainly could not be applied to David (note Matt. 22:41–46).

Peter’s conclusion was both a declaration and an accusation: Jesus is your Messiah, *but you crucified Him* (see Acts 2:23)! Peter did not present the cross as the place where the sinless substitute died for the world, but where Israel killed her own Messiah! They committed the greatest crime in history! Was there any hope? Yes, for Peter gave a third explanation that was good news to their hearts.

He explained why it happened: to save sinners (vv. 36–41). The Holy Spirit took Peter’s message and used it to convict the hearts of the listeners. (In Acts 5:33 and 7:54, a different Greek word is used that suggests anger rather than conviction for sin.) After all, if they were guilty of crucifying their Messiah, what might God do to them! Note that they addressed their question to the other apostles as well as to Peter, for all twelve were involved in the witness that day, and Peter was only first among equals.

Peter told them how to be saved: they had to repent of their sins and believe on Jesus Christ. They would give proof of the sincerity of their repentance and faith by being baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, thus identifying themselves publicly with their Messiah and Savior. Only by repenting and believing on Christ could they receive the gift of the Spirit (Gal. 3:2, 14), and this promise was for both the Jews and the “far off” Gentiles (Eph. 2:13–19).

It is unfortunate that the translation of Acts 2:38 in the King James Version suggests that people must be baptized in order to be saved, because this is not what the Bible teaches. The Greek word *eis* (which is translated “for” in the phrase “for the remission of sins”) can mean “on account of” or “on the basis of.” In Matthew 3:11, John the Baptist baptized on the basis that people had repented. Acts 2:38 should not be used to teach salvation by baptism. If baptism is essential for salvation, it seems strange that Peter said nothing about baptism in his other sermons (Acts 3:12–26; 5:29–32; 10:34–43). In fact, the people in the home of Cornelius received the Holy Spirit *before they were baptized* (Acts 10:44–48)! Since believers are commanded to be baptized, it is important that we have a clean conscience by obeying (1 Peter 3:21), but we must not think that baptism is a part of salvation. If so, then nobody in Hebrews 11 was saved, because none of them was ever baptized.

Acts 2:40 indicates that the apostles continued to share the Word and to urge the people to trust Jesus Christ. They looked on the nation of Israel as a “crooked generation” that was under condemnation (Matt. 16:4; 17:17; Phil. 2:15). Actually, the nation would have about forty years before Rome would come and destroy the city and the temple and scatter the people. History was repeating itself. During the forty years in the wilderness, the new generation “saved itself” from the older generation that rebelled against God. Now, God would give His people another forty years of grace, and on that day, three thousand people repented, believed, and were saved.

The Church Walking in the Spirit (2:42–47)

The believers continued to use the temple for their place of assembly and ministry, but they also met in various homes. The three thousand new converts needed instruction in the Word and fellowship with God's people if they were to grow and become effective witnesses. The early church did more than make converts; they also made *disciples* (Matt. 28:19–20).

Two phrases in Acts 2:42 may need explanation. “Breaking of bread” probably refers to their regular meals, but at the close of each meal, they probably paused to remember the Lord by observing what we call “the Lord’s Supper.” Bread and wine were the common fare at a Jewish table. The word *fellowship* means much more than “being together.” It means “having in common” and probably refers to the sharing of material goods that was practiced in the early church. This was certainly not a form of modern communism, for the program was totally voluntary, temporary (Acts 11:27–30), and motivated by love.

The church was unified (Acts 2:44), magnified (Acts 2:47a), and multiplied (Acts 2:47b). It had a powerful testimony among the unsaved Jews, not only because of the miracles done by the apostles (Acts 2:43), but also because of the way the members of the fellowship loved each other and served the Lord. The risen Lord continued to work with them (Mark 16:20), and people continued to be saved. What a church!

The Christians you meet in the book of Acts were not content to meet once a week for “services as usual.” They met daily (Acts 2:46), cared daily (Acts 6:1), won souls daily (Acts 2:47), searched the Scriptures daily (Acts 17:11), and increased in number daily (Acts 16:5). Their Christian faith was a day-to-day reality, not a once-a-week routine. Why? Because the risen Christ was a living reality to them, and His resurrection power was at work in their lives through the Spirit.

The promise is still good: “Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21; Rom. 10:13). Have you called? Have you trusted Jesus Christ to save you?

CHAPTER THREE

Acts 3:1–4:4**THE POWER OF HIS NAME**

The emphasis in Acts 3 and 4 is on the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 3:6, 16; 4:7, 10, 12, 17–18, 30).

A name, of course, implies much more than identification; it carries with it authority, reputation, and power. When somebody says, “You can use my name!” you sincerely hope the name is worth using. If an order is given in the name of the President of the United States or the Prime Minister of Great Britain, those who receive the order know that they are obligated to obey. If I were to issue orders at the White House or at No. 10 Downing Street (even if I could get in), nobody

would pay much attention because my name has no official authority behind it.

But the name of the Lord Jesus has *all authority* behind it, for He is the Son of God (Matt. 28:18). Because His name is “above every name” (Phil. 2:9–11), He deserves our worship and obedience. The great concern of the first Christians was that the name of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, be glorified, and believers today should have that same concern.

As we study this section, we should note that the Jewish emphasis is very pronounced. Peter addressed Jewish men (Acts 3:12) and called them “children of the prophets and of the covenant” (Acts 3:25). He referred to the Jewish fathers (Acts 3:13) as well as to the prophets (Acts 3:18, 21–25). The phrase “times of restitution” (Acts 3:21) is definitely Jewish and refers to the messianic kingdom promised in the prophets. The message is still going out “to the Jew first” (Acts 3:26) and is presented in Jewish terms.

There are three stages in this event, and each stage reveals something wonderful about Jesus Christ.

Amazement: Jesus the Healer (3:1–10)

The believers were still attached to the temple and to the traditional hours of prayer (Ps. 55:17; Dan. 6:10; Acts 10:30). Keep in mind that Acts 1—10 describes a gradual transition from Israel to the Gentiles and from “Jewish Christianity” (note Acts 21:20) to the “one body” made up of both Jews and Gentiles. It took several years before many of the Jewish believers really understood the place of the Gentiles in God’s program, and this understanding did not come without its conflicts.

The contrast between Acts 2 and 3 is interesting: Peter the preacher—Peter the personal worker; multitudes—one poor man; ministry resulting in blessing—ministry resulting in arrest and persecution. The events in Acts 3 are an illustration of the last phrase in Acts 2:47, showing us how the Lord added to His church daily. While the Holy Spirit is not named in this chapter, He was certainly at work in and through the apostles, performing His ministry of glorifying Jesus Christ (John 16:14).

Peter and John are often found together in Scripture. They were partners in the fishing business (Luke 5:10); they prepared the last Passover for Jesus (Luke 22:8); they ran to the tomb on the first Easter Sunday morning (John 20:3–4); and they ministered to the Samaritans who believed on Jesus Christ (Acts 8:14). Now that they were filled with the Holy Spirit, the apostles were no longer competing for greatness, but were at last working faithfully together to build the church (Ps. 133).

That Peter noticed the lame beggar is another evidence of the Spirit’s ministry. No doubt thousands of people were near the temple (Acts 4:4), and perhaps scores of beggars, but the Lord told Peter to heal a lame man lying at the Beautiful Gate. There were nine gates that led from the court of the Gentiles into the temple itself. Scholars are not agreed, but the Beautiful Gate

Acts 3—4

was probably the “Eastern Gate” that led into the court of the women. Made of Corinthian bronze, the gate looked like gold, and it certainly was a choice place for a lame man to beg.

The giving of alms was an important part of the Jewish faith, so beggars found it profitable to be near the temple. Since the believers had pooled their resources (Acts 2:44–45), the two apostles had no money to give, but money was not what the man needed most. He needed salvation for his soul and healing for his body, and money could provide neither. Through the power of the name of Jesus, the beggar was completely healed, and he was so happy and excited that he acted like a child, leaping and praising God.

It is easy to see in this man an illustration of what salvation is like. He was born lame, and all of us are born unable to walk so as to please God. Our father Adam had a fall and passed his lameness on to all of his descendants (Rom. 5:12–21). The man was also poor, and we as sinners are bankrupt before God, unable to pay the tremendous debt that we owe Him (Luke 7:36–50). He was “outside the temple,” and all sinners are separated from God, no matter how near to the door they might be. The man was healed wholly by the grace of God, and the healing was immediate (Eph. 2:8–9). He gave evidence of what God had done by “walking, and leaping, and praising God” (Acts 3:8) and by publicly identifying himself with the apostles, both in the temple (Acts 3:11) and in their arrest (Acts 4:14). Now that he could stand, there was no question *where* this man stood!

Indictment: Jesus, the Son of God (3:11–16)

The healing of the lame beggar drew a crowd around the three men. Solomon’s Porch, on the east side of the temple, was a corridor where our Lord had ministered (John 10:23) and where the church worshipped (Acts 5:12).

In his sermon at Pentecost, Peter had to refute the accusation that the believers were drunk. In this sermon, he had to refute the notion that he and John had healed the man by their own power. (Paul and Barnabas would face a similar situation after healing a lame man. See Acts 14:8–18.) Peter immediately identified the source of the miracle—Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Wisely, Peter said that this was the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The Spirit certainly gave Peter boldness as he reminded the Jews of the way they had treated Jesus. They had denied Him and delivered Him up to be crucified. Even worse, they had asked for a guilty man, Barabbas, to be set free so that an innocent prisoner might be crucified! In order to convince them of their crimes, Peter used several different names and titles for our Lord: God’s Son, Jesus, the Holy One, the Just One, the Prince (Pioneer) of life. This was no ordinary man that they had handed over to the Romans to crucify!

Calvary may have been man’s last word, but the empty tomb was God’s last word. He glorified His Son

by raising Him from the dead and taking Him back to heaven. The enthroned Christ had sent His Holy Spirit and was working through His church. The healed beggar was proof that Jesus was alive. If ever a people were guilty, it was the people Peter addressed in the temple. They were guilty of killing their own Messiah!

This is probably not the kind of message we would give at an evangelistic meeting today, because it was designed especially for Peter’s Jewish audience. As at Pentecost, Peter was addressing people who knew the Scriptures and were acquainted with the recent events in Jerusalem (see Luke 24:18). It was not a group of ignorant pagans with no religious background. Furthermore, the Jewish leaders had indeed perpetrated a great injustice when they arrested and condemned Jesus and asked Pilate to have Him crucified. How many citizens agreed with their decision, we do not know, but you can imagine the remorse of the people when they learned that they had betrayed and killed their own Messiah.

There must be conviction before a sinner can experience conversion. Unless a patient is convinced that he is sick, he will never accept the diagnosis or take the treatment. Peter turned the temple into a courtroom and laid all the evidence out for everybody to see. How could two ordinary fishermen perform such a great miracle unless God was with them? Nobody would dare deny the miracle because the beggar stood there before them all in “perfect soundness” (Acts 3:16; 4:14). To accept the miracle would have been to admit that Jesus Christ is indeed the living Son of God and that His name has power.

Encouragement: Jesus, the Savior (3:17—4:4)

But Peter did not leave the people without hope. In fact, he almost seemed to defend them by pointing out that they had acted in ignorance (Acts 3:17) while at the same time they had fulfilled the Word of God (Acts 3:18).

In the Old Testament law, there is a difference between deliberate sins and sins of ignorance (see Lev. 4—5; Num. 15:22–31). The person who sinned presumptuously was a rebel against God and was guilty of great sin. He was to be “cut off” from his people (Num. 15:30–31), which could mean excommunication and even death. The defiant “high-handed” sinner was condemned, but the person who sinned unwittingly and without deliberate intent was given opportunity to repent and seek God’s forgiveness. Ignorance does not remove the sinner’s guilt, but it does mitigate the circumstances.

Jesus had prayed, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34), and God had answered that prayer. Instead of sending judgment, He sent the Holy Spirit to empower His church and to convict lost sinners. Israel’s situation was something like that of the “manslayer” who killed his neighbor without prior malicious intent, and fled to the nearest city of refuge (Num. 35:9–34). So long as he remained

in the city, he was safe, for then the avengers could not reach him and kill him. He was free to go home only after the death of the high priest. Peter invited these “murderers” to flee by faith to Jesus Christ and find refuge in Him (Heb. 6:18).

In his previous sermon, Peter had explained that the cross was the meeting place of divine sovereignty and human responsibility (Acts 2:23), and he repeated this truth in this second sermon (Acts 3:17–18). There are mysteries here that the human mind cannot fully understand, so we must accept them by faith. God had a plan from all eternity, yet His plan did not force men to act against their own will. The prophets had foretold the sufferings and death of the Messiah, and the nation fulfilled these prophecies without realizing what they were doing. When God cannot rule, He overrules and always accomplishes His divine purposes and decrees.

Having announced the crime, presented the evidence, and explained the nature of their sin, Peter then offered them pardon (Acts 3:19–26)! What a strange thing for the prosecuting attorney to become the defense attorney and the pardoning judge! Peter’s burden was to encourage his people to trust Christ and experience His gracious salvation.

What did he tell them to do? First of all, *they had to repent of their sins* (see Acts 2:38; 5:31; 17:30), which means to have a change of mind about themselves, their sin, and Jesus Christ. Repentance is much more than “feeling sorry for your sins.” As the little Sunday school girl said, “It means feeling sorry enough to quit!” False sorrow for sin could be mere regret (“I’m sorry I got caught!”) or remorse (“I feel terrible!”), and such feelings have a tendency to pass away. Repentance is not the same as “doing penance,” as though we have to make a special sacrifice to God to prove that we are sincere. True repentance is admitting that what God says is true, and because it is true, to change our mind about our sins and about the Savior.

The message of repentance was not new to the Jews, for John the Baptist had preached it and so had Jesus (Matt. 3:2; 4:17). In one sense, repentance is a gift from God (Acts 11:18); in another sense, it is the heart’s response to the convicting ministry of the Spirit of God (Acts 26:20). The person who sincerely repents will have little problem putting his faith in the Savior.

Second, they had to *be converted*, “to turn again,” and exercise saving faith in Jesus Christ. The biblical message is “repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21), and the two go together. Unless we turn from our sins, we cannot put saving faith in Jesus Christ. It is unfortunate that some preachers have so ignored the doctrine of repentance that their “converts” lack a true sense of conviction of sin. Balanced evangelism presents to the sinner both repentance and faith.

Peter announced what would happen if they repented and turned to Jesus Christ: “in order that your sins may be blotted out, in order that the times of refreshing may come from the presence of the

Lord, in order that He may send Jesus Christ” (literal translation). There was a promise for the individual (sins forgiven) and a promise for the nation (times of spiritual refreshing). Peter was actually calling for *national repentance*, for the nation through its leaders had denied its Messiah and condemned Him to die. The declaration is that, if the nation repented and believed, the Messiah would return and establish the promised kingdom. The nation did not repent—and certainly God knew this would happen—so the message eventually moved from the Jews to the Samaritans (Acts 8) and to the Gentiles (Acts 10).

The emphasis in Acts 3:22–25 is on *the prophets* who had announced the coming of the Messiah. Peter quoted from Moses (Deut. 18:15, 18–19) and reminded his listeners that Moses had predicted the arrival of a prophet, and this prophet was the Messiah (see Luke 24:19; John 1:19–28; 6:14). Not to obey (“hear”) this prophet meant condemnation. But Moses was not the only one who foretold the coming of Jesus Christ, for all the prophets united in their witness to Him (see Luke 24:25–27, 44–48).

When Peter spoke about “these days,” to what “days” was he referring? The days of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, the days when God’s prophet would speak to His people and offer them salvation. The nation’s rejection of Him made them especially guilty because the Jews were the privileged “sons of the prophets and of the covenant.” They had sinned against a flood of light!

When God called Abraham, He made an unconditional covenant with him and his descendants that through them the nations of the world would be blessed (Gen. 12:1–3). This promise was fulfilled when Jesus Christ came into the world through the Jewish nation (Gal. 3:6–14). The gospel message came “to the Jew first” because the Jews were God’s chosen instrument through whom the Gentiles would be blessed (Acts 3:26; 13:46; Rom. 1:16). The first Christians were Jews, and the first missionaries were Jews.

But notice that Peter did not permit the “national blessings” to overshadow the personal responsibility of the individuals listening to his message (Acts 3:26). God raised up Jesus Christ and sent Him to *each one* who would turn away from his iniquities (note Acts 3:20). National repentance depends on personal repentance, the response of individual sinners to the message of salvation. Peter was addressing a large crowd, but he still made the application personal.

His message produced two opposite results: (1) some two thousand Jews believed the Word and were converted, and (2) the religious leaders of the nation rejected the message and tried to silence the apostles. We have here the beginning of the persecution about which Jesus had already warned His followers (Matt. 10:17–18; Luke 21:12–15; John 15:18–16:4).

We would expect the Sadducees to oppose the message because they did not believe in the resurrection of the human body (Acts 23:6–8). Peter’s fearless

Acts 4

declaration that Jesus Christ had been raised from the dead ran contrary to their religious beliefs. If the common people questioned the theology of their spiritual leaders, it could undermine the authority of the whole Jewish council. Instead of honestly examining the evidence, the leaders arrested the apostles and kept them in custody overnight, intending to try them the next day. However, the arrival of the temple guards could not prevent two thousand men from trusting Jesus Christ and identifying themselves with the believers in Jerusalem.

As you review this section of Acts, you cannot help but be impressed with some practical truths that should encourage all of us in our witnessing for Christ.

1. God is long suffering with lost sinners. The leaders of Israel had rejected the ministry of John the Baptist (Matt. 21:23–27) and the ministry of Jesus, and yet God gave them another opportunity to repent and be saved. They had denied and slain their own Messiah, and yet God patiently held back His judgment and sent His Spirit to deal with them. God's people today need patience as we witness to a lost world.

2. True witness involves the “bad news” of sin and guilt as well as the “good news” of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. There can be no true faith in Christ unless first there is repentance from sin. It is the ministry of the Holy Spirit to convict lost sinners (John 16:7–11), and He will do this if we faithfully witness and use God's Word.

3. The way to reach the masses is by helping the individual sinner. Peter and John won the crippled beggar, and his transformed life led to the conversion of two thousand men! The servant of God who has no time for personal work with individual sinners will not be given many opportunities for ministering to great crowds. Like Jesus, the apostles took time for individuals.

4. The best defense of the truth of the Christian faith is a changed life. The healed beggar was “exhibit A” in Peter's defense of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In his evangelistic ministries, the Methodist preacher Samuel Chadwick used to pray for “a Lazarus” in every campaign, some “great sinner” whose conversion would shock the community. He got the idea from John 12:9–11. God answered his prayers in meeting after meeting as infamous wicked men trusted Christ and became witnesses through their changed lives. Let's go after the “hard cases” and see what God can do!

5. Whenever God blesses, Satan shows up to oppose the work and silence the witness, and often he uses religious people to do his work. The same crowd that opposed the ministry of Jesus Christ also opposed the work of the apostles, and they will oppose our ministry today. Expect it—but don't let it stop you! The important thing is not that we are comfortable, but that the name of the Lord is glorified through the preaching of the gospel.

6. God has promised to bless and use His Word, so let's be faithful to witness. Jesus even prayed that our

witness would have success (John 17:20), so we have every reason to be encouraged. There is power in the name of Jesus, so we need not fear to witness and call sinners to repent.

7. The name of Jesus Christ still has power! While we may not perform the same apostolic miracles today that were seen in the early church, we can still claim the authority of Jesus Christ as He has instructed us in the Word.

We can preach the “remission of sins” in His name (Luke 24:47) so that people might believe and have “life through his name” (John 20:31). We can give someone a cup of cold water in His name (Mark 9:41), and we can receive a child in His name (Matt. 18:5). These ministries may not seem as spectacular as healing a cripple, but they are still important to the work of God.

We can ask in His name as we pray (John 14:13–14; 15:16; 16:23–26). When we ask the Father for something “in the name of Jesus Christ,” it is as though Jesus Himself were asking it. If we remember this, it will help to keep us from asking for things unworthy of His name.

Yes, the name of Jesus Christ still has authority and power. Let's go forth in His name and conquer!

CHAPTER FOUR

Acts 4:5–31

PERSECUTION, PRAYER, AND POWER

The early church had none of the “advantages” that some ministries boast of and depend on today. They did not have big budgets provided by wealthy donors. Their pastors lacked credentials from the accepted schools, nor did they have the endorsement of the influential political leaders of that day. Most of their ministers had jail records and would probably have a hard time today *joining* our churches, let alone *leading* them. What really was the secret of their success? This chapter provides the answer: the Christians of the early church knew how to pray so that God's hand could work in mighty power.

When asked to explain the secret of his remarkable ministry, the noted British preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon replied, “My people pray for me.” St. Augustine said, “Pray as though everything depended on God, and work as though everything depended on you.” Prayer is not an escape from responsibility; it is our *response* to God's *ability*. True prayer energizes us for service and battle.

Once again, the focus of attention is on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 4:7, 10, 12, 17–18). In this chapter, we see what three groups of people do with His name.

The Apostles: Defending His Name (4:5–14)

The court (vv. 5–7). The court was essentially composed of the high priest's family. The Jewish religious

system had become so corrupt that the offices were passed from one relative to another without regard for the Word of God. When Annas was deposed from the priesthood, Caiaphas his son-in-law was appointed. In fact, five of Annas's sons held the office at one time or another. Somebody has defined a "nepotist" as "a man who, being evil, knows how to give good gifts to his children." Annas certainly qualified.

This was an official meeting of the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:15), the same council that a few months before had condemned Jesus to die. In fact, these officials recognized Peter and John as the associates of Jesus (Acts 4:13). The Sanhedrin was charged with the responsibility of protecting the Jewish faith, and this meant that they had to examine every new teacher and teaching that appeared in the land (see Deut. 13). They certainly had the right to investigate what the church was doing, but they did not have the right to arrest innocent men and then refuse to honestly examine the evidence.

Their question was legal, but they did everything they could to avoid admitting that a miracle had taken place (Acts 4:14). They were evasive and merely referred to the miracle as "this." They were probably scornful as well, so that their question might be paraphrased, "Where did common people like you get the power and authority to do a thing like this?" It was once again the question of "By whose name?" After all, the apostles might be in league with the devil! Even Satan can perform miracles!

The case (vv. 8–14). Peter spoke in the power of the Holy Spirit of God. Note that Peter was again filled with the Spirit (see Acts 2:4) and would experience another filling before the day ended (Acts 4:31). There is one baptism of the Spirit, and this is at conversion (1 Cor. 12:13), but there must be many fillings of the Spirit if the believer is to be an effective witness for Jesus Christ (Eph. 5:18ff.).

Peter respectfully began with an explanation of how the miracle occurred. Certainly the members of the Sanhedrin had seen the crippled beggar many times, and perhaps they had even given alms to him and piously prayed for him. How was this well-known man healed? "By the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth!" Those words must have pierced the hearts of the members of the council! They thought they had finished with the prophet from Nazareth, and now His followers were telling everybody that Jesus was alive! Since the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the dead, Peter's statement was almost a declaration of war!

But the Spirit was telling Peter what to say (see Luke 21:12–15), and the apostle quoted Psalm 118:22, definitely a messianic reference (see Matt. 21:42; 1 Peter 2:4–8). He made it clear that the members of the council were "the builders" and that they had rejected God's Stone, Jesus, the Son of God.

The image of "the stone" was not new to these men who were experts in the Old Testament Scriptures. They knew that the "rock" was a symbol of God (Deut. 32:4, 15, 18, 31; 2 Sam. 22:2; Ps. 18:2; Isa. 28:16),

and that the prophet Daniel had used the rock to picture Messiah and the coming of His kingdom on earth (Dan. 2:31–45). The Jews stumbled over the Rock (Rom. 9:32; 1 Cor. 1:23) and rejected Him, just as Psalm 118:22 had predicted. However, to those who have trusted Him, Jesus Christ is the precious Cornerstone (1 Peter 2:4–8) and the chief Cornerstone (Eph. 2:20).

Peter went on to explain that Jesus is not only the Stone, but He is also the Savior (Acts 4:12). Peter saw in the healing of the beggar a picture of the spiritual healing that comes in salvation. "Made whole" in Acts 4:9 is a translation of the same Greek word that is translated "saved" in Acts 4:12, for salvation means wholeness and spiritual health. Jesus Christ is the Great Physician who alone can heal mankind's greatest malady, the sickness of sin (Mark 2:14–17). Of course, Peter also had "all the people of Israel" in mind as he spoke (see Acts 4:10) because the message was still going out exclusively to the Jews. Even Psalm 118, from which Peter quoted, speaks of a future national salvation for Israel.

The Council: Opposing His Name (4:15–22)

Their problem (vv. 13–14). They were in a dilemma; no matter which way they turned, they were "trapped." They could not deny the miracle, because the man was standing before them, and yet they could not explain how "uneducated and untrained men" (NASB) could perform such a mighty deed. Peter and John were ordinary fishermen, not professional scribes or authorized ministers of the Jewish religion. They were disciples of Jesus of Nazareth, but—He was dead! The council took notice of the courage and confidence of Peter and John, as well as the power of Peter's words, and it all added up to perplexity.

It is important to note that, of itself, the miracle was not proof of the resurrection of Christ or even of the truth of Peter's message. Satan can perform miracles (2 Thess. 2:9–10) and false prophets can do wonders (Deut. 13:1–5). The miracle and the message, *in the context of all that had been going on since Pentecost*, was one more evidence that Jesus Christ was alive and at work in the church by His Holy Spirit. In both sermons, Peter used the Old Testament to support and explain his claims, and this is one evidence of a true prophet of God (Deut. 13:1–5; Isa. 8:20). Miracles are not a substitute for the Word of God (Luke 16:27–31).

Their deliberation (vv. 15–18). The council did not seek for truth, but rather sought for some way to avoid the truth! Had they honestly considered the evidence and meekly listened to the message, they might have been saved, but their pride and hardness of heart stood in the way. Some of the chief priests and elders had experienced a similar dilemma during Passover when they had tried to trap Jesus in the temple (Matt. 21:23–27). Some people never learn! But their response is proof that miracles alone can never convict

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or convert the lost sinner. Only the Word of God can do that (see John 11:45–53; Acts 14:1–20).

Their conclusion. They wanted to “let the thing die a natural death.” This meant threatening the apostles and forbidding them to teach and preach in the name of Jesus. This official sentence shows how much the enemy fears the witness of the church, for Satan has been trying to silence God’s people from the very beginning. Sad to say, he has succeeded with far too many Christians, the “silent witnesses” of the church. Even the existential philosopher Albert Camus said, “What the world expects of Christians is that Christians should speak out, loud and clear ... in such a way that never a doubt, never the slightest doubt, could arise in the heart of the simplest man.”

The council did not want the gospel message to spread, and yet that is exactly what happened! From 120 praying men and women in Acts 1, the church increased to more than 3,000 on the day of Pentecost, and now there were more than 5,000 disciples in the fellowship. In the days that followed, “believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women” (Acts 5:14; and see 6:1, 7). Satan’s attempts to silence the church only led to a stronger witness for the Lord.

The failure of the council (vv. 19–22). This was evident when Peter refused to be intimidated by their threats. All of us need to follow Peter’s example and make our decisions on the basis of “Is it right?” and not “Is it popular?” or “Is it safe?” However, we must be sure that we have the clear teaching of the Word of God on our side before we take a stand against the authority of the government. Peter knew what the Lord had commanded the believers to do (Acts 1:8), and he was going to obey Him at any cost.

It is popular today to promote various causes by defying the government, disobeying the law, and defending these actions on the basis of conscience. Since even some Christians are involved in this approach to social action, it is important to understand the kind of “civil disobedience” practiced by people in the Bible. Peter and John are not the only ones who disobeyed the authorities in order to serve God. A list of “dedicated conscientious objectors” would include, among others, the Jewish midwives (Ex. 1), Moses’ parents (Heb. 11:23), Daniel (Dan. 1; 6), and the three Hebrew children (Dan. 3). When you examine the records, you discover the biblical principles by which they operated, principles that are not always followed today.

To begin with, each of these “objectors” had a message from God that could not be questioned. The midwives and Moses’ parents knew that it was wrong to murder the babies. Daniel and his friends, and the three Hebrew men, knew that it was wrong to eat food offered to idols or to bow down to idols in worship. Peter and John knew that they were under orders from their Master to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth, and that it would be wrong to obey the

Sanhedrin. All of these people were faithfully obeying a clear word from God and not just following some selfish personal whim of their own.

Second, their convictions touched every area of their lives. In other words, they did everything “with conscience toward God” (1 Peter 2:19) because they belonged to God. The university student today whose conscience permits him to cheat on exams or drive while drunk, but not register for military service, does not convince me that he is really cultivating a healthy conscience. When a person’s *total life* is under the direction of a godly conscience, then I find it easier to have confidence in his unpopular decisions.

Note also that our examples from the Bible acted with respect and courtesy, even when they defied the law. It is possible for Christians to respect authority and at the same time disobey the authorities (see Rom. 13; Titus 3:1–2; 1 Peter 2:13–25). Daniel tried to avoid getting his guard into trouble, and the apostles used their arrests as opportunities for witness. This is quite a contrast to some of the modern “Christian objectors” who seem to major on denunciation and accusation rather than loving witness.

Of course, the greatest example of unjust suffering is that of Jesus Christ, and we must imitate Him (see 1 Peter 2:13–25). Jesus teaches us that righteous protest against injustice always involves sacrifice and suffering, and must be motivated by love. God’s people must be careful not to clothe their prejudice in the garments of “righteous indignation” and pass themselves off as courageous soldiers of conscience. We must examine our own hearts honestly to make certain we are not conducting a “holy war” just to satisfy inner frustrations.

Because they had no real case to offer, the council could only threaten the men and let them go. After all, when you have a living miracle before you, as well as an approving public around you, you must be careful what you do!

The Church: Calling on His Name (4:23–31)

The greatest concentration of power in Jerusalem that day was in the prayer meeting that followed the trial. This is one of the truly great prayers recorded in the Bible, and it is a good example for us to follow.

To begin with, it was a prayer that was born out of witness and service for the Lord. Peter and John had just come in “from the trenches,” and the church met to pray in order to defeat the enemy. Too often today, believers gather for prayer as though attending a concert or a party. There is little sense of urgency and danger because most of us are comfortable in our Christian walk. If more of God’s people were witnessing for Christ in daily life, there would be more urgency and blessing when the church meets for prayer.

It was a united prayer meeting as they “lifted up their voice to God with one accord” (Acts 4:24; see 1:14). The people were of one heart and mind, and God was pleased to answer their requests. Division in

the church always hinders prayer and robs the church of spiritual power.

Their praying was based solidly on the Word of God, in this case, Psalm 2. The Word of God and prayer must always go together (John 15:7). In His Word, God speaks to us and tells us what He wants to do. In prayer, we speak to Him and make ourselves available to accomplish His will. True prayer is not telling God what to do, but asking God to do His will in us and through us (1 John 5:14–15). It means getting God's will done on earth, not man's will done in heaven.

They did not pray to have their circumstances changed or their enemies put out of office. Rather, they asked God to empower them to make the best use of their circumstances and to accomplish what He had already determined (Acts 4:28). This was not "fatalism" but faith in the Lord of history who has a perfect plan and is always victorious. They asked for divine enablement, not escape, and God gave them the power that they needed.

"Do not pray for easy lives," wrote Phillips Brooks. "Pray to be stronger men and women. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for powers equal to your tasks." That is the way the early Christians prayed, and that is the way God's people should pray today.

They addressed God as "Sovereign Lord," the God who is in control of all things. The Greek word gives us our English word *despot*, a ruler who exercises absolute power, either benevolently or abusively. Simeon used this same title when he prayed in the temple (Luke 2:29). It is good to know the Sovereign Lord when you are experiencing persecution.

They also approached Him as the Creator, for, after all, if your Father is "Lord of heaven and earth," what have you to fear (see Matt. 11:25–30)? Nehemiah approached God on this same basis (Neh. 9:6), and so did the psalmist (see Ps. 145) and the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 42). Years later, when he wrote his first epistle, Peter encouraged suffering saints to yield themselves to the faithful Creator (1 Peter 4:19).

Psalm 2 describes the revolt of the nations against the Lord and His Christ. The psalm originally grew out of the crowning of a new king in Israel, perhaps David, but its ultimate message points to the King of Kings, Jesus Christ. Whenever a new king was enthroned, the vassal rulers around were required to come and submit to him, but some of them refused to do this. God only laughed at their revolt, for He knew that they could never stand up against His King.

The early believers applied the message of this psalm to their own situation and identified their adversaries as Herod, Pilate, the Romans, and the Jews. These enemies had "ganged up" against Jesus Christ and even crucified Him, yet God raised Him from the dead and enthroned Him in heaven. All of this was a part of God's perfect plan (see Acts 2:23; 3:18), so there was no need to fear.

The early church strongly believed in God's sovereignty and His perfect plan for His people. But note that they did not permit their faith in divine sovereignty to destroy human responsibility, for they were faithful to witness and pray. It is when God's people get out of balance and overemphasize either sovereignty or responsibility that the church loses power. Again, we are reminded of Augustine's wise words, "Pray as though everything depends on God, and work as though everything depended on you." Faith in a sovereign Lord is a tremendous encouragement for God's people to keep serving the Lord when the going is difficult.

They did not ask for protection; they asked for power. They did not ask for fire from heaven to destroy the enemy (see Luke 9:51–56) but for power from heaven to preach the Word and heal the sick (see Matt. 5:10–12, 43–48). Their great desire was for boldness in the face of opposition (see Acts 4:17). The emphasis is on the hand of God at work in the life of the church (Acts 4:28, 30), not the hand of man at work for God. Believing prayer releases God's power and enables God's hand to move (Isa. 50:2; 64:1–8).

Finally, note that they wanted to glorify God's Child (Servant) Jesus Christ (Acts 4:27, 30). It was His name that gave them power to minister the Word and to perform miracles, and His name alone deserved the glory. The glory of God, not the needs of men, is the highest purpose of answered prayer.

God's answer was to shake the place where they were meeting and to fill the people once again with the Spirit of God (Acts 4:31). This gave them the boldness that they needed to continue to serve God in spite of official opposition. This was not a "second Pentecost" because there cannot be another Pentecost any more than there can be another Calvary. It was a new filling of the Spirit to equip the believers to serve the Lord and minister to the people.

We will consider Acts 4:32–37 in our next study, but it is worth noting that the new fullness of the Spirit also created a deeper unity among the people (Acts 4:34) and a greater desire to sacrifice and share with one another. They enjoyed "great power" and "great grace," which ought to be the marks of a "great" church. This led to a great ingathering of souls for the Lord.

"Lord, thou art God!" What a declaration of faith and what a practical application of good theology! However, if their lives had not been submitted to His control, they could not have prayed that way. Boldness in prayer is the result of faithfulness in life and service. The sovereignty of God is not an abstract doctrine that we accept and defend. It is a living truth that we act on and depend on for every need. When you are loyal to the Lord and put Him first (Acts 4:19), then you can trust Him to be faithful to you and see you through.

The name of Jesus Christ has not lost its power, but many of God's people have lost their power because they have stopped praying to the sovereign God.

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“Nothing lies beyond the reach of prayer except that which lies outside the will of God.” I don’t know who first said that, but the statement is absolutely true. Dr. R. A. Torrey, the noted evangelist and educator, said, “Pray for great things, expect great things, work for great things, but above all—pray.”

The early church prayed, and God answered in mighty power.

CHAPTER FIVE

Acts 4:32–5:16

BEWARD OF THE SERPENT!

Satan had failed completely in his attempt to silence the witness of the church. However, the enemy never gives up; he simply changes his strategy. His first approach had been to attack the church from the outside, hoping that arrest and threats would frighten the leaders. When that failed, Satan decided to attack the church *from the inside* and use people who were a part of the fellowship.

We must face the fact that Satan is a clever foe. If he does not succeed as the “devouring lion” (1 Peter 5:8), then he attacks again as the “deceiving serpent” or an “angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:3, 13–14). Satan is both a murderer and a liar (John 8:44), and the church must be prepared for both attacks.

The Generosity of the Believers (4:32–37)

The believers had prayed and God’s Spirit had filled them and given them new power. The church that depends on believing prayer will know the blessing of the Holy Spirit in its ministry. How can we tell when a local church is really filled with the Spirit? When you go back to the record of the first filling at Pentecost (Acts 2:44–47), you discover three outstanding characteristics of a Spirit-filled church.

It is unified (2:44, 46). This is a God-given spiritual unity, not a man-made organizational uniformity. The church is an organism that is held together by life, and that life comes through the Holy Spirit. Of course, the church must be organized, for if an organism is not organized, it will die. However, when the organization starts to hinder spiritual life and ministry, then the church becomes just another religious institution that exists to keep itself going. When the Holy Spirit is at work, God’s people will be united in their doctrinal beliefs, as well as in fellowship, giving, and worship (Acts 4:42).

A Spirit-filled church is magnified and will have “favor with all the people” (2:47). In spite of the opposition of the rulers, the common people were drawn to the believers because something new and exciting was happening. When the religious leaders tried to silence the church, it was their fear of the people that restrained them (Acts 4:21; 5:26). Yes, a Spirit-filled church will have its enemies, but what the

Lord is doing will attract the attention and the admiration of people who are hungry to know God.

A Spirit-filled church is multiplied, because the Lord will daily add new believers to the church (2:47). Evangelism will not be the work of a chosen few, but the daily delight and ministry of the whole congregation. In the early church, each member sought to be an effective witness for Jesus Christ, no matter where he happened to be. No wonder the church grew from 120 to over 5,000 in just a short time!

How did Satan’s attack affect the spiritual condition of the church? It had no effect at all! The fact that Peter and John were arrested, tried, and threatened had absolutely no effect on the spiritual life of the church, for the church was still unified (Acts 4:32), magnified (Acts 4:33), and multiplied (Acts 4:32)!

One evidence of the unity of the church was the way they sacrificed and shared with one another. When the Holy Spirit is at work, giving is a blessing and not a burden. We must keep in mind that this “Christian communism” was very unlike the political Communism of our day. What the believers did was purely voluntary (Acts 5:4) and was motivated by love. No doubt many of the new believers were visitors in Jerusalem, having come for the feasts, and they had to depend on their Christian friends to help meet their daily needs.

Nor should we think that every believer sold all his goods and brought the money to the apostles. Acts 4:34 indicates that some of the members “from time to time” sold various pieces of property and donated to the common treasury. When the assembly had a need, the Spirit directed someone to sell something and meet the need.

While the early church’s spirit of sacrifice and loving generosity is worthy of our emulation, believers today are not required to imitate these practices. The principles of Christian giving are outlined in the Epistles, especially in 2 Corinthians 8–9, and nowhere are we instructed to bring our money and lay it at the pastor’s feet (Acts 4:35) as though he were an apostle. It is the *spirit* of their giving that is important to us today and not the “letter” of their system.

Joseph, nicknamed “Barnabas” (son of encouragement), is introduced at this point for several reasons. First, he was a generous giver and illustrated the very thing Dr. Luke was describing. Second, his noble act apparently filled Ananias and Sapphira with envy so that they attempted to impress the church with their giving and ended up being killed. Third, Barnabas had a most important ministry in the church and is mentioned at least twenty-five times in the book of Acts and another five times in the Epistles. In fact, it is Barnabas who encouraged Paul in his early service for the Lord (Acts 9:26–27; 11:19–30; 13:1–5) and who gave his cousin John Mark the encouragement he needed after his failure (Acts 13:13; 15:36–41; Col. 4:10).

Levites were not permitted to own land, so it is

difficult to understand how Barnabas acquired the property that he sold. Perhaps that particular law (Num. 18:20; Deut. 10:9) applied only in Palestine and the property was in Cyprus, or perhaps the corrupt religious leaders had become lax in enforcing the law. There is much we do not know about Joseph Barnabas, but this we do know: he was a Spirit-filled man who was an encouragement to the church because he gave his all to the Lord. Not every believer can be like Peter and John, but we can all be like Barnabas and have a ministry of encouragement.

The Hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira (5:1–11)

George MacDonald wrote, “Half of the misery in the world comes from trying to *look*, instead of trying to *be*, what one is not.” The name that Jesus gave to this practice is “hypocrisy,” which simply means “wearing a mask, playing the actor.” We must not think that failure to reach our ideals is hypocrisy, because no believer lives up to all that he or she knows or has in the Lord. Hypocrisy is *deliberate* deception, trying to make people think we are more spiritual than we really are.

When I was pastoring my first church, the Lord led us to build a new sanctuary. We were not a wealthy congregation, so our plans had to be modest. At one point in the planning, I suggested to the architect that perhaps we could build a simple edifice with a more elaborate facade at the front to make it look more like an expensive church.

“Absolutely not!” he replied. “A church stands for truth and honesty, and any church I design will not have a facade! A building should tell the truth and not pretend to be what it isn’t.”

Years later, I ran across this poem, which is a sermon in itself:

They build the front just like St. Mark’s,
Or like Westminster Abbey;
And then, as if to cheat the Lord,
They make the back parts shabby.

That was the sin of Ananias and Sapphira: putting on a lovely “front” in order to conceal the shabby sin in their lives, sin that cost them their lives.

Ananias means “God is gracious,” but he learned that God is also holy, and Sapphira means “beautiful,” but her heart was ugly with sin. No doubt some people are shocked when they read that God killed two people just because they lied about a business transaction and about their church giving. But when you consider the features connected with this sin, you have to agree that God did the right thing by judging them.

It is worth noting that the Lord judges sin severely *at the beginning of a new period in salvation history*. Just after the tabernacle was erected, God killed Nadab and Abihu for trying to present “false fire” to the Lord (Lev. 10). He also had Achan killed for disobeying orders after Israel had entered the Promised Land (Josh. 7). While God was certainly not responsible for their sins,

He did use these judgments as warnings to the people, and even to us (1 Cor. 10:11–12).

To begin with, the sin of Ananias and Sapphira was *energized by Satan* (Acts 5:3), and that is a serious matter. If Satan cannot defeat the church by attacks from the outside, he will get on the inside and go to work (Acts 20:28–31). He knows how to lie to the minds and hearts of church members, even genuine Christians, and get them to follow his orders. We forget that the admonition about the spiritual armor (Eph. 6:10–18) was written to God’s people, not to unbelievers, because it is the Christians who are in danger of being used by Satan to accomplish his evil purposes.

Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote, “Sin has many tools, but a lie is the handle which fits them all.” Satan is a liar and a murderer (John 8:44). He lied to and *through* this couple, and the lie led to their deaths. When God judged Ananias and Sapphira, He was also judging Satan. He was letting everybody know that He would not tolerate deception in His church.

Their sin was *motivated by pride*, and pride is a sin that God especially hates and judges (Prov. 8:13). No doubt the church was praising God for the generous offering that Barnabas had brought when Satan whispered to the couple, “You can also bask in this kind of glory! You can make others think that you are as spiritual as Barnabas!” Instead of resisting Satan’s approaches, they yielded to him and planned their strategy.

Jesus made it very clear that we must be careful how we give, lest the glory that belongs to God should be given to us (Matt. 6:1–4, 19–34). The Pharisees were adept at calling attention to their gifts, and they received the praises of men—but that’s all they received! Whatever we possess, God has given to us; we are stewards, not owners. We must use what He gives us for His glory alone (see John 5:44).

Daniel Defoe called pride “the first peer and president of hell.” Indeed, it was pride that transformed Lucifer into Satan (Isa. 14:12–15), and it was pride (“Ye shall be as gods”) that caused our first parents to sin (Gen. 3). Pride opens the door to every other sin, for once we are more concerned with our reputation than our character, there is no end to the things we will do just to make ourselves “look good” before others.

A third feature of their sin was especially wicked: their sin was *directed against God’s church*. We have reason to believe that Ananias and Sapphira were believers. The spiritual level of the church at that time was so high that it is doubtful that a mere “professor” could have gotten into the fellowship without being detected. The fact that they were able to lie to the Spirit (Acts 5:3) and tempt the Spirit (Acts 5:9) would indicate that they had the Spirit of God living within.

God loves His church and is jealous over it, for the church was purchased by the blood of God’s Son

Acts 5

(Acts 20:28; Eph. 5:25) and has been put on earth to glorify Him and do His work. Satan wants to destroy the church, and the easiest way to do it is to use those who are within the fellowship. Had Peter not been discerning, Ananias and Sapphira would have become influential people in the church! Satan would have been working through them to accomplish his purposes!

The church is “the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15), and Satan attacks it with his lies. The church is God’s temple in which He dwells (1 Cor. 3:16), and Satan wants to move in and dwell there too. The church is God’s army (2 Tim. 2:1–4), and Satan seeks to get into the ranks as many traitors as he can. The church is safe so long as Satan is attacking from the outside, but when he gets on the inside, the church is in danger.

It is easy for us to condemn Ananias and Sapphira for their dishonesty, but we need to examine our own lives to see if our profession is backed up by our practice. Do we really mean everything we pray about in public? Do we sing the hymns and gospel songs sincerely or routinely? “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Matt. 15:8 NIV). If God killed “religious deceivers” today, how many church members would be left?

What is described in this chapter is not a case of church discipline. Rather it is an example of God’s personal judgment. “The Lord shall judge his people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:30–31). Had Ananias and Sapphira judged their own sin, God would not have judged them (1 Cor. 11:31), but they agreed to lie, and God had to deal with them.

Ananias was dead and buried, and Sapphira did not even know it! Satan always keeps his servants in the dark, while God guides His servants in the light (John 15:15). Peter accused her of tempting God’s Spirit, that is, deliberately disobeying God and seeing how far God would go (Ex. 17:2; Deut. 6:16). They were actually defying God and daring Him to act—and He acted, with swiftness and finality. “Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God” (Matt. 4:7).

We must keep in mind that their sin was not in robbing God of money but in lying to Him and robbing Him of glory. They were not required to sell the property, and, having sold it, they were not required to give any of the money to the church (Acts 5:4). Their lust for recognition conceived sin in their hearts (Acts 5:4, 9), and that sin eventually produced death (James 1:15).

The result was a wave of godly fear that swept over the church and over all those who heard the story (Acts 5:11). We have moved from “great power” and “great grace” (Acts 4:33) to “great fear,” and all of these ought to be present in the church. “Let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: for our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:28–29).

The Ministry of the Apostles (5:12–16)

We have learned that the Spirit-filled church is unified, magnified, and multiplied. Satan wants to divide the church, disgrace the church, and decrease the church, and he will do it, if we let him.

But the church described here completely triumphed over the attacks of Satan! The people were still unified (Acts 5:12), magnified (Acts 5:13), and multiplied (Acts 5:14). Multitudes were added to the Lord, and for the first time, Luke mentions the salvation of women. Both in his gospel and in Acts, Luke has a great deal to say about women and their relationship to Christ and the church. There are at least a dozen references in Acts to women, as Luke shows the key roles women played in the apostolic church. This is a remarkable thing when you consider the general position of women in the culture of that day (see Gal. 3:26–28).

God gave the apostles power to perform great miracles. While it is true that some of the ordinary members exercised miraculous powers (Acts 6:8), it was primarily the apostles who did the miracles. These “signs and wonders” were God’s way of authenticating their ministry (Rom. 15:18–19; 2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:4).

Just as there were special judgments at the beginning of a new era, so there were also special miracles. We find no miracles performed in Genesis, but at the beginning of the age of law, Moses performed great signs and wonders. Elijah and Elisha were miracle workers at the beginning of the great era of the prophets, and Jesus and the apostles performed signs and wonders when the Gospel Age was inaugurated. Each time God opened a new door, He called man’s attention to it. It was His way of saying, “Follow these leaders, because I have sent them.”

The mighty wonders performed by the apostles were the fulfillment of the Lord’s promise that they would do “greater works” in answer to believing prayer (John 14:13–14). When Jesus performed miracles during His ministry on earth, He had three purposes in mind: (1) to show compassion and meet human need; (2) to present His credentials as the Son of God; and (3) to convey spiritual truth. For example, when He fed the five thousand, the miracle met their physical need, revealed Him as the Son of God, and gave Him opportunity to preach a sermon about the Bread of Life (John 6).

The apostolic miracles followed a similar pattern. Peter and John healed the crippled beggar and met his need, but Peter used that miracle to preach a salvation sermon and to prove to the people and the council that he and John were indeed the servants of the living Christ. One of the qualifications for an apostle was that he had seen the risen Christ (Acts 1:22; 1 Cor. 9:1), and, since nobody can claim that experience today, there are no apostles in the church. The apostles and prophets laid the foundation for the church (Eph. 2:20), and the pastors, teachers, and evangelists are

building on it. If there are no apostles, there can be no “signs of an apostle” as are found in the book of Acts (2 Cor. 12:12).

This certainly does not mean that God is limited and can no longer perform miracles for His people! But it does mean that the need for confirming miracles has passed away. We now have the completed Word of God, and we test teachers by their message, not by miracles (1 John 2:18–29; 4:1–6). And we must keep in mind that Satan is a counterfeiter and well able to deceive the unwary. In the Old Testament, any prophet who performed miracles but, at the same time, led the people away from God’s Word, was considered a false prophet and was killed (Deut. 13). The important thing was not the miracles, but whether his message was true to the Word of God.

A radio listener wrote me and wanted to debate this issue with me, insisting that there were instances today of people being raised from the dead. I wrote him a kind letter and asked him to send me the testimonies of the witnesses, the kind of evidence that could be presented in court. He wrote back and honestly admitted that that kind of evidence was not available, but he still believed it because he had heard a TV preacher say it was so. Most of the miracles recorded in the Bible were out in the open for everybody to see, and it would not be difficult to prove them in a court of law.

Peter and the other apostles found themselves ministering as their Lord had ministered, with people coming from all over, bringing their sick and afflicted (Matt. 4:23–25; Mark 1:45; 2:8–12). The Twelve must have found it very difficult to walk down the street, for people crowded around them and laid before them sick people on their pallets. Some of the people even had the superstitious belief that there was healing in Peter’s shadow.

It is significant that *all of these people were healed*. There were no failures and nobody was sent away because he or she “did not have faith to be healed.” These were days of mighty power when God was speaking to Israel and telling them that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed their Messiah and Savior. “For the Jews require a sign” (1 Cor. 1:22), and God gave signs to them. The important thing was not the healing of the afflicted, but the winning of lost souls, as multitudes were added to the fellowship. The Spirit gave them power for wonders and power for witness (Acts 1:8), for miracles apart from God’s Word cannot save the lost.

The greatest miracle of all is the transformation of a lost sinner into a child of God by the grace of God. That is the miracle that meets the greatest need, lasts the longest, and costs the greatest price—the blood of God’s Son.

And that is one miracle we can all participate in as we share the message of the gospel, “the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth” (Rom. 1:16).

CHAPTER SIX

Acts 5:17–42

TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES

After Pentecost, the message of the resurrection of Jesus Christ spread rapidly in Jerusalem as Spirit-empowered witnesses shared the gospel with the lost. Signs and wonders accompanied the preaching of the Word, and no one could deny that God was at work in a new way among His ancient people.

But not everybody was happy with the success of the church. The “religious establishment” that had opposed the ministry of Jesus, and then crucified Him, took the same hostile approach toward the apostles. “If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you,” said Jesus. “They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service” (John 15:20; 16:2 NKJV). These words were beginning to be fulfilled.

It was the age-old conflict between living truth and dead tradition. The new wine could not be put into the old wineskins, nor could the new cloth be sewn on the worn-out garments (Matt. 9:14–17). The English martyr Hugh Latimer said, “Whenever you see persecution, there is more than a probability that truth is on the persecuted side.”

We see in this account four different responses to God’s truth, responses we still see today.

The Council: Attacking the Truth (5:17–28)

The high priest and his associates had three reasons for arresting the apostles (this time it was *all* of the apostles) and bringing them to trial. To begin with, Peter and John had not obeyed the official orders to stop preaching in the name of Jesus Christ. They were guilty of defying the law of the nation. Second, the witness of the church was refuting the doctrines held by the Sadducees, giving every evidence that Jesus Christ was alive. Third, the religious leaders were filled with envy (“indignation”) at the great success of these untrained and unauthorized men (see Matt. 27:18; Acts 13:45). The traditions of the fathers had not attracted that much attention or gained that many followers in such a short time. It is amazing how much envy can be hidden under the disguise of “defending the faith.”

The apostles did not resist arrest or organize a public protest. They quietly went along with the temple guard and actually spent a few hours in the public jail. But during the night, an angel set them free and told them to return to their witnessing in the temple. (The Sadducees, of course, did not believe in angels. See Acts 23:8.) In the book of Acts, you will find several instances of angelic ministries as God cared for His people (Acts 8:26; 10:3, 7; 12:7–11, 23; 27:23). The angels are servants who minister to us as we serve the Lord (Heb. 1:14).

As in Peter’s deliverance (Acts 12:7–11), neither the

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guards nor the leaders knew that the prisoners had been liberated. You are tempted to smile as you imagine the surprised looks on the faces of the guards when they discovered that their most important prisoners were gone. And just imagine the astonishment of the envious members of the Sanhedrin when they heard the report! Here they were trying to *stop* the miracles, but their actions only *multiplied* the miracles!

What a contrast between the apostles and the members of the council. The council was educated, ordained, and approved, and yet they had no ministry of power. The apostles were ordinary laymen, yet God's power was at work in their lives. The council was trying desperately to protect themselves and their dead traditions, while the apostles were risking their lives to share the living Word of God. The dynamic church was enjoying the new; the dead council was defending the old.

You find a variety of emotions in this section: envy (Acts 5:17), bewilderment (Acts 5:24), and fear (Acts 5:26; see 4:21 and Matt. 21:26). Yet, when the apostles came in, the high priest boldly accused them of defying the law and causing trouble. He would not even use the name of Jesus Christ, but instead said "this name" and "this man's blood," lest by speaking His name he would defile his lips or bring down the wrath of God (see John 15:21).

But even this hateful indictment was an admission that the church was increasing and getting the job done! The wrath of man was bringing praise to the Lord (Ps. 76:10). The high priest realized that if the apostles were right, then the Jewish leaders had been wrong in condemning Jesus Christ. Indeed, if the apostles were right, then the council was guilty of His blood (Matt. 27:25; 1 Thess. 2:14–16). As this "trial" progressed, the apostles became the judges and the council became the accused.

The Apostles: Affirming the Truth (5:29–32)

The apostles did not change their convictions (Acts 4:19–20). They obeyed God and trusted Him to take care of the consequences. They could not serve two masters, and they had already declared whose side they were on. Had they been diplomats instead of ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:20), they could have pleased everybody and escaped a beating. But they stood firmly for the Lord, and He honored their courage and faith.

Neither did they change their message (Acts 5:30–32). Peter indicted the leaders for the death of Jesus (see Acts 3:13–14; 4:10), and boldly affirmed once again that Jesus Christ had been raised from the dead. Not only was Jesus raised from the dead, but He was also exalted by God to heaven. The work of the Holy Spirit in recent days was evidence that Jesus had returned to heaven and sent His Spirit as He promised. The Sadducees certainly did not rejoice to hear the apostles speak about resurrection from the dead.

That Jesus Christ is at God's right hand is a key theme in the Scriptures. The right hand is, of course,

the place of honor, power, and authority. Psalm 110:1 is the basic prophecy, but there are numerous references: Matthew 22:44; Mark 14:62; 16:19; Acts 2:33–34; 5:31; Romans 8:34; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; and 1 Peter 3:22. Soon, Stephen would see Jesus standing at God's right hand (Acts 7:55).

In his second sermon, Peter had called Jesus "the Prince of life" (Acts 3:15); and here he called Him "a Prince and a Savior." The word *Prince* means "a pioneer, one who leads the way, an originator." The Sanhedrin was not interested in pioneering anything; all they wanted to do was protect their vested interests and keep things exactly as they were (see John 11:47–52). As the "Pioneer of life," Jesus saves us and leads us into exciting experiences as we walk "in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). There are always new trails to blaze.

Hebrews 2:10 calls Him "the Pioneer [captain] of their salvation," for our salvation experience must never become static. The Christian life is not a parking lot; it is a launching pad! It is not enough just to be born again; we must also grow spiritually (2 Peter 3:18) and make progress in our walk. In Hebrews 12:2, Jesus is called "the Pioneer [author] ... of our faith," which suggests that He leads us into new experiences that test our faith and help it to grow. One of the major themes of Hebrews is "let us press on to maturity" (Heb. 6:1 NASB), and we cannot mature unless we follow Christ, the Pioneer, into new areas of faith and ministry.

The title *Savior* was not new to the members of the council, for the word was used for physicians (who save people's lives), philosophers (who solve people's problems), and statesmen (who save people from danger and war). It was even applied to the emperor. But only Jesus Christ is the true and living Savior who rescues from sin, death, and judgment all who will trust Him.

Peter again called the nation to repentance (Acts 2:36; 3:19–26; 4:10–12) and promised that the gift of the Spirit would be given to all who "obey Him." This does not imply that the gift of the Spirit is a reward for obedience, for a gift can be received only by faith. The phrase "obey him" is the same as "obedient to the faith" in Acts 6:7, and means "to obey God's call and trust God's Son." God does not *suggest* that sinners repent and believe; He *commands* it (Acts 17:30).

It was a bold witness that the apostles gave before the highest Jewish religious court. The Spirit of God enabled them and they were not afraid. After all, Jesus had promised to be with them and, through His Holy Spirit, empower them for witness and service. They were His witnesses of His resurrection (Acts 1:22; 2:24, 32; 3:15, 26; 4:10), and He would see them through.

Gamaliel: Avoiding the Truth (5:33–39)

Gamaliel was a Pharisee who probably did not want to see the Sadducees win any victories. He was a scholar highly esteemed by the people, rather liberal in his applications of the law, and apparently moderate in

his approach to problems. “When Rabban Gamaliel the Elder died,” said the Jews, “the glory of the law ceased and purity and abstinence died.” Paul was trained by Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). Gamaliel’s “counsel” was unwise and dangerous, but God used it to save the apostles from death. That the Sadducees would heed the words of a Pharisee shows how distinguished a man Gamaliel was.

In spite of the fact that Gamaliel tried to use cool logic rather than overheated emotions, his approach was still wrong. To begin with, he automatically classified Jesus with two rebels, which means *he had already rejected the evidence*. To him, this “Jesus of Nazareth” was just another zealous Jew, trying to set the nation free from Rome. But did Theudas or Judas ever do the things that Jesus did? Were they raised from the dead? With a clever twist of bad logic, Gamaliel convinced the council that there was really nothing to worry about! Troublemakers come and go, so be patient.

Furthermore, Gamaliel assumed that “history repeats itself.” Theudas and Judas rebelled, were subdued, and their followers were scattered. Give these Galileans enough time and they too will disband, and you will never again hear about Jesus of Nazareth. While some students do claim to see “cycles” in history, these “cycles” are probably only in the eyes of the beholder. By selecting your evidence carefully, you can prove almost anything from history. The birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ had never happened before and would never happen again. God had broken into history and visited this earth!

Gamaliel also had the mistaken idea that, if something is not of God, it must fail. But this idea does not take into consideration the sinful nature of man and the presence of Satan in the world. Mark Twain said that a lie runs around the world while truth is still putting on her shoes. In the end, God’s truth will be victorious, but meanwhile, Satan can be very strong and influence multitudes of people.

Success is no test of truth, in spite of what the pragmatists say. False cults often grow faster than God’s church. This world is a battlefield on which truth and error are in mortal combat, and often it looks as if truth is “on the scaffold,” while wrong sits arrogantly on the throne. How long should the council wait to see if the new movement would survive? What tests would they use to determine whether or not it was successful? What is success? No matter how you look at it, Gamaliel’s “wisdom” was foolish.

But the biggest weakness of his advice was his motive: he encouraged neutrality when the council was facing a life-and-death issue that demanded decision. “Wait and see!” is actually not neutrality; *it is a definite decision*. Gamaliel was voting “No!” but he was preaching “maybe someday.”

There are many matters in life that do not demand a courageous decision of conscience. I had a friend in seminary who became emotionally disturbed because he tried to make every decision a matter of conscience,

including the cereal he ate at breakfast and the route he took when he walked to the store. But when we face a serious matter of conscience, we had better examine the evidence carefully. This, Gamaliel refused to do. He lost an opportunity for salvation because he turned the meeting into a petty discussion about Jewish insurrectionists.

Jesus made it clear that it is impossible to be neutral about Him and His message. “He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad” (Matt. 12:30). The members of the council knew the words of Elijah, “How long will you waver between two opinions?” (1 Kings 18:21 niv). There are times when being neutral means making a quiet (and perhaps cowardly) decision to reject God’s offer. It is significant that the first group named among those who go to hell is “the fearful” (Rev. 21:8), the people who knew the truth but were afraid to take their stand.

If Gamaliel was really afraid of fighting against God, why did he not honestly investigate the evidence, diligently search the Scriptures, listen to the witnesses, and ask God for wisdom? This was the opportunity of a lifetime! Daniel Defoe, author of *Robinson Crusoe*, claimed that nobody was born a coward. “Truth makes a man of courage,” he wrote, “and guilt makes that man of courage a coward.” What some men call caution, God would call cowardice. The apostles were true ambassadors; Gamaliel was really only a “religious politician.”

The Church: Announcing the Truth (5:40–42)

Part of the council wanted to kill the apostles (Acts 5:33), but Gamaliel’s speech tempered their violence. In a compromise move, the council decided to have the apostles beaten, so the men were given thirty-nine strokes (see Deut. 25:1–3; 2 Cor. 11:24). Then the apostles were commanded to stop speaking in the name of Jesus Christ lest something worse happen to them. (Review Acts 2:22; 3:6, 16; 4:10, 12, 17–18, 30.)

When people refuse to deal with disagreements on the basis of principle and truth, they often resort to verbal or physical violence, and sometimes both. The sad thing is that this violence often masquerades as patriotism or as religious zeal. When understanding fails, violence starts to take over, and people begin to destroy each other in the name of their nation or their God. It is tragic that even the history of religion is punctuated with accounts of persecutions and “holy wars.” William Temple said that Christians are “called to the hardest of all tasks: to fight without hatred, to resist without bitterness, and in the end, if God grant it so, to triumph without vindictiveness.”

How did the apostles respond to this illegal treatment from their nation’s religious leaders? They rejoiced! Jesus had told them to expect persecution and had instructed them to rejoice in it (Matt. 5:10–12). The opposition of men meant the approval of God,

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and it was actually a privilege to suffer for His name (Phil. 1:29).

To paraphrase Phillips Brooks, the purpose of life is to glorify God by the building of character through truth. The Sanhedrin thought that it had won a great victory, when actually the council had experienced a crushing defeat. No doubt they congratulated each other for doing such a good job of defending the faith! But it was the apostles who were the winners, because they grew in godliness as they yielded to God's will and suffered for their Master. In later years, Peter would have much to say in his first epistle about the meaning of suffering in the life of the believer, but now he was learning the lessons.

Neither the threats nor the beatings stopped them from witnessing for Jesus Christ. If anything, this persecution only made them trust God more and seek greater power in their ministry. True believers are not "quitters." The apostles had a commission to fulfill, and they intended to continue as long as their Lord enabled them. Acts 5:42 summarizes the apostolic pattern for evangelism, an excellent pattern for us to follow.

To begin with, they witnessed "daily." This meant that they took advantage of witnessing opportunities no matter where they were (Eph. 5:15–16). *Every* Christian is a witness, either a good one or a bad one, and our witness either draws others to Christ or drives them away. It is a good practice to start each day asking the Lord for the wisdom and grace needed to be a loving witness for Christ that day. If we sincerely look for opportunities and expect God to give them to us, we will never lack for open doors.

D. L. Moody was fearless in his witness for Christ and sought to speak about spiritual matters to at least one soul each day. "How does your soul prosper today?" he would ask; or, "Do you love the Lord? Do you belong to Christ?" Some were offended by his blunt manner, but not a few were led to Christ then and there. "The more we use the means and opportunities we have," he said, "the more will our ability and our opportunities be increased." He also said, "I live for souls and for eternity; I want to win some soul to Christ." He was not satisfied only to address great crowds; he also felt constrained to speak to people personally and urge them to trust Jesus Christ.

The believers witnessed "in the temple." After all, that was where the "religious" people gathered, and it was easier to reach them there. For several years, the church was looked on as another "sect" of the Jewish faith, and both the temple and the many synagogues were open to believers. In his missionary journeys, Paul always went first to the local synagogue or Jewish place of prayer, and he witnessed there until he was thrown out.

My counsel to new Christians has usually been, "Go back to your home and church, be a loving witness for Christ, and stay until they ask you to leave" (see 1 Cor. 7:17–24). The apostles did not abandon the

Jewish temple, though they knew the old dispensation was ended and that one day the temple would be destroyed. They were not compromising; they were "buying up the opportunity" to reach more people for Christ.

While I was ministering at the Moody Church in Chicago, it was my joy to lead a pastor to Christ, a gifted man who ministered to a wealthy congregation. He went back to his church and began to share Christ, and numbers of his people were saved. Then the denominational leaders stepped in and started to threaten him with dismissal.

"What do I do?" he asked, and I said, "Stay there until they throw you out. Be loving and kind, but don't give in!" Eventually he was forced out of the church, but not before his witness had influenced many both in the church and in the community. Today, God is using him in a remarkable way to witness for Christ and to train others to witness. He is able to get into churches and groups that might never invite me!

The early Christians also witnessed "in every house." Unlike congregations today, these people had no buildings that were set aside for worship and fellowship. Believers would meet in different homes, worshipping the Lord, listening to teaching, and seeking to win the lost (see Acts 2:46). Paul referred to a number of "house fellowships" when he greeted the saints in Rome (Rom. 16:5, 10–11, 14). The early church took the Word right into the homes, and we should follow their example. This does not mean that it is wrong to have special buildings set aside for church ministry, but only that we must not confine the ministry to the four walls of a church building.

Their ministry went on without ceasing. The authorities had told them to stop witnessing, but they only witnessed all the more! Their motive was not defiance to the law but rather obedience to the Lord. It was not something they turned on and off, depending on the situation. They were "always at it," and they kept at it as long as God gave them opportunities.

The witness of the church included both teaching and preaching, and that is a good balance. The word translated "preach" gives us our English word *evangelize*, and this is the first of fifteen times it is used in Acts. It simply means "to preach the gospel, to share the good news of Jesus Christ." (See 1 Cor. 15:1–8 for the official statement of the gospel message.)

However, proclamation must be balanced with instruction (see Acts 2:42) so that the sinners know *what* to believe and the new converts understand *why* they believed. The message cannot produce fruit unless the person understands it and can make an intelligent decision (Matt. 13:18–23). Believers cannot grow unless they are taught the Word of God (1 Peter 2:1–3).

Finally, it was Jesus Christ who was the center of their witness. That was the very name that the Sanhedrin had condemned! The early church did not go about arguing religion or condemning the establishment: they

simply told people about Jesus Christ and urged them to trust in Him. “For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord” (2 Cor. 4:5). “Ye shall be witnesses unto me” (Acts 1:8).

It was my privilege to speak at a service celebrating the fortieth anniversary of a pastor friend whose ministry has blessed many. A number of his friends shared in the service and quite candidly expressed their love for him and their appreciation for his ministry. My friend became more and more embarrassed as the meeting progressed, and when it came time for me to bring the message, he leaned over and whispered in my ear, “Warren, please tell them about Jesus!”

In his clever and convicting book *The Gospel Blimp*, the late Joe Bayly wrote: “Jesus Christ didn’t commit the gospel to an advertising agency; He commissioned disciples.”

That commission still stands.

In your life, is it commission—or omission?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Acts 6—7

STEPHEN, THE MAN GOD CROWNED

There are two words for “crown” in the New Testament: *diadema*, which means “a royal crown” and gives us the English word *diadem*; and *stephanos*, the “victor’s crown,” which gives us the popular name Stephen. You can inherit a *diadema*, but the only way to get a *stephanos* is to earn it.

Acts 6 and 7 center on the ministry and martyrdom of Stephen, a Spirit-filled believer who was crowned by the Lord. “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life” (Rev. 2:10). He was faithful both in life and in death and therefore is a good example for us to follow.

These chapters present Stephen as a faithful believer in four different areas of ministry.

Stephen the Servant (6:1–7)

The church was experiencing “growing pains,” and this was making it difficult for the apostles to minister to everybody. The “Grecians” were the Greek-speaking Jews who had come to Palestine from other nations, and therefore may not have spoken Aramaic, while the “Hebrews” were Jewish residents of the land who spoke both Aramaic and Greek. The fact that the “outsiders” were being neglected created a situation that could have divided the church. However, the apostles handled the problem with great wisdom and did not give Satan any foothold in the fellowship.

When a church faces a serious problem, this presents the leaders and the members with a number of opportunities. For one thing, problems give us the opportunity to examine our ministry and discover what changes must be made. In times of success, it is easy for us to maintain the *status quo*, but this is dangerous.

Henry Ward Beecher called success “a last-year’s nest from which the birds have flown.” Any ministry or organization that thinks its success will go on automatically is heading for failure. We must regularly examine our lives and our ministries lest we start taking things for granted.

The apostles studied the situation and concluded that *they* were to blame: they were so busy serving tables that they were neglecting prayer and the ministry of the Word of God. They had created their own problem because they were trying to do too much. Even today, some pastors are so busy with secondary tasks that they fail to spend adequate time in study and in prayer. This creates a “spiritual deficiency” in the church that makes it easy for problems to develop.

This is not to suggest that serving tables is a menial task, because *every* ministry in the church is important. But it is a matter of priorities; the apostles were doing jobs that others could do just as well. D. L. Moody used to say that it was better to put ten men to work than to try to do the work of ten men. Certainly it is better for you, for the workers you enlist, and for the church as a whole.

Church problems also give us an opportunity to exercise our faith, not only faith in the Lord, but also faith in each other. The leaders suggested a solution, and all the members agreed with it. The assembly selected seven qualified men, and the apostles set them apart for ministry. The church was not afraid to adjust their structure in order to make room for a growing ministry. When structure and ministry conflict, this gives us an opportunity to trust God for the solution. It is tragic when churches destroy ministry because they refuse to modify their structure. The apostles were not afraid to share their authority and ministry with others.

Problems also give us the opportunity to express our love. The Hebrew leaders and the predominantly Hebrew members selected six men who were Hellenists and one man who was both a Gentile and a proselyte! What an illustration of Romans 12:10 and Philippians 2:1–4! When we solve church problems, we must think of others and not of ourselves only.

We commonly call these seven men of Acts 6 “deacons” because the Greek noun *diakonos* is used in Acts 6:1 (“ministration”), and the verb *diakoneo* (“serve”) is used in Acts 6:2. However, this title is not given to them in this chapter, although you find deacons mentioned in Philippians 1:1 and their qualifications given in 1 Timothy 3:8–13. The word simply means “a servant.” These seven men were humble servants of the church, men whose work made it possible for the apostles to carry on their important ministries among the people. Stephen was one of these men. The emphasis in Stephen’s life is on *fullness*: he was full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom (Acts 6:3, 10), full of faith (Acts 6:5), and full of power (Acts 6:8). In Scripture, to be “full of” means “to be controlled by.” This man was controlled by the Spirit, faith, wisdom, and power. He

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was a God-controlled man yielded to the Holy Spirit, a man who sought to lead people to Christ.

What was the result? The blessing of God continued and increased! The church was still unified (Acts 6:5), multiplied (Acts 6:7), and magnified (Acts 6:8). Acts 6:7 is one of several “summaries” found in the book, statements that let us know that the story has reached an important juncture (see Acts 2:41; 4:4; 5:12–16; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; and 28:31). In Acts 6:7, Dr. Luke describes the climax of the ministry in Jerusalem, for the persecution following Stephen’s death will take the gospel to the Samaritans and then to the Gentiles. It has been estimated that there were eight thousand Jewish priests attached to the temple ministry in Jerusalem, and “a great company” of them trusted Jesus Christ as Savior!

Stephen the Witness (6:8–15)

This Spirit-filled man did not limit his ministry to the serving of tables; he also won the lost and even did miracles. Up to this point, it was the apostles who performed the miracles (Acts 2:43; 5:12), but now God gave this power to Stephen also. This was part of His plan to use Stephen to bear witness to the leaders of Israel. Stephen’s powerful testimony would be the climax of the church’s witness to the Jews. Then the message would go out to the Samaritans and then to the Gentiles.

Jews from many nations resided in Jerusalem in their own “quarters,” and some of these ethnic groups had their own synagogues. The freedmen (“libertines”) were the descendants of Jews who had previously been in bondage but had won their freedom from Rome. Since Paul came from Tarsus in Cilicia (Acts 21:39), it is possible that he heard Stephen in the synagogue and may have debated with him. However, nobody could match or resist Stephen’s wisdom and power (see Luke 21:15). Their only alternative was to destroy him.

Their treatment of Stephen parallels the way the Jewish leaders treated Jesus. First, they hired false witnesses to testify against him. Then, they stirred up the people who accused him of attacking the law of Moses and the temple. Finally, after listening to his witness, they executed him (see Matt. 26:59–62; John 2:19–22).

The Jews were jealous over their law and could not understand how Christ had come to fulfill the law and to bring in the new age. They were proud of their temple and refused to believe that God would permit it to be destroyed. Stephen faced the same spiritual blindness that Jeremiah faced in his ministry (see Jer. 7). The church faced the opposition of Jewish tradition for many years to come, from within its own ranks (Acts 15) and from false teachers coming in from the outside (Gal. 2:4).

The enemy surprised Stephen and arrested him while he was ministering (“having come upon him suddenly” is Wuest’s translation of Acts 6:12), and they took him before the same council that had tried Jesus

and the apostles. It was not even necessary for Stephen to speak in order to give witness, for the very glow on his face told everybody that he was a servant of God. Certainly the members of the Sanhedrin would recall Moses’ shining face (Ex. 34:29–30). It was as though God was saying, “This man is not against Moses! He is like Moses—he is My faithful servant!”

Stephen the Judge (7:1–53)

This is the longest address in the book of Acts and one of the most important. In it, Stephen reviewed the history of Israel and the contributions made by their revered leaders:

Abraham (Acts 7:2–8), Joseph (Acts 7:9–17), Moses (Acts 7:18–44), Joshua (Acts 7:45), and David and Solomon (Acts 7:46–50). But this address was more than a recitation of familiar facts; it was also a refutation of their indictments against Stephen and a revelation of their own national sins. Stephen proved from their own Scriptures that the Jewish nation was guilty of worse sins than those they had accused him of committing. What were these sins?

They misunderstood their own spiritual roots (vv. 1–8). Stephen’s address opens with “the God of glory” and closes with the glory of God (Acts 7:55), and all the time he spoke, his face radiated that same glory! Why? Because Israel was the only nation privileged to have the glory of God as a part of its inheritance (Rom. 9:4). Alas, the glory of God had departed, first from the tabernacle (1 Sam. 4:19–22) and then from the temple (Ezek. 10:4, 18). God’s glory had come in His Son (John 1:14), but the nation had rejected Him.

Abraham was the founder of the Hebrew nation, and his relationship to God was one of *grace* and *faith*. God had graciously appeared to him and called him out of heathen darkness into the light of salvation, and Abraham had responded by faith. Abraham was saved by grace, through faith, and not because he was circumcised, kept a law, or worshipped in a temple. All of those things came afterward (see Rom. 4; Gal. 3). He believed the promises of God and it was this faith that saved him.

God promised the land to Abraham’s descendants, and then told Abraham that his descendants would suffer in Egypt before they would enter and enjoy the land, and this took place just as God promised. From the very beginning, God had a wise plan for His people, and that plan would be fulfilled as long as they trusted His Word and obeyed His will.

The Jews greatly revered Abraham and prided themselves in being his “children.” But they confused physical descent with spiritual experience and depended on their national heritage rather than their personal faith. John the Baptist had warned them about this sin (Matt. 3:7–12) and so had Jesus (John 8:33–59). The Jews were blind to the simple faith of Abraham and the patriarchs, and they had cluttered it with man-made traditions that made salvation a

matter of good works, not faith. God has no grandchildren. Each of us must be born into the family of God through personal faith in Jesus Christ (John 1:11–13).

The Jews prided themselves in their circumcision, failing to understand that the rite was symbolic of an inner spiritual relationship with God (Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4; 6:10; Acts 7:51; Gal. 5:1–6; Phil. 3:3; Col. 2:11–12). Over the years, the fulfilling of ritual had taken the place of the enjoyment of reality. This happens in churches even today.

They rejected their God-sent deliverers (vv. 9–36). I have combined the sections dealing with Joseph and Moses because these two Jewish heroes have this in common: they were both rejected as deliverers the first time, but were accepted the second time. Joseph's brethren hated their brother and sold him into servitude, yet later he became their deliverer. They recognized Joseph "at the second time" (Acts 7:13) when they returned to Egypt for more food. Israel rejected Moses when he first tried to deliver them from Egyptian bondage, and he had to flee for his life (Ex. 2:11–22). But when Moses came to them the second time, the nation accepted him and he set them free (Acts 7:35).

These two events illustrate how Israel treated Jesus Christ. Israel rejected their Messiah when He came to them the first time (John 1:11), but when He comes again, they will recognize Him and receive Him (Zech. 12:10; Rev. 1:7). In spite of what they did to His Son, God has not cast away His people (Rom. 11:1–6). Israel today is suffering from a partial spiritual blindness that one day will be taken away (Rom. 11:25–32). Individual Jews are being saved, but the nation as a whole is blind to the truth about Jesus Christ.

Before leaving this section, we must deal with some seeming contradictions between Stephen's address and the Old Testament Scriptures.

Genesis 46:26–27 states that seventy people made up the household of Jacob, including Joseph's family already in Egypt, but Stephen claimed that there were seventy-five (Acts 7:14; and see Ex. 1:1–5). The Hebrew text has seventy in both Genesis and Exodus, but the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament) has seventy-five. Where did the number seventy-five come from in the Septuagint? In their count, the translators included Joseph's grandchildren (1 Chron. 7:14–15, 20–25). Being a Hellenistic Jew, Stephen would naturally use the Septuagint. There is no real contradiction; your total depends on the factors you include.

Acts 7:16 suggests that Jacob was buried at Shechem, but Genesis 50:13 states that he was buried in the cave of Machpelah at Hebron, along with Abraham, Isaac, and Sarah (Gen. 23:17). It was Joseph who was buried at Shechem (Josh. 24:32). It is likely that the children of Israel carried out of Egypt the remains of all the sons of Jacob, and not just Joseph alone, and buried them together in Shechem. The

"fathers" mentioned in Acts 7:15 would be the twelve sons of Jacob.

But who purchased the burial place in Shechem—Abraham or Jacob? Stephen seems to say that Abraham bought it, but the Old Testament record says that Jacob did (Gen. 33:18–20). Abraham purchased the cave of Machpelah (Gen. 23:14–20). The simplest explanation is that Abraham actually purchased *both* pieces of property and that Jacob later had to purchase the Shechem property again. Abraham moved around quite a bit, and it would be very easy for the residents of the land to forget or ignore the transactions he had made.

They disobeyed their law (vv. 37–43). Stephen's opponents had accused him of speaking against the sacred law of Moses, but the history of Israel revealed that the nation had repeatedly *broken* that law. God gave the law to His congregation ("church") in the wilderness at Mount Sinai, His living Word through the mediation of angels (see Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19). No sooner had the people received the law than they disobeyed it by asking Aaron to make them an idol (Ex. 32), and thereby broke the first two of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1–6).

The Jews had worshipped idols in Egypt (Josh. 24:14; Ezek. 20:7–8), and after their settlement in the Promised Land they gradually adopted the gods of the pagan nations around them. God repeatedly disciplined His people and sent them prophets to warn them, until finally He carried them off to Babylon, where they were finally cured of idolatry.

Acts 7:42 should be compared with Romans 1:24–28, for all of these verses describe the judgment of God when He "takes His hands off" and permits sinners to have their own way. When Stephen quoted Amos 5:25–27, he revealed what the Jews had really been doing all those years: in outward form, they were worshipping Jehovah, but in their hearts, they were worshipping foreign gods! The form of the question in Acts 7:42 demands a negative reply: "No, you were not offering those sacrifices to the Lord!"

In this day of "pluralism" of religions and an emphasis on "toleration," we must understand why God hated the pagan religions and instructed Israel to destroy them. To begin with, these religions were unspeakably obscene in their worship of sex and their use of religious prostitutes. Their practices were also brutal, even to the point of offering children as sacrifices to their gods. It was basically demon worship, and it opened the way for all kinds of godless living on the part of the Jews. Had the nation turned from the true God and succumbed to idolatry, it could have meant the end of the godly remnant and the fulfillment of the promise of the Redeemer.

God's law was given to the Jews to protect them from the pagan influence around them, and to enable them to enjoy the blessings of the land. It was the law that made them a holy people, different from the other nations. When Israel broke down that wall of

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distinction by disobeying God's law, they forfeited the blessing of God and had to be disciplined.

They despoiled their temple (vv. 44–50). The witnesses accused Stephen of seeking to destroy the temple, but that was exactly what the Jewish nation did! Moses built the tabernacle and God's glory graciously dwelt in the Holy of Holies (Ex. 40:34–38). Solomon built the temple, and once again God's glory came in (1 Kings 8:10–11). But over the years, the worship at the temple degenerated into mere religious formality, and eventually there were idols placed in the temple (2 Kings 21:1–9; Ezek. 8:7–12). Jeremiah warned people against their superstitious faith in the temple and told them that they had turned God's house into a den of thieves (Jer. 7:1–16).

Had the nation heeded their own prophets, they would have escaped the horrors of the Babylonian siege (see the book of Lamentations) and the destruction of their city and temple. Even Solomon recognized the truth that God did not live in buildings (1 Kings 8:27), and the prophet Isaiah made it even clearer (Isa. 66:1–2). We really make nothing for God, because everything comes from Him, and how can the Creator of the universe be contained in a man-made building (Acts 17:24)? The Jewish defense of their temple was both illogical and unscriptural.

They stubbornly resisted their God and His truth (vv. 51–53). This is the climax of Stephen's speech, the personal application that cut his hearers to the heart. Throughout the centuries, Israel had refused to submit to God and obey the truths He had revealed to them. Their ears did not hear the truth, their hearts did not receive the truth, and their necks did not bow to the truth. As a result, they killed their own Messiah!

The nation refused to accept the new truth that God was revealing from age to age. Instead of seeing God's truth as seed that produces fruit and more seed, the religious leaders "embalmed" the truth and refused to accept anything new. By the time Jesus came to earth, the truth of God was encrusted with so much tradition that the people could not recognize God's truth when He did present it. Man's dead traditions had replaced God's living truth (see Matt. 15:1–20).

Stephen the Martyr (7:54–60)

You wonder what kind of a world we live in when good and godly men like Stephen can be murdered by religious bigots! But we have similar problems in our "enlightened" age today: taking hostages, bombings that kill or maim innocent people, assassinations, and all in the name of politics or religion. The heart of man has not changed, nor can it be changed apart from the grace of God.

What were the results of Stephen's death? For Stephen, death meant *coronation* (Rev. 2:10). He saw the glory of God and the Son of God standing to receive him to heaven (see Luke 22:69). Our Lord sat down when He ascended to heaven (Ps. 110:1; Mark 16:19), but He stood up to welcome to glory the first

Christian martyr (Luke 12:8). This is the last time the title "Son of man" is used in the Bible. It is definitely a messianic title (Dan. 7:13–14), and Stephen's use of it was one more witness that Jesus is indeed Israel's Messiah.

Stephen was not only tried in a manner similar to that of our Lord, but he also died with similar prayers on his lips (Luke 23:34, 46; Acts 7:59–60). A heckler once shouted to a street preacher, "Why didn't God do something for Stephen when they were stoning him?" The preacher replied, "God did do something for Stephen. He gave him the grace to forgive his murderers and to pray for them!" A perfect answer!

For Israel, Stephen's death meant *condemnation*. This was their third murder: they had *permitted* John the Baptist to be killed; they had *asked* for Jesus to be killed; and now they were killing Stephen themselves. When they allowed Herod to kill John, the Jews sinned against God the Father who had sent John (Matt. 21:28–32). When they asked Pilate to crucify Jesus, they sinned against God the Son (Matt. 21:33–46). When they stoned Stephen, Israel sinned against the Holy Spirit who was working in and through the apostles (Matt. 10:1–8; Acts 7:51). Jesus said that this sin could never be forgiven (Matt. 12:31–32). Judgment finally came in AD 70 when Titus and the Roman armies destroyed Jerusalem and the temple.

For the church in Jerusalem, the death of Stephen meant *liberation*. They had been witnessing "to the Jew first" ever since Pentecost, but now they would be directed to take the message out of Jerusalem to the Samaritans (Acts 8) and even to the Gentiles (Acts 11:19–26). The opposition of the enemy helped prevent the church from becoming a Jewish "sect" and encouraged them to fulfill the commission of Acts 1:8 and Matthew 28:18–20.

Finally, as far as Saul (Acts 7:58) was concerned, the death of Stephen eventually meant *salvation*. He never forgot the event (Acts 22:17–21), and no doubt Stephen's message, prayers, and glorious death were used of the Spirit to prepare Saul for his own meeting with the Lord (Acts 9). God never wastes the blood of His saints. Saul would one day see the same glory that Stephen saw and would behold the Son of God and hear Him speak!

When Christians die, they "fall asleep" (John 11:11; 1 Thess. 4:13). The body sleeps and the spirit goes to be with the Lord in heaven (Acts 7:59; 2 Cor. 5:6–9; Phil. 1:23; Heb. 12:22–23). When Jesus returns, He will bring with Him the spirits of those who have died (1 Thess. 4:14), their bodies will be raised and glorified, and body and spirit will be united in glory to be "forever with the Lord." Even though we Christians weep at the death of a loved one (Acts 8:2), we do not sorrow hopelessly, for we know we shall meet again when we die or when the Lord returns.

God does not call all of us to be martyrs, but He does call us to be "living sacrifices" (Rom. 12:1–2). In some respects, it may be harder to *live* for Christ than

to die for Him, but if we are living for Him, we will be prepared to die for Him if that is what God calls us to do.

In 1948, Aucas martyr Jim Elliot wrote in his journal, “I seek not a long life, but a full one, like You, Lord Jesus.” Two years later, he wrote: “I must not think it strange if God takes in youth those whom I would have kept on earth till they were older. God is peopling Eternity, and I must not restrict Him to old men and women.”

Like Stephen, Jim Elliot and his four comrades were called on January 8, 1956, to “people Eternity” as they were slain by the people they were seeking to reach. What has happened to the Aucas since then is proof that the blood of the martyrs is indeed the seed of the church. Many Aucas are now Christians.

“Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life” (Rev. 2:10).

CHAPTER EIGHT

Acts 8

A CHURCH ON THE MOVE

There is one thing stronger than all the armies in the world,” wrote Victor Hugo, “and that is an idea whose time has come.”

The gospel of Jesus Christ is much more than an idea. The gospel is “the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16 ΝΚΙΥ). It is God’s “dynamite” for breaking down sin’s barriers and setting the prisoners free. Its time had come and the church was on the move. The “salt” was now leaving the “Jerusalem saltshaker” to be spread over all Judea and Samaria, just as the Lord had commanded (Acts 1:8).

The events in Acts 8 center around four different men.

A Zealous Persecutor—Saul (8:1–3)

The book of Acts and the Epistles give sufficient data for a sketch of Saul’s early life. He was born in Tarsus in Cilicia (Acts 22:3), a “Hebrew of the Hebrews” (see 2 Cor. 11:22; Phil. 3:5), the “son of a Pharisee” (Acts 23:6), and a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37; 22:25–28). He was educated in Jerusalem by Gamaliel (Acts 22:3) and became a devoted Pharisee (Acts 26:4–5; Phil. 3:5). Measured by the law, his life was blameless (Phil. 3:6). He was one of the most promising young Pharisees in Jerusalem, well on his way to becoming a great leader for the Jewish faith (Gal. 1:14).

Saul’s zeal for the law was displayed most vividly in his persecution of the church (Gal. 1:13–14; Phil. 3:6). He really thought that persecuting the believers was one way of serving God, so he did it with a clear conscience (2 Tim. 1:3). He obeyed the light that he had, and, when God gave him more light, he obeyed that and became a Christian!

In what ways did Saul persecute the church? He

“made havoc of the church,” and the verb here describes a wild animal mangling its prey. When Christ spoke to Saul on the Damascus road, He compared him to a beast (Acts 9:5)! The stoning of Stephen, which Saul approved, shows the lengths to which he would go to achieve his purpose. He persecuted both men and women “unto the death” (Acts 22:4), entering both houses and synagogues (Acts 22:19). He had the believers imprisoned and beaten (Acts 22:19; 26:9–11). If they renounced their faith in Jesus Christ (“compelling them to blaspheme”—Acts 26:11), they were set free; if they did not recant, they could be killed.

In later years, Paul described himself as “exceedingly mad against them” (Acts 26:11), “a blasphemer [he denounced Jesus Christ], and a persecutor, and injurious [violent]” (1 Tim. 1:13). He was a man with great authority whose devotion to Moses completely controlled his life, and almost destroyed his life. He did it “ignorantly in unbelief” (1 Tim. 1:13), and God showed him mercy and saved him. Saul of Tarsus is the last person in Jerusalem you would have chosen to be the great apostle to the Gentiles!

A Faithful Preacher—Philip (8:4–8)

Persecution does to the church what wind does to seed: it scatters it and only produces a greater harvest. The word translated “scattered” (*diaspeiro*, Acts 8:1, 4) means “to scatter seed.” The believers in Jerusalem were God’s seed, and the persecution was used of God to plant them in new soil so they could bear fruit (Matt. 13:37–38). Some went throughout Judea and Samaria (see Acts 1:8), and others went to more distant fields (Acts 11:19ff.).

The Samaritans were a “half-breed” people, a mixture of Jew and Gentile. The nation originated when the Assyrians captured the ten northern tribes in 732 BC, deported many of the people, and then imported others who intermarried with the Jews. The Samaritans had their own temple and priesthood and openly opposed fraternization with the Jews (John 4:9).

We have no reason to believe that God permitted this persecution because His people were negligent and had to be “forced” to leave Jerusalem. The fact that Saul persecuted believers “even unto strange [foreign] cities” (Acts 26:11) would suggest that their witness was bearing fruit even beyond Jerusalem. Nor should we criticize the apostles for remaining in the city. If anything, we should commend them for their courage and devotion to duty. After all, somebody had to remain there to care for the church.

Because of the witness and death of Stephen, it is possible that the focus of the persecution was against the Hellenistic Jews rather than the “native” Jews. It would be easier for Saul and his helpers to identify the Hellenistic believers since many of the “native” Jews were still very Jewish and very much attached to the temple. Peter was still keeping a “kosher home” when he was sent to evangelize the household of Cornelius (Acts 10:9–16).

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Philip was chosen as a deacon (Acts 6:5) but, like Stephen, he grew in his ministry and became an effective evangelist (see Acts 21:8). God directed him to evangelize in Samaria, an area that had been prohibited to the apostles (Matt. 10:5–6). Both John the Baptist and Jesus had ministered there (John 3:23; 4:1ff.), so Philip entered into their labors (John 4:36–38).

The word for preaching in Acts 8:4 means “to preach the gospel, to evangelize”; while the word in Acts 8:5 means “to announce as a herald.” Philip was God’s commissioned herald to deliver His message to the people of Samaria. To reject the messenger would mean to reject the message and rebel against the authority behind the herald, Almighty God. How people respond to God’s messenger and God’s message is serious business.

Philip not only declared God’s Word, but he also demonstrated God’s power by performing miracles. It was the apostles who had majored on miracles (Acts 2:43; 5:12), yet both Stephen and Philip did signs and wonders by the power of God (Acts 6:8). However, the emphasis here is on the Word of God: the people gave heed to the Word because they saw the miracles, and by believing the Word, they were saved. Nobody was ever saved simply because of miracles (John 2:23–25; 12:37–41).

Great persecution (Acts 8:1) plus the preaching of the gospel resulted in great joy! Both in his gospel and in the book of Acts, Luke emphasizes the joy of salvation (Luke 2:10; 15:7, 10; 24:52; Acts 8:8; 13:52; 15:3). The people of Samaria who heard the gospel and believed were delivered from physical affliction, demonic control, and, most important, from their sins. No wonder there was great joy!

The gospel had now moved from “Jewish territory” into Samaria where the people were part Jew and part Gentile. God in His grace had built a bridge between two estranged peoples and made the believers one in Christ, and soon He would extend that bridge to the Gentiles and include them as well. Even today, we need “bridge builders” like Philip, men and women who will carry the gospel into pioneer territory and dare to challenge ancient prejudices. “Into all the world ... the gospel to every creature” is still God’s commission to us.

A Clever Deceiver—Simon the Sorcerer (8:9–25)

It is a basic principle in Scripture that wherever God sows His true believers, Satan will eventually sow his counterfeits (Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43). This was true of the ministry of John the Baptist (Matt. 3:7ff.) and Jesus (Matt. 23:15, 33; John 8:44), and it would be true of Paul’s ministry also (Acts 13:6ff.; 2 Cor. 11:1–4, 13–15). The enemy comes as a lion to devour, and when that approach fails, he comes as a serpent to deceive. Satan’s tool in this case was a sorcerer named Simon.

The word translated “bewitched” in Acts 8:9 and 11 simply means “astounded, confounded.” It is translated

“wondered” in Acts 8:13. The people were amazed at the things that Simon did and, therefore, they believed the things that he said. They considered him “the great power of God.” Simon’s sorcery was energized by Satan (2 Thess. 2:1–12) and was used to magnify himself, while Philip’s miracles were empowered by God and were used to glorify Christ. Simon started to lose his following as the Samaritans listened to Philip’s messages, believed on Jesus Christ, were born again, and were baptized.

What does it mean that “Simon himself believed” (Acts 8:13)? We can answer that question best by asking another one: What was the basis of his “faith”? His faith was not in the Word of God, but in the miracles he saw Philip perform, and there is no indication that Simon repented of his sins. He certainly did not believe with *all* his heart (Acts 8:37). His faith was like that of the people of Jerusalem who witnessed our Lord’s miracles (John 2:23–25), or even like that of the demons (James 2:19). Simon continued with Philip, not to hear the Word and learn more about Jesus Christ, but to witness the miracles and perhaps learn how they were done.

It is important to note that the Samaritans did not receive the gift of the Holy Spirit when they believed. It was necessary for two of the apostles, Peter and John, to come from Jerusalem, put their hands on the converts, and impart to them the gift of the Spirit. Why? Because God wanted to unite the Samaritan believers with the original Jewish church in Jerusalem. He did not want two churches that would perpetuate the division and conflict that had existed for centuries. Jesus had given Peter the “keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 16:13–20), which meant that Peter had the privilege of “opening the door of faith” to others. He opened the door to the Jews at Pentecost, and now he opened the door to the Samaritans. Later, he would open the door of faith to the Gentiles (Acts 10).

Remember too that the first ten chapters of Acts record a period of transition, from the Jew to the Samaritan to the Gentile. God’s pattern for today is given in Acts 10: the sinner hears the gospel, believes, receives the gift of the Spirit, and then is baptized. It is dangerous to base any doctrine or practice *only* on what is recorded in Acts 1–10, for you might be building on that which was temporary and transitional. Those who claim we must be baptized to receive the gift of the Spirit (Acts 2:38) have a hard time explaining what happened to the Samaritans, and those who claim we must have “the laying on of hands” to receive the Spirit have a difficult time with Acts 10. Once you accept Acts 1–10 as a transitional period in God’s plan, with Acts 10 being the climax, the problems are solved.

The wickedness of Simon’s heart was fully revealed by the ministry of the two apostles. Simon not only wanted to perform miracles, but he also wanted the power to convey the gift of the Holy Spirit to others—and he was quite willing to pay for this power! It is this

passage that gives us the word *simony*, which means “the buying and selling of church offices or privileges.”

As you study the book of Acts, you will often find the gospel in conflict with money and “big business.” Ananias and Sapphira lost their lives because they lied about their gift (Acts 5:1–11). Paul put a fortune-teller out of business in Philippi and ended up in jail (Acts 16:16–24). He also gave the silversmiths trouble in Ephesus and helped cause a riot (Acts 19:23–41). The early church had its priorities straight: it was more important to preach the Word than to win the support of the wealthy and influential people of the world.

Peter’s words to Simon give every indication that the sorcerer was not a converted man. “Thy money perish with thee!” is pretty strong language to use with a believer. He had neither “part or lot in this matter” (“this word”) and his heart was not right before God. While it is not out of place for believers to repent (see Rev. 2–3), the command to repent is usually given to unbelievers. The word *thought* in Acts 8:22 means “plot or scheme” and is used in a bad sense. The fact that Simon was “in the gall of bitterness” (Deut. 29:18; Heb. 12:15) and “the bond of iniquity” would indicate that he had never truly been born again.

Simon’s response to these severe words of warning was not at all encouraging. He was more concerned about avoiding judgment than getting right with God! There is no evidence that he repented and sought forgiveness. A sinner who wants the prayers of others but who will not pray himself is not going to enter God’s kingdom.

This episode only shows how close a person can come to salvation and still not be converted. Simon heard the gospel, saw the miracles, gave a profession of faith in Christ, and was baptized, and yet he was never born again. He was one of Satan’s clever counterfeits, and had Peter not exposed the wickedness of his heart, Simon would have been accepted as a member of the Samaritan congregation!

Even though the persecution was still going on, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in “many villages of the Samaritans” as they went their way. They lost no opportunity to share the good news with others now that the doors were open in Samaria.

A Concerned Seeker—an Ethiopian (8:26–40)

Philip was not only a faithful preacher, he was also an obedient personal worker. Like his Master, he was willing to leave the crowds and deal with one lost soul. The angel could have told this Ethiopian official how to be saved, but God has not given the commission to angels: He has given it to His people. Angels have never personally experienced God’s grace; therefore, they can never bear witness of what it means to be saved.

D. L. Moody once asked a man about his soul, and the man replied, “It’s none of your business!” “Oh, yes, it is my business!” Moody said, and the man immediately exclaimed, “Then you must be D. L. Moody!” It

is every Christian’s business to share the gospel with others, and to do it without fear or apology.

Philip’s experience ought to encourage us in our own personal witness for the Lord. To begin with, God directed Philip to the right person at the right time. You and I are not likely to have angels instruct us, but we can know the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our witnessing, if we are walking in the Spirit and praying for God’s direction.

Late one afternoon, I was completing my pastoral calling and I felt impressed to make one more visit to see a woman who was faithfully attending church but was not a professed Christian. At first, I told myself that it was foolish to visit her that late in the day, since she was probably preparing a meal for her family. But I went anyway and discovered that she had been burdened about her sins all that day! Within minutes, she opened her heart to Christ and was born again. Believe me, I was glad I obeyed the leading of the Spirit!

This court official did not come from what we know today as Ethiopia; his home was in ancient Nubia, located south of Egypt. Since he was a eunuch, he could not become a full Jewish proselyte (Deut. 23:1), but he was permitted to become a “God fearer” or “a proselyte of the gate.” He was concerned enough about his spiritual life to travel over two hundred miles to Jerusalem to worship God, but his heart was still not satisfied.

This Ethiopian represents many people today who are religious, read the Scriptures, and seek the truth, yet do not have saving faith in Jesus Christ. They are sincere, but they are lost! They need someone to show them the way.

As Philip drew near to the chariot, he heard the man reading from the prophet Isaiah. (It was customary in those days for students to read out loud.) God had already prepared the man’s heart to receive Philip’s witness! If we obey the Lord’s leading, we can be sure that God will go before us and open the way for our witness.

Isaiah 53 was the passage he was reading, the prophecy of God’s Suffering Servant. Isaiah 53 describes our Lord Jesus Christ in His birth (Isa. 53:1–2), life and ministry (Isa. 53:3), substitutionary death (Isa. 53:4–9), and victorious resurrection (Isa. 53:10–12). Isaiah 53:4 should be connected with 1 Peter 2:24; Isaiah 53:7 with Matthew 26:62–63; Isaiah 53:9 with Matthew 27:57–60; and Isaiah 53:12 with Luke 23:34, 37.

The Ethiopian focused on Isaiah 53:7–8, which describes our Lord as the willing Sacrifice for sinners, even to the point of losing His human rights. As Philip explained the verses to him, the Ethiopian began to understand the gospel because the Spirit of God was opening his mind to God’s truth. It is not enough for the lost sinner to desire salvation; he must also understand God’s plan of salvation. It is the heart that understands the Word that eventually bears fruit (Matt. 13:23).

Acts 8—9

The idea of substitutionary sacrifice is one that is found from the beginning of the Bible to the end. God killed animals so that He might clothe Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:21). He provided a ram to die in the place of Isaac (Gen. 22:13). At Passover, innocent lambs died for the people of Israel (Ex. 12), and the entire Jewish religious system was based on the shedding of blood (Lev. 17, especially v. 11). Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of both the Old Testament types and the prophecies (John 1:29; Rev. 5).

“Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God” (Rom. 10:17). The Ethiopian believed on Jesus Christ and was born again! So real was his experience that he insisted on stopping the caravan and being baptized immediately! He was no “closet Christian”; he wanted everybody to know what the Lord had done for him.

How did he know that believers were supposed to be baptized? Perhaps Philip had included this in his witness to him, or perhaps he had even seen people baptized while he was in Jerusalem. We know that Gentiles were baptized when they became Jewish proselytes. Throughout the book of Acts, baptism is an important part of the believer’s commitment to Christ and witness for Christ.

While Acts 8:37 is not found in all the New Testament manuscripts, there is certainly nothing in it that is unbiblical (Rom. 10:9–10). In the days of the early church, converts were not baptized unless they first gave a clear testimony of their faith in Jesus Christ. And keep in mind that the Ethiopian was speaking not only to Philip but also to those in the caravan who were near his chariot. He was an important man, and you can be sure that his attendants were paying close attention.

Philip was caught away to minister elsewhere (compare 1 Kings 18:12), but the treasurer “went on his way rejoicing” (see Acts 8:8). God did not permit Philip to do the necessary discipling of this new believer, but surely He provided for it when the man arrived home. Even though he was a eunuch, the Ethiopian was accepted by God (see Isa. 56:3–5)!

Philip ended up at Azotus, about twenty miles from Gaza, and then made his way to Caesarea, a journey of about sixty miles. Like Peter and John, Philip “preached his way home” (Acts 8:25) as he told others about the Savior. Twenty years later, we find Philip living in Caesarea and still serving God as an evangelist (Acts 21:8ff.).

As you trace the expansion of the gospel during this transition period (Acts 2—10), you see how the Holy Spirit reaches out to the whole world. In Acts 8, the Ethiopian who was converted was a descendant of Ham (Gen. 10:6, where “Cush” refers to Ethiopia). In Acts 9, Saul of Tarsus will be saved, a Jew and therefore a descendant of Shem (Gen. 10:21ff.). In Acts 10, the Gentiles find Christ, and they are the descendants of Japheth (Gen. 10:2–5). The whole world was peopled by Shem, Ham, and Japheth (Gen. 10:1), and God

wants the whole world—all of their descendants—to hear the message of the gospel (Matt. 28:18–20; Mark 16:15).

In October 1857, J. Hudson Taylor began to minister in Ningpo, China, and he led a Mr. Nyi to Christ. The man was overjoyed and wanted to share his faith with others.

“How long have you had the good tidings in England?” Mr. Nyi asked Hudson Taylor one day. Taylor acknowledged that England had known the gospel for many centuries.

“My father died seeking the truth,” said Mr. Nyi. “Why didn’t you come sooner?”

Taylor had no answer to that penetrating question.

How long have *you* known the gospel?

How far have you shared it personally?

CHAPTER NINE

Acts 9:1–31

GOD ARRESTS SAUL

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus, the leading persecutor of the Christians, was perhaps the greatest event in church history after the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. The next great event would be the conversion of the Gentiles (Acts 10), and Saul (Paul) would become the apostle to the Gentiles. God was continuing to work out His plan to bring the gospel to the whole world.

“Paul was a great man,” said Charles Spurgeon, “and I have no doubt that on the way to Damascus he rode a very high horse. But a few seconds sufficed to alter the man. How soon God brought him down!”

The account of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus is given three times in Acts, in chapters 9, 22, and 26. According to the record before us, Saul experienced four meetings that together transformed his life.

He Met Jesus Christ (9:1–9)

When you look at Saul *on the road* (Acts 9:1–2), you see a very zealous man who actually thought he was doing God a service by persecuting the church. Had you stopped him and asked for his reasons, he might have said something like this:

“Jesus of Nazareth is dead. Do you expect me to believe that a crucified nobody is the promised Messiah? According to our law, anybody who is hung on a tree is cursed [Deut. 21:23]. Would God take a cursed false prophet and make him the Messiah? No! His followers are preaching that Jesus is both alive and doing miracles through them. But their power comes from Satan, not God. This is a dangerous sect, and I intend to eliminate it before it destroys our historic Jewish faith!”

In spite of his great learning (Acts 26:24), Saul was spiritually blind (2 Cor. 3:12–18) and did not understand what the Old Testament really taught about the

Messiah. Like many others of his countrymen, he stumbled over the cross (1 Cor. 1:23) because he depended on his own righteousness and not on the righteousness of God (Rom. 9:30–10:13; Phil. 3:1–10). Many self-righteous religious people today do not see their need for a Savior and resent it if you tell them they are sinners.

Saul's attitude was that of an angry animal whose very breath was dangerous (see Acts 8:3)! Like many other rabbis, he believed that the law had to be obeyed before Messiah could come, and yet these "heretics" were preaching against the law, the temple, and the traditions of the fathers (Acts 6:11–13). Saul wasted the churches in Judea (Gal. 1:23) and then got authority from the high priest to go as far as Damascus to hunt down the disciples of Jesus. This was no insignificant enterprise, for the authority of the highest Jewish council was behind him (Acts 22:5).

Damascus had a large Jewish population, and it has been estimated that there could well have been thirty to forty synagogues in the city. The fact that there were already believers there indicates how effective the church had been in getting out the message. Some of the believers may have fled the persecution in Jerusalem, which explains why Saul wanted authority to bring them back. Believers were still identified with the Jewish synagogues, for the break with Judaism would not come for a few years. (See James 2:2, where "assembly" is "synagogue" in the original Greek.)

Saul suddenly found himself *on the ground* (Acts 9:4)! It was not a heat stroke or an epileptic seizure that put him there, but a personal meeting with Jesus Christ. At midday (Acts 22:6), he saw a bright light from heaven and heard a voice speaking his name (Acts 22:6–11). The men with him also fell to the earth (Acts 26:14) and heard the sound, but they could not understand the words spoken from heaven. They stood to their feet in bewilderment (Acts 9:7), hearing Saul address someone, but not knowing what was happening.

Saul of Tarsus made some wonderful discoveries that day. To begin with, he discovered to his surprise that Jesus of Nazareth was actually *alive!* Of course, the believers had been constantly affirming this (Acts 2:32; 3:15; 5:30–32), but Saul had refused to accept their testimony. If Jesus was alive, then Saul had to change his mind about Jesus and His message. He had to repent, a difficult thing for a self-righteous Pharisee to do.

Saul also discovered that he was a lost sinner who was in danger of the judgment of God. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:5 NKJV). Saul thought he had been serving God, when in reality he had been persecuting the Messiah! When measured by the holiness of Jesus Christ, Saul's good works and legalistic self-righteousness looked like filthy rags (Isa. 64:6; Phil. 3:6–8). All of his values changed. He was a new person because he trusted Jesus Christ.

The Lord had a special work for Saul to do (Acts

26:16–18). The Hebrew of the Hebrews would become the apostle to the Gentiles; the persecutor would become a preacher; and the legalistic Pharisee would become the great proclaimer of the grace of God. Up to now, Saul had been like a wild animal, fighting against the goads, but now he would become a vessel of honor, the Lord's "tool," to preach the gospel in the regions beyond. What a transformation!

Some thirty years later, Paul wrote that Christ had "apprehended him" on the Damascus road (Phil. 3:12). Saul was out to arrest others when the Lord arrested him. He had to lose his religion before he could gain the righteousness of Christ. His conversion experience is unique, because sinners today certainly do not hear God's voice or see blinding heavenly lights. However, Paul's experience is an example of how Israel will be saved when Jesus Christ returns and reveals Himself to them (Zech. 12:10; Matt. 24:29ff.; 1 Tim. 1:12–16). His salvation is certainly a great encouragement to any lost sinner, for if "the chief of sinners" could be saved, surely anybody can be saved!

It is worth noting that the men who were with Saul saw the light, but did not see the Lord, and they heard the sound, but did not hear the voice speaking the words (note John 12:27–29). We wonder if any of them later trusted in Christ because of Saul's testimony. He definitely saw the glorified Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:7–10).

The men led Saul *into the city* (Acts 9:8–9), for the angry bull (Acts 9:1) had now become a docile lamb! The leader had to be led because the vision had left him blind. His spiritual eyes had been opened, but his physical eyes were closed. God was thoroughly humbling Saul and preparing him for the ministry of Ananias. He fasted and prayed (Acts 9:11) for three days, during which time he no doubt started to "sort out" what he believed. He had been saved by grace, not by law, through faith in the living Christ. God began to instruct Saul and show him the relationship between the gospel of the grace of God and the traditional Mosaic religion that he had practiced all his life.

He Met Ananias (9:10–19)

Ananias was a devout Jew (Acts 22:12) who was a believer in Jesus Christ. He knew what kind of reputation Saul had and that he was coming to Damascus to arrest believers. It was up to a week's journey from Jerusalem to Damascus, but some of the Jerusalem Christians had gotten to the city first in order to warn the saints.

It is interesting to note in Acts 9 the different names used for God's people: disciples (Acts 9:1, 10, 19, 25–26, 36, 38), those of the way (Acts 9:2), saints (Acts 9:13, 32, 41), all that call on God's name (Acts 9:14, 21), and brethren (Acts 9:17, 30). We use the word *Christian* most frequently, and yet that name did not appear on the scene until later (Acts 11:26). "Disciples" is the name that is used most in the book

Acts 9

of Acts, but you do not find it used in the Epistles. There the name “saints” is the most frequently used title for God’s people.

Ananias was available to do God’s will, but he certainly was not anxious to obey! The fact that Saul was “praying” instead of “preying” should have encouraged Ananias. “Prayer is the autograph of the Holy Ghost upon the renewed heart,” said Charles Spurgeon (Rom. 8:9, 14–16). Instead of trusting himself, Saul was now trusting the Lord and waiting for Him to show him what to do. In fact, Saul had already seen a vision of a man named Ananias (Hananiah = “the Lord is gracious”) coming to minister to him; so, how could Ananias refuse to obey?

Acts 9:15 is a good summary of Paul’s life and ministry. It was all of grace, for he did not choose God; it was God who chose him (1 Tim. 1:14). He was God’s vessel (2 Tim. 2:20–21), and God would work in and through him to accomplish His purposes (Eph. 2:10; Phil. 2:12–13). God’s name would be glorified as His servant would take the gospel to Jews and Gentiles, kings and commoners, and as he would suffer for Christ’s sake. This is the first reference in the book of Acts to the gospel going to the Gentiles (see also Acts 22:21; 26:17).

Once convinced, Ananias lost no time going to the house of Judas and ministering to the waiting Saul. The fact that he called him “brother” must have brought joy to the heart of the blinded Pharisee. Saul not only heard Ananias’s voice, but he felt his hands (Acts 9:12, 17). By the power of God, his eyes were opened and he could see! He was also filled with the Holy Spirit and baptized, and then he ate some food.

The King James Version of Acts 22:16 conveys the impression that it was necessary for Saul to be baptized in order to be saved, but that was not the case. Saul washed away his sins by “calling on the Lord” (Acts 2:21; Rom. 10:13). Kenneth Wuest translates Acts 22:16, “Having arisen, be baptized and wash away your sins, having previously called upon His name.” In the Greek, it is not a present participle (“calling”), but an aorist participle (“having called”). His calling on the Lord preceded his baptism.

Saul tarried with the believers in Damascus and no doubt learned from them. Imagine what it would be like to disciple the great apostle Paul! He discovered that they were loving people, undeserving of the persecution he had inflicted on them, and that they knew the truth of God’s Word and only wanted to share it with others.

Before we leave this section, we should emphasize some practical lessons that all believers ought to learn.

To begin with, *God can use even the most obscure saint*. Were it not for the conversion of Saul, we would never have heard of Ananias, and yet Ananias had an important part to play in the ongoing work of the church. Behind many well-known servants of God are lesser-known believers who have influenced them. God keeps the books and will see to it that each servant will

get a just reward. The important thing is not fame but faithfulness (1 Cor. 4:1–5).

The experience of Ananias also reminds us that we *should never be afraid to obey God’s will*. Ananias at first argued with the Lord and gave some good reasons why he should not visit Saul. But the Lord had everything under control, and Ananias obeyed by faith. When God commands, we must remember that He is working “at both ends of the line,” and that His perfect will is always the best.

There is a third encouragement: *God’s works are always balanced*. God balanced a great public miracle with a quiet meeting in the house of Judas. The bright light and the voice from heaven were dramatic events, but the visit of Ananias was somewhat ordinary. The hand of God pushed Saul from his “high horse,” but God used the hand of a man to bring Saul what he most needed. God spoke from heaven, but He also spoke through an obedient disciple who gave the message to Saul. The “ordinary” events were just as much a part of the miracle as were the extraordinary.

Finally, *we must never underestimate the value of one person brought to Christ*. Peter was ministering to thousands in Jerusalem, and Philip had seen a great harvest among the Samaritan people, but Ananias was sent to only one man. Yet what a man! Saul of Tarsus became Paul the apostle, and his life and ministry have influenced people and nations ever since. Even secular historians confess that Paul is one of the significant figures in world history.

On April 21, 1855, Edward Kimball led one of the young men in his Sunday school to faith in Christ. Little did he realize that Dwight L. Moody would one day become the world’s leading evangelist. The ministry of Norman B. Harrison in an obscure Bible conference was used of God to bring Theodore Epp to faith in Christ, and God used Theodore Epp to build the Back to the Bible ministry around the world. Our task is to lead men and women to Christ; God’s task is to use them for His glory; and every person is important to God.

He Met the Opposition (9:20–25)

Saul immediately began to proclaim the Christ that he had persecuted, declaring boldly that Jesus is the Son of God. This is the only place in Acts that you find this title, but Paul used it in his Epistles at least fifteen times. It was a major emphasis in his ministry. The dramatic change in Saul’s life was a source of wonder to the Jews at Damascus. Every new convert’s witness for Christ ought to begin right where he is, so Saul began his ministry first in Damascus (Acts 26:20).

It is likely that Saul’s visit to Arabia (Gal. 1:17) took place about this time. Had Dr. Luke included it in his account, he would have placed it between Acts 9:21 and 22. We do not know how long he remained in Arabia, but we do know that after three years, Saul was back in Jerusalem (Gal. 1:18).

Why did he go to Arabia? Probably because the

Lord instructed him to get alone so that He might teach Saul His Word. There were many things that would have to be clarified in Saul's mind before he could minister effectively as an apostle of Jesus Christ. If Saul went to the area near Mount Sinai (Gal. 4:25), it took considerable courage and strength for such a journey. Perhaps it was then that he experienced "perils of robbers" and "perils in the wilderness" (2 Cor. 11:26). It is also possible that he did some evangelizing while in Arabia, because when he returned to Damascus, he was already a marked man.

The important thing about this Arabian sojourn is the fact that Saul did not "confer with flesh and blood" but received his message and mandate directly from the Lord (see Gal. 1:10–24). He did not borrow anything from the apostles in Jerusalem, because he did not even meet them until three years after his conversion.

When Saul returned to Damascus, he began his witness afresh, and the Jews sought to silence him. Now he would discover what it meant to be the hunted instead of the hunter! This was but the beginning of the "great things" he would suffer for the name of Christ (Acts 9:16). How humiliating it must have been for Saul to be led into Damascus as a blind man and then smuggled out like a common criminal (see 2 Cor. 11:32–33).

Throughout his life, the great apostle was hated, hunted, and plotted against by both Jews and Gentiles ("in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles"—2 Cor. 11:26 *NKJV*). As you read the book of Acts, you see how the opposition and persecution increase, until the apostle ends up a prisoner in Rome (Acts 13:45, 50; 14:19; 17:5, 13; 18:12; 20:3, 19; 21:10–11, 27ff.). But he counted it a privilege to suffer for the sake of Christ, and so should we. "Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12).

He Met the Jerusalem Believers (9:26–31)

There were two stages in Saul's experience with the church in Jerusalem.

Saul rejected (v. 26). At first, the believers in the Jerusalem church were afraid of him. Saul "kept trying" (literal Greek) to get into their fellowship, but they would not accept him. For one thing, they were afraid of him and probably thought that his new attitude of friendliness was only a trick to get into their fellowship so he could have them arrested. They did not believe that he was even a disciple of Jesus Christ, let alone an apostle who had seen the risen Savior.

Their attitude seems strange to us, for surely the Damascus saints had gotten word to the church in Jerusalem that Saul had been converted and was now preaching the Word. Perhaps Saul's "disappearance" for almost three years gave an air of suspicion to his testimony. Where had he been? What was he doing? Why had he waited so long to contact the Jerusalem elders? Furthermore, what right did he have to call himself an apostle when he had not been selected by Jesus Christ?

There were many unanswered questions that helped create an atmosphere of suspicion and fear.

Saul accepted (vv. 27–31). It was Barnabas who helped the Jerusalem church accept Saul. We met Joseph, the "son of encouragement," in Acts 4:36–37, and we will meet him again as we continue to study Acts. Barnabas "took hold" of Saul, brought him to the church leaders, and convinced them that Saul was both a believer and a chosen apostle. He had indeed seen the risen Christ (1 Cor. 9:1). It is not necessary to invent some "hidden reason" why Barnabas befriended Saul. This was just the nature of the man: he was an encouragement to others.

There seems to be a contradiction between Acts 9:27 and Galatians 1:18–19. How could Barnabas introduce Saul to "the apostles" (plural) if Peter was the only apostle Saul met? Dr. Luke is obviously using the word "apostle" in the wider sense of "spiritual leader." Even Galatians 1:19 calls James, the brother of the Lord, an apostle, and Barnabas is called an apostle in Acts 14:4 and 14. In his epistles, Paul sometimes used "apostle" to designate a special messenger or agent of the church (Rom. 16:7; 2 Cor. 8:23; Phil. 2:25, original Greek). So, there really is no contradiction; it is the leaders of the Jerusalem church that Saul met.

Saul began to witness to the Greek-speaking Jews, the Hellenists that had engineered the trial and death of Stephen (Acts 6:9–15). Saul was one of them, having been born and raised in Tarsus, and no doubt he felt an obligation to take up the mantle left by Stephen (Acts 22:20). The Hellenistic Jews were not about to permit this kind of witness, so they plotted to kill him.

At this point, we must read Acts 22:17–21. God spoke to Saul in the temple and reminded him of his commission to take the message to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15). Note the urgency of God's command: "Quick! Leave Jerusalem immediately, because they will not accept your testimony about me" (Acts 22:18 *NIV*). Saul shared this message with the church leaders, and they assisted him in returning to his native city, Tarsus. The fact that they believed Saul's testimony about the vision is proof that he had been fully accepted by the church.

We will not meet Saul again until Acts 11:25, when once more it is Barnabas who finds him and brings him to the church at Antioch where they ministered together. That took place about seven years after Saul left Jerusalem, about ten years after his conversion. We have every reason to believe that Saul used Tarsus as his headquarters for taking the gospel to the Gentiles in that part of the Roman Empire. He ministered "in the regions of Syria and Cilicia" (Gal. 1:21) and established churches there (Acts 15:41). Some Bible scholars believe that the Galatian churches were founded at this time.

It is likely that some of the trials listed in 2 Corinthians 11:24–26 occurred during this period. Only one Roman beating is recorded in Acts (16:22), which leaves two not accounted for. Likewise, the five

Acts 9—10

Jewish beatings are not recorded either in Acts or the Epistles. Luke tells us about only one shipwreck (Acts 27), but we have no record of the other two. Anyone who thinks that the apostle was taking a vacation during those years is certainly in error!

Acts 9:31 is another of Luke's summaries that he regularly dropped into the book (Acts 2:46–47; 4:4, 32; 5:12–14). Note that the geographic locations parallel those given in Acts 1:8. Luke is telling us that the message was going out just as the Lord had commanded. Soon, the center would be Antioch, not Jerusalem, and the key leader Paul, not Peter, and the gospel would be taken to the uttermost part of the earth.

It was a time of “peace” for the churches, but not a time of complacency, for they grew both spiritually and numerically. They seized the opportunity to repair and strengthen their sails before the next storm began to blow! The door of faith had been opened to the Jews (Acts 2) and to the Samaritans (Acts 8), and soon it would be opened to the Gentiles (Acts 10). Saul has moved off the scene, and Peter now returns. Soon, Peter will move off the scene (except for a brief mention in Acts 15), and Paul will fill the pages of the book of Acts.

God changes His workmen, but His work goes on.

And you and I are privileged to be a part of that work today!

CHAPTER TEN

Acts 9:32—10:48

PETER'S MIRACLE MINISTRY

What is the greatest miracle that God can do for us? Some would call the healing of the body God's greatest miracle, while others would vote for the raising of the dead. However, I think that the greatest miracle of all is the salvation of a lost sinner. Why? Because salvation costs the greatest price, it produces the greatest results, and it brings the greatest glory to God.

In this section, we find Peter participating in all three miracles: he heals Aeneas, he raises Dorcas from the dead, and he brings the message of salvation to Cornelius and his household.

A Great Miracle—Healing the Body (9:32–35)

The apostle Peter had been engaged in an itinerant ministry (Acts 8:25) when he found himself visiting the saints in Lydda, a largely Gentile city about twenty-five miles from Jerusalem. It is possible that the area had first been evangelized by people converted at Pentecost, or perhaps by faithful believers who had been scattered far and wide during the great persecution. No doubt Philip the evangelist had also ministered there (Acts 8:40).

We know very little about Aeneas. How old was he?

Did he believe on Jesus Christ? Was he a Jew or a Gentile? All that Dr. Luke tells us is the man had been palsied for eight years, which meant he was crippled and helpless. He was a burden to himself and a burden to others, and there was no prospect that he would ever get well.

Peter's first miracle had been the healing of a crippled man (Acts 3), and now that miracle was repeated. As you read the book of Acts, you will see parallels between the ministries of Peter and Paul. Both healed cripples. Both were arrested and put into jail and were miraculously delivered. Both were treated like gods (Acts 10:25–26; 14:8–18), and both gave a bold witness before the authorities. Both had to confront false prophets (Acts 8:9–24; 13:6–12). No one reading the book of Acts could end up saying, “I am for Paul!” or “I am for Peter!” (1 Cor. 1:12). “But it is the same God which worketh all in all” (1 Cor. 12:6).

The resurrected Christ, by the authority of His name, brought perfect soundness to Aeneas (see Acts 3:6, 16; 4:10). The healing was instantaneous, and the man was able to get up and make his bed. He became a walking miracle! Acts 9:35 does not suggest that the entire population of Lydda and Sharon were saved, but only all those who had contact with Aeneas. Just seeing him walk around convinced them that Jesus was alive and they needed to trust in Him. (See John 12:10–11 for a similar instance.)

You can be sure that Peter did much more in Lydda than heal Aeneas, as great and helpful as that miracle was. He evangelized, taught and encouraged the believers, and sought to establish the church in the faith. Jesus had commissioned Peter to care for the sheep (John 21:15–17), and Peter was faithful to fulfill that commission.

A Greater Miracle—Raising the Dead (9:36–43)

Joppa, the modern Jaffa, is located on the seacoast, some ten miles beyond Lydda. The city is important in Bible history as the place from which the prophet Jonah embarked when he tried to flee from God (Jonah 1:1–3). Jonah went to Joppa to avoid going to the Gentiles, but Peter in Joppa received his call to go to the Gentiles! Because Jonah disobeyed God, the Lord sent a storm that caused the Gentile sailors to fear. Because Peter obeyed the Lord, God sent the “wind of the Spirit” to the Gentiles and they experienced great joy and peace. What a contrast!

It seemed so tragic that a useful and beloved saint like Dorcas (Tabitha = gazelle) should die when she was so greatly needed by the church. This often happens in local churches, and it is a hard blow to take. In my own pastoral ministry, I have experienced the loss of choice saints who were difficult to replace in the church, yet, all we can say is, “The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21).

The believers in Joppa heard that Peter was in the area, and they sent for him immediately. There is no

record in Acts that any of the apostles had raised the dead, so their sending for Peter was an evidence of their faith in the power of the risen Christ. When our Lord ministered on earth. He raised the dead, so why would He not be able to raise the dead from His exalted throne in glory?

We usually think of the apostles as leaders who told other people what to do, but often the people commanded them! (For Peter's "philosophy of ministry" read 1 Peter 5.) Peter was a leader who served the people and was ready to respond to their call. Peter had the power to heal, and he used the power to glorify God and help people, not to promote himself.

It was a Jewish custom first to wash the dead body, and then to anoint it with spices for burial. When Peter arrived in the upper room where Dorcas lay in state, he found a group of weeping widows who had been helped by her ministry. Keep in mind that there was no "government aid" in those days for either widows or orphans, and needy people had to depend on their "network" for assistance. The church has an obligation to help people who are truly in need (1 Tim. 5:3–16; James 1:27).

The account of Peter's raising of Dorcas should be compared with the account of our Lord's raising of Jairus's daughter (Mark 5:34–43). In both cases, the mourning people were put out of the room, and the words spoken are almost identical: "*talitha cumi*: little girl, arise"; "*Tabitha cumi*: Tabitha, arise." Jesus took the girl by the hand before He spoke to her, for He was not afraid of becoming ceremonially defiled, and Peter took Dorcas by the hand after she had come to life. In both instances, it was the power of God that raised the person from the dead, for the dead person certainly could not exercise faith.

As with the healing of Aeneas, the raising of Dorcas attracted great attention and resulted in many people trusting Jesus Christ. During the "many days" that he tarried in Joppa, Peter took the opportunity to ground these new believers in the truth of the Word, for faith built on miracles alone is not substantial.

It was a good thing Peter tarried in Joppa, because God met with him there in a thrilling new way. God's servants need not always be "on the go." They should take time to be alone with God, to reflect and meditate and pray, especially after experiencing great blessings. Yes, there were plenty of sick people Peter might have visited and healed, but God had other plans. He deliberately detained His servant in Joppa to prepare him for his third use of "the keys."

It is significant that Peter stayed in the home of a tanner, because tanners were considered "unclean" by the Jewish rabbis (see Lev. 11:35–40). God was moving Peter a step at a time from Jewish legalism into the freedom of His wonderful grace.

The Greatest Miracle—Winning Lost Sinners (10:1–48)

Chapter 10 is pivotal in the book of Acts, for it records

the salvation of the Gentiles. We see Peter using "the keys of the kingdom" for the third and last time. He had opened the door of faith for the Jews (Acts 2) and also for the Samaritans (Acts 8), and now he would be used of God to bring the Gentiles into the church (see Gal. 3:27–28; Eph. 2:11–22).

This event took place about ten years after Pentecost. Why did the apostles wait so long before going to the lost Gentiles? After all, in His Great Commission (Matt. 28:19–20), Jesus had told them to go into *all* the world, and it would seem logical for them to go to their Gentile neighbors as soon as possible. But God has His times as well as His plans, and the transition from the Jews to the Samaritans to the Gentiles was a gradual one.

The stoning of Stephen and the subsequent persecution of the church marked the climax of the apostles' witness to the Jews. Then the gospel moved to the Samaritans. When God saved Saul of Tarsus, He got hold of His special envoy to the Gentiles. Now was the time to open the door of faith (Acts 14:27) to the Gentiles and bring them into the family of God.

There were four acts to this wonderful drama.

Preparation (vv. 1–22). Before He could save the Gentiles, God had to prepare Peter to bring the message and Cornelius to hear the message. Salvation is a divine work of grace, but God works through human channels. Angels can deliver God's messages to lost men, but they cannot preach the gospel to them. That is our privilege—and responsibility.

Caesarea is sixty-five miles northwest of Jerusalem and thirty miles north of Joppa (Jaffa). At that time, Caesarea was the Roman capital of Judea and boasted of many beautiful public buildings. In that city lived Cornelius, the Roman centurion, whose heart had tired of pagan myths and empty religious rituals, and who had turned to Judaism in hopes he could find salvation. Cornelius was as close to Judaism as he could get without becoming a proselyte. There were many "God fearers" like him in the ancient world (Acts 13:16), and they proved to be a ready field for spiritual harvest.

It is interesting to see how religious a person can be and still not be saved. Certainly, Cornelius was sincere in his obedience to God's law, his fasting, and his generosity to the Jewish people (compare this to Luke 7:1–10). He was not permitted to offer sacrifices in the temple, so he presented his prayers to God as his sacrifices (Ps. 141:1–2). In every way, he was a model of religious respectability—and yet he was not a saved man.

The difference between Cornelius and many religious people today is this: he knew that his religious devotion was not sufficient to save him. Many religious people today are satisfied that their character and good works will get them to heaven, and they have no concept either of their own sin or of God's grace. In his prayers, Cornelius was asking God to show him the way of salvation (Acts 11:13–14).

In many respects, John Wesley was like Cornelius.

Acts 10

He was a religious man, a church member, a minister, and the son of a minister. He belonged to a “religious club” at Oxford, the purpose of which was the perfecting of the Christian life. Wesley served as a foreign missionary, but even as he preached to others, he had no assurance of his own personal salvation.

On May 24, 1738, Wesley reluctantly attended a small meeting in London where someone was reading aloud from Martin Luther’s commentary on Romans. “About a quarter before nine,” Wesley wrote in his journal, “while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed, I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.” The result was the great Wesleyan revival that not only swept many into the kingdom, but also helped transform British society through Christian social action.

God sent an angel to instruct Cornelius and, in true military fashion, Cornelius immediately obeyed. But why send for Peter, who was thirty miles away in Joppa, when Philip the evangelist was already in Caesarea (Acts 8:40)? Because it was Peter, not Philip, who had been given the “keys.” God not only works at the right time, but He also works through the right servant, and both are essential.

Peter also had to be prepared for this event since he had lived as an orthodox Jew all of his life (Acts 10:14). The law of Moses was a wall between the Jews and the Gentiles, and this wall had been broken down at the cross (Eph. 2:14–18). The Gentiles were considered aliens and strangers as far as the Jewish covenants and promises were concerned (Eph. 2:11–13). But now, all of that would change, and God would declare that, as far as the Jew and the Gentile were concerned, “There is no difference” either in condemnation (Rom. 3:22–23) or in salvation (Rom. 10:12–13).

Why did God use a vision about food to teach Peter that the Gentiles were not unclean? For one thing, Peter was hungry, and a vision about food would certainly “speak to his condition,” as the Quakers say. Second, the distinction between “clean and unclean foods” was a major problem between the Jews and the Gentiles in that day. In fact, Peter’s Christian friends criticized him for eating with the Gentiles (Acts 11:1–3)! God used this centuries-old regulation (Lev. 11) to teach Peter an important spiritual lesson.

A third reason goes back to something Jesus had taught Peter and the other disciples when He was ministering on earth (Mark 7:1–23). At that time, Peter did not fully understand what Jesus was saying, but now it would all come together. God was not simply changing Peter’s diet; He was changing His entire program! The Jew was not “clean” and the Gentile “unclean,” but *both Jew and Gentile were “unclean” before God!* “For God hath concluded them all in unbelief, that he might have mercy on all” (Rom. 11:32).

This meant that a Gentile did not have to become a Jew in order to become a Christian.

Even though Peter’s refusal was in the most polite terms, it was still wrong. Dr. W. Graham Scroggie wrote, “You can say ‘No,’ and you can say ‘Lord’; but you cannot say ‘No, Lord!’” If He is truly our Lord, then we can only say “Yes!” to Him and obey His commands.

God’s timing is always perfect, and the three men from Caesarea arrived at the door just as Peter was pondering the meaning of the vision. The Spirit commanded Peter to meet the men and go with them. The phrase “nothing doubting” (Acts 10:20) means “making no distinctions.” You find it again in Acts 11:12, and a similar word is used in Acts 11:2 (“contended with him” = “made a difference”). Peter was no longer to make any distinctions between the Jews and the Gentiles.

Explanation (vv. 23–33). The fact that Peter allowed the Gentiles to lodge with him is another indication that the walls were coming down. Peter selected six Jewish believers to go along as witnesses (Acts 11:12), three times the official number needed. It would take at least two days to cover the thirty miles between Joppa and Caesarea. When Peter arrived, he discovered that Cornelius had gathered relatives and friends to hear the message of life. He was a witness even before he became a Christian!

How easy it would have been for Peter to accept honor and use the situation to promote himself, but Peter was a servant, not a celebrity (1 Peter 5:1–6). When he announced that he did not consider the Gentiles unclean, this must have amazed and rejoiced the hearts of his listeners. For centuries the Jews, on the basis of Old Testament law, had declared the Gentiles to be unclean, and some Jews even referred to the Gentiles as “dogs.”

The remarkable thing in this section is Peter’s question, “I ask, therefore, for what intent ye have sent for me?” (Acts 10:29). Didn’t Peter know that he had been summoned there to preach the gospel? Had he forgotten the Acts 1:8 commission to go to “the uttermost part of the earth”? Today, we can look back at developing events in the church and understand what God was doing, but it might not have been that easy had we been living in the midst of those events. In fact, the Jerusalem church questioned Peter about his actions (Acts 11:1–18), and later called a conference to deal with the place of the Gentiles in the church (Acts 15).

Cornelius rehearsed his experience with the angel and then told Peter why he had been summoned: to tell him, his family, and his friends how they could be saved (Acts 11:14). They were not interested Gentiles asking for a lecture on Jewish religion. They were lost sinners begging to be told how to be saved.

Before we leave this section, some important truths must be emphasized. First, the idea that “one religion is as good as another” is completely false. Those who tell us that we should worship “the God of many

names” and not “change other people’s religions” are going contrary to Scripture. “Salvation is of the Jews” (John 4:22), and there can be no salvation apart from faith in Jesus Christ, who was born a Jew. Cornelius had piety and morality, but he did not have salvation. Some might say, “Leave Cornelius alone! His religion is a part of his culture, and it’s a shame to change his culture!” God does not see it that way. Apart from hearing the message of the gospel and trusting Christ, Cornelius had no hope.

Second, the seeking Savior (Luke 19:10) will find the seeking sinner (Jer. 29:13). Wherever there is a searching heart, God responds. This is why it is essential that we as God’s children obey His will and share His Word. You never know when your witness for Christ is exactly what somebody has been waiting and praying for.

Third, Peter certainly was privileged to minister to a model congregation (Acts 10:33). They were all present, they wanted to hear the Word, and they listened, believed, and obeyed. What more could a preacher ask?

Proclamation (vv. 34–43). There can be no faith apart from the Word (Rom. 10:17), and Peter preached that Word. God is no respecter of persons as far as nationality and race are concerned. When it comes to sin and salvation, “there is no difference” (Rom. 2:11; 3:22–23; 10:1–13). All men have the same Creator (Acts 17:26), and all men need the same Savior (Acts 4:12). Acts 10:35 does not teach that we are saved by works, otherwise Peter would be contradicting himself (Acts 10:43). To “fear God and work righteousness” is a description of the Christian life. To fear God is to reverence and trust Him (Mic. 6:8). The evidence of this faith is a righteous walk.

Peter then summarized the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Cornelius and his friends knew about Christ’s life and death, for “this thing was not done in a corner” (Acts 26:26). Peter made it clear that Israel was God’s instrument for accomplishing His work (Acts 10:36), but that Jesus is “Lord of all,” and not just Lord of Israel. From the very founding of the nation of Israel, God made it clear that the blessing would be from Israel to the whole world (Gen. 12:1–3).

The public at large knew about Christ’s life, ministry, and death, but only the apostles and other believers were witnesses of His resurrection. As in his previous sermons, Peter laid the blame for the crucifixion on the Jewish leaders (Acts 3:15; 4:10; 5:30), as did Stephen (Acts 7:52). Paul would pick up this same emphasis (1 Thess. 2:14–16).

Having finished this recitation of the historical basis for the gospel message, Christ’s death and resurrection, Peter then announced the good news: “Whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sin” (Acts 10:43; see 2:21). His hearers laid hold of that word “whosoever,” applied it to themselves, believed on Jesus Christ, and were saved.

Vindication (vv. 44–48). Peter was just getting

started in his message when his congregation believed and the Holy Spirit interrupted the meeting (Acts 11:15). God the Father interrupted Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:4–5), and God the Son interrupted him in the matter of the temple tax (Matt. 17:24–27). Now, God the Spirit interrupted him—and Peter never was able to finish his sermon! Would that preachers today had interruptions of this kind!

The Holy Spirit was giving witness to the six Jews who were present that these Gentiles were truly born again. After all, these men had not seen the vision with Peter, and they needed to understand that the Gentiles were now on an equal footing with the Jews. This does not suggest that every new believer gives evidence of salvation by speaking in tongues, though every true believer will certainly use his or her tongue to glorify God (Rom. 10:9–10). This was an event parallel to Pentecost: the same Spirit who had come on the Jewish believers had now come on the Gentiles (Acts 11:15–17; 15:7–9). No wonder the men were astonished!

With this event, the period of transition in the early history of the church comes to an end. Believers among the Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles have all received the Spirit of God and are united in the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:27).

These Gentiles were not saved by being baptized; they were baptized because they gave evidence of being saved. To use Acts 2:38 to teach salvation by baptism, or Acts 8:14–16 to teach salvation by the laying on of hands, is to ignore the transitional character of God’s program. Sinners have always been saved by faith; that is one principle God has never changed. But God does change His methods of operation, and this is clearly seen in Acts 1–10. The experience of Cornelius and his household makes it very clear that baptism is not essential for salvation. From now on, the order will be hear the Word, believe on Christ, and receive the Spirit, and then be baptized and unite with other believers in the church to serve and worship God.

Peter tarried in Caesarea and helped to ground these new believers in the truth of the Word. Perhaps Philip assisted him. This entire experience is an illustration of the commission of Matthew 28:19–20. Peter went where God sent him and made disciples (“teach”) of the Gentiles. Then he baptized them and taught them the Word.

That same commission applies to the church today. Are we fulfilling it as we should?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Acts 11

MAKING ROOM FOR THE GENTILES

Acts 11 describes how the church in Jerusalem related to “the saints below,” the Gentiles in Caesarea and Antioch who had trusted Jesus

Acts 11

Christ as their Savior and Lord. Having fellowship with the Gentiles was a new experience for these Jewish Christians, who all their lives had looked on the Gentiles as pagans and outsiders. Tradition said that a Gentile had to “become a Jew” in order to be accepted, but now Jews and Gentiles were united in the church through faith in Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:26–28).

Acts 11 describes three responses of the Jewish believers to the Gentile Christians. As you study these responses, you will better understand how Christians today ought to relate to one another.

They Accepted the Gentiles (11:1–18)

Peter no sooner returned to Jerusalem when he was met by members of the strong legalistic party in the church of Judea (“they that were of the circumcision”) who rebuked him for fellowshiping with Gentiles and eating with them. Keep in mind that these Jewish believers did not yet understand the relationship between law and grace, Jews and Gentiles, and Israel and the church. Most Christians today understand these truths, but, after all, we have Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and Hebrews! There were many converted priests in the church who would be zealous for the law (Acts 6:7), and even the ordinary Jewish believer would have a difficult time making the transition (Acts 21:20). It was not only a matter of religion, but also of culture, and cultural habits are very hard to break.

The phrase “contended with him” comes from the same word translated “doubting nothing” in Acts 10:20 and 11:12. It means “to make a difference.” These legalists were making a difference between the Gentiles and the Jews after Peter had demonstrated that “there is no difference!” God had declared the Gentiles “clean,” that is, accepted before God on the same basis as the Jews—through faith in Jesus Christ.

Peter had nothing to fear. After all, he had only followed orders from the Lord, and the Spirit had clearly confirmed the salvation of the Gentiles. Peter reviewed the entire experience from beginning to end, and, when he was finished, the Jewish legalists dropped their charges and glorified God for the salvation of the Gentiles (Acts 11:18). However, this did not end the matter completely, for this same legalistic party later debated with Paul about the salvation of the Gentiles (Acts 14:26–15:2). Even after the Jerusalem Conference, legalistic teachers continued to attack Paul and invade the churches he founded. They wanted to woo the believers into a life of obedience to the law (Gal. 1:6ff.; Phil. 3:1–3, 17–21). It is possible that many of these legalists were genuine believers, but they did not understand their freedom in Jesus Christ (Gal. 5:1ff.).

In his personal defense in Acts 11, Peter presented three pieces of evidence: the vision from God (Acts 11:5–11), the witness of the Spirit (Acts 11:12–15, 17), and the witness of the Word (Acts 11:16). Of course, none of these men had seen the vision, but they trusted Peter’s report, for they knew that he had been

as orthodox as they in his personal life (Acts 10:14). He was not likely to go to the Gentiles on his own and then invent a story to back it up.

The witness of the Spirit was crucial, for this was God’s own testimony that He had indeed saved the Gentiles. It is interesting that Peter had to go *all the way back to Pentecost* to find an example of what happened in the home of Cornelius! This suggests that a dramatic “baptism of the Spirit” (Acts 11:16), accompanied by speaking in tongues, was not an everyday occurrence in the early church. Peter could not use the experience of the Samaritans as his example, because the Samaritans received the gift of the Spirit through the laying on of the apostles’ hands (Acts 8:14–17). Cornelius and his household received the Spirit the moment they trusted Christ. This is the pattern for today.

“What was I, that I could withstand God?” asked Peter, and to this question, the legalists had no answer. From beginning to end, the conversion of the Gentiles was God’s gracious work. He gave them the gift of repentance and the gift of salvation when they believed. In later years, God would use the letters of Paul to explain the “one body,” how believing Jews and believing Gentiles are united in Christ (Eph. 2:11–3:12). But at that time, this “mystery” was still hidden, so we must not be too hard on those saints who were uneasy about the place of the Gentiles in the church.

Christians are to receive one another and not dispute over cultural differences or minor matters of personal conviction (Rom. 14–15). Some of the Jewish Christians in the early church wanted the Gentiles to become Jews, and some of the Gentile believers wanted the Jews to stop being Jews and become Gentiles! This attitude can create serious division in the church even today, so it is important that we follow the example of Acts 11:18 and the admonition of Romans 14:1, and receive those whom God has also received.

They Encouraged the Gentiles (11:19–26)

When the saints were scattered abroad during Saul’s persecution of the church (Acts 8:1), some of them ended up in Antioch, the capital of Syria, three hundred miles north of Jerusalem. (Don’t confuse this city with Antioch in Pisidia, Acts 13:14.) There were at least sixteen Antiochs in the ancient world, but this one was the greatest.

With a population of half a million, Antioch ranked as the third largest city in the Roman Empire, following Rome and Alexandria. Its magnificent buildings helped give it the name “Antioch the Golden, Queen of the East.” The main street was more than four miles long, paved with marble, and lined on both sides by marble colonnades. It was the only city in the ancient world at that time that had its streets lighted at night.

A busy port and a center for luxury and culture, Antioch attracted all kinds of people, including wealthy retired Roman officials who spent their days

chatting in the baths or gambling at the races. With its large cosmopolitan population and its great commercial and political power, Antioch presented to the church an exciting opportunity for evangelism.

Antioch was a wicked city, perhaps second only to Corinth. Though all the Greek, Roman, and Syrian deities were honored, the local shrine was dedicated to Daphne, whose worship included immoral practices. "Antioch was to the Roman world what New York City is to ours," writes James A. Kelso in *An Archaeologist Follows the Apostle Paul*. "Here where all the gods of antiquity were worshipped, Christ must be exalted." Not only was an effective church built in Antioch, but it became the church that sent Paul out to win the Gentile world for Christ.

When the persecuted believers arrived in Antioch, they did not at all feel intimidated by the magnificence of the buildings or the pride of the citizens. The Word of God was on their lips and the hand of God was on their witness, and "a great number" of sinners repented and believed. It was a thrilling work of God's wonderful grace.

The church leaders in Jerusalem had a responsibility to "shepherd" the scattered flock, which now included Gentile congregations as far away as Syria. Apparently the apostles were ministering away from Jerusalem at the time, so the elders commissioned Barnabas to go to Antioch to find out what was going on among the Gentiles. This proved to be a wise choice, for Barnabas lived up to his nickname, "son of encouragement" (Acts 4:36).

Acts 11:24 gives us a "spiritual profile" of Barnabas, and he appears to be the kind of Christian all of us would do well to emulate. He was a righteous man who obeyed the Word in daily life so that his character was above reproach. He was filled with the Spirit, which explains the effectiveness of his ministry. That he was a man of faith is evident from the way he encouraged the church and then encouraged Saul. New Christians and new churches need people like Barnabas to encourage them in their growth and ministry.

How did Barnabas encourage these new Gentile believers? For one thing, he rejoiced at what he saw. Worshipping with Gentiles was a new experience for him, but he approached it positively and did not look for things to criticize. It was a work of God, and Barnabas gave thanks for God's grace.

He emphasized dedication of the heart as he taught the people the Word of God. The phrase "cleave [cling] to the Lord" does not suggest that they were to "keep themselves saved." The same grace that saves us can also keep us (1 Cor. 15:10; Heb. 13:9). The phrase reminds us of Joshua's admonition to Israel in Joshua 22:5. To "cleave to the Lord" includes loving the Lord, walking in His ways, obeying His Word, and serving Him wholeheartedly. It means that we belong to Him alone and that we cultivate our devotion to Him. "No man can serve two masters" (Matt. 6:24).

There were two wonderful results from Barnabas's

work in Antioch. First, the church's witness made a great impact on the city so that "many people were added to the Lord" (Acts 11:24). When the saints are grounded in the Word, they will have a strong witness to the lost, and there will be a balance in the church between edification and evangelism, worship and witness, teaching and testifying.

Second, the growth of the church meant that Barnabas needed help, so he went to Tarsus and enlisted Saul. But why go so far away just to find an assistant? Why not send to Jerusalem and ask the deacon Nicolas, who was from Antioch (Acts 6:5)? Because Barnabas knew that God had commissioned Saul to minister to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; 22:21; 26:17). You recall that Barnabas befriended Saul in Jerusalem (Acts 9:26–27), and no doubt the two of them often talked about Saul's special call from God.

Saul had been converted about ten years when Barnabas brought him to Antioch. The New Testament does not tell us what Saul did back home in Tarsus after he left Jerusalem (Acts 9:28–30), but it is likely he was busy evangelizing both Jews and Gentiles. It may have been during this period that he founded the churches in Cilicia (Acts 15:23, 41; Gal. 1:21), and that he experienced some of the sufferings listed in 2 Corinthians 11:23–28. As he witnessed in the synagogues, you can be sure he would not have had an easy time of it!

What Barnabas did for Saul needs to be practiced in our churches today. Mature believers need to enlist others and encourage them in their service for the Lord. It was one of D. L. Moody's policies that each new Christian be given a task soon after conversion. At first, it might be only passing out hymnals or ushering people to their seats, but each convert had to be busy. As previously mentioned, he said, "It is better to put ten men to work than to do the work of ten men." Many of Mr. Moody's "assistants" became effective Christian workers in their own right, and this multiplied the witness.

It was at Antioch that the name *Christian* was first applied to the disciples of Jesus Christ. The Latin suffix *-ian* means "belonging to the party of." In derision, some of the pagan citizens of Antioch joined this Latin suffix to the Hebrew name "Christ" and came up with *Christian*. The name is found only three times in the entire New Testament: Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16.

Unfortunately, the word *Christian* has lost a great deal of significance over the centuries and no longer means "one who has turned from sin, trusted Jesus Christ, and received salvation by grace" (Acts 11:21–23). Many people who have never been born again consider themselves "Christians" simply because they say they are not "pagans." After all, they may belong to a church, attend services somewhat regularly, and even occasionally give to the work of the church! But it takes more than that for a sinner to become a child of God. It takes repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ, who died for our sins on the cross and rose again to give us eternal life.

Acts 11

The believers in the early church *suffered* because they were Christians (1 Peter 4:16). Dr. David Otis Fuller has asked, “If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” A good question! And the answer is a matter of life or death!

They Received Help from the Gentiles (11:27–30)

The foundation for the church was laid by the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20), and then both eventually moved off the scene. After all, you don’t keep laying the foundation! The New Testament prophets received their messages from the Lord by the Holy Spirit, and delivered them to the people, sometimes in a tongue. The message would then have to be interpreted, after which the people would evaluate the message to make sure it came from God (note 1 Cor. 12:10; 14:27–33; 1 Thess. 5:19–21).

The New Testament prophets received their messages from the Lord *immediately*, but ministers and teachers today get their messages *mediately* through the Scriptures. We today have the completed Word of God from which the Holy Spirit teaches and guides us. First Corinthians 12:10 ties together the gifts of prophecy, discernment, and tongues and the interpretation of tongues. Of course, the Spirit is sovereign and can give to a believer any gift He desires (1 Cor. 12:11), but the passing of apostles and prophets from the scene, and the completing of God’s revelation in the Word, suggest that a change has taken place.

There are people today who claim to receive special “words of revelation” or “words of wisdom” from the Lord, but such revelations are suspect and even dangerous. “To the law and to the testimony; if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them” (Isa. 8:20). “Hearken not unto the words of the prophets that prophesy unto you,” warned Jeremiah. “They make you vain [fill you with false hopes]; they speak a vision of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of the Lord” (Jer. 23:16).

The Spirit told Agabus (see Acts 21:10–11) that a great famine was soon to come, and it did come during the reign of Claudius Caesar (AD 41–54), when crops were poor for many years. Ancient writers mention at least four famines: two in Rome, one in Greece, and one in Judea. The famine in Judea was especially severe, and the Jewish historian Josephus records that many people died for lack of money to buy what little food was available.

Agabus delivered his message to the Antioch believers, and they determined to help their fellow Christians in Judea. The purpose of true prophecy is not to satisfy our curiosity about the future but to stir up our hearts to do the will of God. The believers could not stop the famine from coming, but they could send relief to those in need.

An important spiritual principle is illustrated in this passage: if people have been a spiritual blessing to us, we should minister to them out of our material possessions.

“Let him who is taught in the word share in all good things with him who teaches” (Gal. 6:6 NKJV). The Jewish believers in Jerusalem had brought the gospel to Antioch. Then they had sent Barnabas to encourage the new believers. It was only right that the Gentiles in Antioch reciprocate and send material help to their Jewish brothers and sisters in Judea. Some years later, Paul would gather a similar offering from the Gentile churches and take it to the saints in Jerusalem (Acts 24:17; and see Rom. 15:23–28).

It is important to note that a change had taken place in the Jerusalem church. At one time, nobody in the church had any need (Acts 4:34), nor was it necessary to ask others for help. Those early years were “days of heaven on earth” as God richly blessed His people and used them as witnesses to the unbelieving nation. They were “times of refreshing” from the Lord (Acts 3:19). But when the message moved from the Jews to the Samaritans and the Gentiles, the Jerusalem “sharing program” gradually faded away and things became more normal.

The pattern for Christian giving today is not Acts 2:44–45 and 4:31–35, but Acts 11:29, “every man according to his ability.” It is this pattern that Paul taught in 2 Corinthians 8–9. The practice of “Christian communism” was found only in Jerusalem and was a temporary measure while the message was going “to the Jew first.” Like God’s care of the Jews in the wilderness, it was a living exhibition of the blessings God would bestow if the nation would repent and believe.

The fact that the church elected Barnabas and Saul to take the relief offering to Jerusalem is evidence that they had confidence in them. The men had been working together in the teaching of the Word, and now they joined hands in the practical ministry of relieving the wants of the Jerusalem believers. No doubt they also ministered the Word along the way as they made the long journey from Antioch to Jerusalem. In a short time, the Spirit would call these two friends to join forces and take the gospel to the Gentiles in other lands (Acts 13:1ff.), and they would travel many miles together.

Another significant result from this ministry was the addition of John Mark to their “team” (Acts 12:25). It is likely that Mark was converted through the ministry of Peter (1 Peter 5:13). His mother’s house was a gathering place for the Jerusalem believers (Acts 12:12), and she and Barnabas were related (Col. 4:10). Even though John Mark failed in his first “term” as a missionary (Acts 13:13), and helped cause a rift between Barnabas and Paul (Acts 15:38–40), he later became an effective assistant to Paul (2 Tim. 4:11) and was used of God to write the gospel of Mark.

The word *elders* in Acts 11:30 has not been used before in Acts, except to refer to the Jewish leaders (Acts 4:5, 23; 6:12). In the church, the elders were mature believers who had the spiritual oversight of the ministry (1 Peter 5:1; 2 John 1). When you compare

Acts 20:17 and 28, and Titus 1:5 and 7, you learn that “elder” and “bishop” [overseer] are equivalent titles. The elders/bishops were the “pastors” of the flocks, assisted by the deacons, and the qualifications for both are found in 1 Timothy 3.

Wherever Paul established churches, he saw to it that qualified elders were ordained to give leadership to the assemblies (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). In the Jerusalem church, the apostles and elders gave spiritual oversight (Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22). The delegation from the Antioch church did not ignore the spiritual leaders in Jerusalem, but delivered the gift to them for distribution to the needy members. This is an important principle and should be heeded in this day when so many organizations want to get support from local churches.

Was it a humbling experience for the Jewish believers to receive help from the Gentiles? Perhaps, but it was also a beautiful demonstration of love and a wonderful testimony of unity. Sir Winston Churchill said, “We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.” It was an enriching experience for the churches in Jerusalem and in Antioch, for there is blessing both in giving and receiving when God’s grace is in control.

It is unfortunate when individual Christians and local churches forget those who have been a spiritual blessing to them. The church at Antioch is a splendid example of how we as believers ought to show gratitude in a practical way to those who have helped us in our Christian life. Phillips Brooks was asked what he would do to revive a dead church, and he replied, “I would take up a missionary offering!”

Sincerely thinking of others is still the best formula for a happy and useful Christian life, both for individuals and for churches.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Acts 12

WAKE UP TO A MIRACLE!

Imagine waking up to a miracle and having an angel for your alarm clock!

That’s what happened to Peter when he was in prison for the third time, awaiting trial and certain death. Years later, when he wrote his first epistle, Peter may have had this miraculous experience in mind when he quoted Psalm 34:15–16: “For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers; but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil” (1 Peter 3:12). That quotation certainly summarizes what God did for Peter, and it reveals to us three wonderful assurances to encourage us in the difficult days of life.

God Sees Our Trials (12:1–4)

“The eyes of the Lord are over the righteous” (1 Peter 3:12).

God watched and noted what Herod Agrippa I was doing to His people. This evil man was the grandson of Herod the Great, who ordered the Bethlehem children to be murdered, and the nephew of Herod Antipas, who had John the Baptist beheaded. A scheming and murderous family, the Herods were despised by the Jews, who resented having Edomites ruling over them. Of course, Herod knew this, so he persecuted the church to convince the Jewish people of his loyalty to the traditions of the fathers. Now that the Gentiles were openly a part of the church, Herod’s plan was even more agreeable to the nationalistic Jews who had no place for “pagans.”

Herod had several believers arrested, among them James, the brother of John, whom he beheaded. Thus James became the first of the apostles to be martyred. When you ponder his death in the light of Matthew 20:20–28, it takes on special significance. James and John, with their mother, had asked for thrones, but Jesus made it clear that there can be no glory apart from suffering. “Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” He asked (Matt. 20:22). Their bold reply was, “We are able.”

Of course, they did not know what they were saying, but they eventually discovered the high cost of winning a throne of glory: James was arrested and killed, and John became an exile on the Isle of Patmos, a prisoner of Rome (Rev. 1:9). Indeed, they did drink of the cup and share in the baptism of suffering that their Lord had experienced!

If it pleased the Jews when James was killed, just think how delighted they would be if Peter were slain! God permitted Herod to arrest Peter and put him under heavy guard in prison. Sixteen soldiers, four for each watch, kept guard over the apostle, with two soldiers chained to the prisoner and two watching the doors. After all, the last time Peter was arrested, he mysteriously got out of jail, and Herod was not about to let that happen again.

Why was James allowed to die, while Peter was rescued? After all, both were dedicated servants of God, needed by the church. The only answer is *the sovereign will of God*, the very thing Peter and the church had prayed about after their second experience of persecution (Acts 4:24–30). Herod had “stretched forth” his hand to destroy the church, but God would stretch forth His hand to perform signs and wonders and glorify His Son (Acts 4:28–30). God allowed Herod to kill James, but He kept him from harming Peter. It was the throne in heaven that was in control, not the throne on earth.

Please note that the Jerusalem church did not replace James as they had replaced Judas (Acts 1:15–26). As long as the gospel was going “to the Jew first,” it was necessary to have the full complement of twelve apostles to witness to the twelve tribes of Israel. The stoning of Stephen ended that special witness to Israel, so the number of official witnesses was no longer important.

Acts 12

It is good to know that, no matter how difficult the trials or how disappointing the news, God is still on the throne and has everything under control. We may not always understand His ways, but we know His sovereign will is best.

God Hears Our Prayers (12:5–17)

“And his ears are open unto their prayers” (1 Peter 3:12).

The phrase “but prayer” is the turning point in the story. Never underestimate the power of a praying church! “The angel fetched Peter out of prison,” said the Puritan preacher Thomas Watson, “but it was prayer that fetched the angel.” Follow the scenes in this exciting drama in Acts 12.

Peter sleeping (vv. 5–6). If you were chained to two Roman soldiers and facing the possibility of being executed the next day, would you sleep very soundly? Probably not, but Peter did. In fact, Peter was so sound asleep that the angel had to strike him on the side to wake him up!

The fact that Peter had been a prisoner twice before is not what gave him his calm heart. For that matter, this prison experience was different from the other two. This time, he was alone, and the deliverance did not come right away. The other two times, he was able to witness, but this time, no special witnessing opportunities appeared. Peter’s previous arrests had taken place after great victories, but this one followed the death of James, his dear friend and colleague. It was a new situation altogether.

What gave Peter such confidence and peace? To begin with, many believers were praying for him (Acts 12:12), and kept it up day and night for a week, and this helped to bring him peace (Phil. 4:6–7). Prayer has a way of reminding us of the promises of God’s Word, such as, “I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep; for thou, Lord, only makest me to dwell in safety” (Ps. 4:8). Or, “Fear thou not, for I am with thee. Be not dismayed, for I am thy God. I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness” (Isa. 41:10).

But the main cause of Peter’s peace was the knowledge that Herod could not kill him. Jesus had promised Peter that he would live to be an old man and end his life crucified on a Roman cross (John 21:18–19). Peter simply laid hold of that promise and committed the entire situation to the Lord, and God gave him peace and rest. He did not know how or when God would deliver him, but he did know that deliverance was coming.

Peter obeying (vv. 7–11). Once again we behold the ministry of angels (Acts 5:19; 8:26; 10:3, 7) and are reminded that the angels care for God’s children (Ps. 34:7). The angel brought light and liberty into the prison cell, but the guards had no idea that anything was going on. However, if Peter was going to be delivered, he had to obey what the angel commanded. He probably thought it was a dream or a vision, but he

arose and followed the angel out of the prison and into the street. Only then did he come to himself and realize that he had been a part of another miracle.

The angel commanded Peter to bind his garments with his girdle, and then to put on his sandals. These were certainly ordinary tasks to do while a miracle is taking place! But God often joins the miraculous with the ordinary just to encourage us to keep in balance. Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes, but then commanded His disciples to gather up the leftovers. He raised Jairus’s daughter from the dead, then told her parents to give her something to eat. Even in miracles, God is always practical.

God alone can do the extraordinary, but His people must do the ordinary. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, but the men had to roll the stone from the tomb. The same angel that removed the chains from Peter’s hands could have put the shoes on Peter’s feet, but he told Peter to do it. God never wastes miracles.

Peter had to stoop before he could walk. It was a good lesson in humility and obedience. In fact, from that night on, every time Peter put on his shoes, it must have reminded him of the prison miracle and encouraged him to trust the Lord.

This deliverance took place at Passover season, the time of year when the Jews celebrated their exodus from Egypt. The word *delivered* in Acts 12:11 is the same word Stephen used when he spoke about the Jewish exodus (Acts 7:34). Peter experienced a new kind of “exodus” in answer to the prayers of God’s people.

Peter knocking (vv. 12–16). As Peter followed the angel, God opened the way, and when Peter was free, the angel vanished. His work was done, and now it was up to Peter to trust the Lord and use his common sense in taking the next step. Since it was the prayers of God’s people that had helped to set him free, Peter decided that the best place for him would be in that prayer meeting at Mary’s house. Furthermore, he wanted to report the good news that God had answered their prayers. So Peter headed for the house of Mary, mother of John Mark.

When you remember that (a) many people were praying, (b) they were praying earnestly, (c) they prayed night and day for perhaps as long as a week, and (d) their prayers were centered specifically on Peter’s deliverance, then the scene that is described here is almost comical. The answer to their prayers is standing at the door, but they don’t have faith enough to open the door and let him in! God could get Peter out of a prison, but Peter can’t get himself into a prayer meeting!

Of course, the knock at the door might have been that of Herod’s soldiers, coming to arrest more believers. It took courage for the maid Rhoda (“rose”) to go to the door, but imagine her surprise when she recognized Peter’s voice! She was so overcome that she forgot to open the door! Poor Peter had to keep knocking and calling while the “believers” in the prayer meeting decided what to do! And the longer he stood at the gate, the more dangerous his situation became.

The exclamation, “It is his angel” (Acts 12:15) reveals their belief in “guardian angels” (Matt. 18:10; Heb. 1:14). Of course, the logical question is, “Why would an angel bother to knock?” All he had to do was simply walk right in! Sad to say, good theology plus unbelief often leads to fear and confusion.

We must face the fact that even in the most fervent prayer meetings there is sometimes a spirit of doubt and unbelief. We are like the father who cried to Jesus, “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief” (Mark 9:24). These Jerusalem saints believed that God could answer their prayers, so they kept at it night and day. But, when the answer came right to their door, they refused to believe it. God graciously honors even the weakest faith, but how much more He would do if only we would trust Him.

Note the plural pronouns in Acts 12:16: “They ... opened the door and ... they were astonished.” I get the impression that, for safety’s sake, they decided to open the door *together* and face *together* whatever might be on the other side. Rhoda would have done it by herself, but she was too overcome with joy. It is commendable that a lowly servant girl recognized Peter’s voice and rejoiced that he was free. Rhoda surely was a believer who knew Peter as a friend.

Peter declaring (v. 17). Apparently everybody began to speak at once, and Peter had to silence them. He quickly gave an account of the miracle of his deliverance and no doubt thanked them for their prayer help. He instructed them to get the word to James, the half-brother of the Lord, who was the leader of the Jerusalem assembly (Matt. 13:55; Acts 15:13ff.; Gal. 1:19). James was also the author of the epistle of James.

Where Peter went when he left the meeting, nobody knows to this day! It certainly was a well-kept secret. Except for a brief appearance in Acts 15, Peter walks off the pages of the book of Acts to make room for Paul and the story of his ministry among the Gentiles. First Corinthians 9:5 tells us that Peter traveled in ministry with his wife, and 1 Corinthians 1:12 suggests that he visited Corinth. There is no evidence in Scripture that Peter ever visited Rome. In fact, if Peter had founded the church in Rome, it is unlikely that Paul would have gone there, for his policy was to work where other apostles had not labored (Rom. 15:18–22). Also, he certainly would have said something to or about Peter when he wrote his letter to the Romans.

Before we leave this section, it would be profitable to consider how Christians can best pray for those in prison, for even today there are many people in prison only because they are Christians. “Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them” commands Hebrews 13:3. In other words, pray for them as you would want them to pray for you if your situations were reversed.

We ought to pray that God will give them grace to bear with suffering so that they might have a triumphant

witness for the Lord. We should ask the Spirit to minister the Word to them and bring it to their remembrance. It is right to ask God to protect His own and to give them wisdom as they must day after day deal with a difficult enemy. We must ask God that, if it is His will, they be delivered from their bondage and suffering and reunited with their loved ones.

God Deals with Our Enemies (12:18–25)

“But the face of the Lord is against them that do evil” (1 Peter 3:12).

If the account had ended with Peter’s departure, we would find ourselves wondering, “What happened to the prison guards and to Herod?” We do not know at what time the angel delivered Peter, but when the next quaternion arrived at the cell, imagine their consternation when they discovered that the guards were there but the prisoner was gone! If the new watch awakened the old watch, it was certainly a rude awakening for them! If the old watch was already awake and alert, they must have had a difficult time explaining the situation to the new watch. How could a chained prisoner escape when there were four guards present and the doors were locked?

If a guard permitted a prisoner to escape, Roman law required that he receive the same punishment that the prisoner would have received, even if it was death (see Acts 16:27; 27:42). This law did not strictly apply in Herod’s jurisdiction, so the king was not forced to kill the guards, but, being a Herod, he did it anyway. Instead of killing one man to please the Jews, he killed four and perhaps hoped it would please them more.

“The righteous is delivered out of trouble, and the wicked cometh in his stead” (Prov. 11:8). This truth is illustrated in the death of Herod. While God does not always bring retribution this quickly, we can be sure that the Judge of all the earth will do what is right (Gen. 18:25; Rev. 6:9–11).

The people of Tyre and Sidon, who depended on the Jews for food (see Ezra 3:7), had in some way displeased King Herod and were in danger of losing this assistance. In true political fashion, they bribed Blastus, who was in charge of the king’s bed chamber, and thus a trusted official; he in turn convinced the king to meet the delegation. It was an opportunity for the proud king to display his authority and glory, and for the delegates to please him with their flattery.

The Jewish historian Josephus said that this scene took place during a festival honoring Claudius Caesar, and that the king wore a beautiful silver garment in honor of the occasion. We do not know what Herod said in his oration, but we do know why he said it: he wanted to impress the people. And he did! They played on his Herodian ego and told him he was a god, and he loved every minute of it.

But he did not give the glory to the Lord, so this whole scene was nothing but idolatry. “I am the Lord: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another” (Isa. 42:8; see 48:11). Instead of Peter being

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killed by Herod, it was Herod who was killed by Peter's God! Perhaps the same angel who delivered Peter also smote the king. Herod contracted some affliction in his bowels and died five days later, according to Josephus. This was in AD 44.

This event is more than a slice of ancient history, because it typifies the world and its people today. The citizens of Tyre and Sidon were concerned about one thing only—getting sufficient food to feed their stomachs. To be sure, food is essential to life, but when we pay any price to get that food, we are doing wrong. By flattering the king and calling him a god, the delegation knew they could get what they wanted.

I cannot help but see in King Herod an illustration of the future “man of sin” who will one day rule the world and persecute God's people (2 Thess. 2; Rev. 13). This “man of sin” (or Antichrist) will make himself god and will command the worship of the whole world. But Jesus Christ will return and judge him and those who follow him (Rev. 19:11–21).

The world still lives for praise and pleasure. Man has made himself his own god (Rom. 1:25). The world still lives on the physical and ignores the spiritual (see 1 John 2:15–17). It lives by force and flattery instead of faith and truth, and one day it will be judged.

The church today, like Israel of old, suffers because of people like Herod who use their authority to oppose the truth. Beginning with Pharaoh in Egypt, God's people have often suffered under despotic rulers and governments, and God has always preserved His witness in the world. God has not always judged evil officials as He judged Herod, but He has always watched over His people and seen to it that they did not suffer and die in vain. Our freedom today was purchased by their bondage.

The early church had no “political clout” or friends in high places to “pull strings” for them. Instead, they went to the highest throne of all, the throne of grace. They were a praying people, for they knew that God could solve their problems. God's glorious throne was greater than the throne of Herod, and God's heavenly army could handle Herod's weak soldiers any day or night! The believers did not need to bribe anyone at court. They simply took their case to the highest court and left it with the Lord!

And what was the result? “But the word of God grew and multiplied” (Acts 12:24). This is another of Luke's summaries, or “progress reports,” that started with Acts 6:7 (see 9:31; 16:5; 19:20; 28:31). Luke is accomplishing the purpose of his book and showing us how the church spread throughout the Roman world from its small beginnings in Jerusalem. What an encouragement to us today!

At the beginning of Acts 12, Herod seemed to be in control, and the church was losing the battle. But at the end of the chapter, Herod is dead and the church—very much alive—is growing rapidly!

The secret? A praying church!

Missionary Isobel Kuhn used to pray when in

trouble, “If this obstacle is from thee, Lord, I accept it; but if it is from Satan, I refuse him and all his works in the name of Calvary!” And Dr. Alan Redpath has often said, “Let's keep our chins up and our knees down—we're on the victory side!”

God works when churches pray, and Satan still trembles “when he sees the weakest saint upon his knees.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Acts 13—14

GOD OPENS THE DOORS

We usually identify the preaching of the gospel with the quiet rural villages of Palestine where the Lord Jesus ministered. For this reason, many Christians are surprised to learn that the church in the book of Acts was almost entirely *urban*. Historian Wayne A. Meeks writes that “within a decade of the crucifixion of Jesus, the village culture of Palestine had been left behind, and the Greco-Roman city became the dominant environment of the Christian movement” (*The First Urban Christians*, 11).

The church began in Jerusalem and then spread to other cities, including Samaria, Damascus, Caesarea, and Antioch in Syria. At least forty different cities are named in Acts. From Antioch, Paul and his helpers carried the gospel throughout the then-known world. In fact, the record given in Acts 13—28 is almost a review of ancient geography. About the year 56, the apostle Paul was able to write, “So that from Jerusalem, and round about unto Illyricum, I have fully preached the gospel of Christ” (Rom. 15:19). What a record!

In these two chapters, Dr. Luke described Paul's ministry in six different cities, beginning and ending at Antioch.

Antioch in Syria—Decision (13:1–5)

That sainted missionary to India and Persia Henry Martyn once said, “The Spirit of Christ is the spirit of missions, and the nearer we get to Him, the more intensely missionary we must become.” Paul (Saul) and Barnabas had that experience as they ministered in Antioch and were called by the Spirit to take the gospel to the Roman world.

Until now, Jerusalem had been the center of ministry, and Peter had been the key apostle. But from this point on, Antioch in Syria would become the new center (Acts 11:19ff.), and Paul the new leader. The gospel was on the move!

Luke listed five different men who were ministering in the church: *Barnabas*, whom we have already met (Acts 4:36–37; 9:27; 11:22–26); *Simeon*, who may have been from Africa since he was nicknamed “Black”; *Lucius*, who came from Cyrene and may have been one of the founders of the church in Antioch (Acts 11:20); *Manaen*, who was an intimate friend (or perhaps an

adopted foster brother) of Herod Antipas, who had killed John the Baptist; and *Saul* (Paul), last on the list but soon to become first.

These men were serving as “prophets and teachers” in a local church. The prophets helped lay the foundation for the church as they proclaimed the Word of God (Eph. 2:20; 1 Cor. 14:29–32). They were more “forth-tellers” than “foretellers,” though at times the prophets did announce things to come (Acts 11:27–30). The teachers helped to ground the converts in the doctrines of the faith (2 Tim. 2:2).

God had already called Paul to minister to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; 21:17–21), and now He summoned Barnabas to labor with him. The church confirmed their calling, commissioned the men, and sent them forth. It is the ministry of the Holy Spirit, working through the local church, to equip and enlist believers to go forth and serve. The modern mission board is only a “sending agency” that expedites the work authorized by the local church.

Barnabas and Paul took John Mark with them as their assistant. He was a cousin to Barnabas (Col. 4:10), and his mother’s home in Jerusalem was a gathering place for the believers (Acts 12:12). It is likely that it was Peter who led John Mark to faith in Christ (1 Peter 5:13). John Mark no doubt helped Barnabas and Paul in numerous ways, relieving them of tasks and details that would have interfered with their important ministry of the Word.

Paphos—Deception (13:6–12)

It was logical to go first to Cyprus, for this was the home of Barnabas (Acts 4:36). Luke gives us no details of the ministry in Salamis, the great commercial center at the east end of the island. We trust that some people did believe the gospel and that a local assembly was formed. The men then moved ninety miles to Paphos on the west end of the island, and there they met their first opposition.

Paphos was the capital of Cyprus, and the chief Roman official there was Sergius Paulus, “an understanding man” who wanted to hear the Word of God. He was opposed by a Jewish false prophet named “Son of Jesus [Joshua].” It is unusual to find a *Jewish* false prophet and sorcerer, for the Jews traditionally shunned such demonic activities. The name *Elymas* means “sorcerer” or “wise man” (cf. the “wise men” of Matt. 2).

This event is an illustration of the lesson that Jesus taught in the parable of the tares (Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43): wherever the Lord sows His true children (the wheat), Satan comes along and sows a counterfeit (the tares), a child of the devil. Paul recognized that Elymas was a child of the devil (John 8:44), and he inflicted blindness on the false prophet as a judgment from God. This miracle was also evidence to Sergius Paulus that Paul and Barnabas were servants of the true God and preached the true message of salvation (Heb. 2:4). The Roman official believed and was saved.

Acts 13:9 is the first place you find the familiar name *Paul* in the New Testament. As a Jewish Roman citizen, the apostle’s full name was probably “Saul Paulus,” for many Jews had both Jewish and Roman names.

Perga—Desertion (13:13)

Why did John Mark desert his friends and return to Jerusalem? Perhaps he was just plain homesick, or he may have become unhappy because Paul had begun to take over the leadership from Mark’s cousin Barnabas (note “Paul and his company” in Acts 13:13). Mark was a devoted Jew, and he may have felt uncomfortable with the saved Gentiles. Some students think that John Mark’s return to Jerusalem helped start the opposition of the legalistic Judaizers who later opposed Paul (see Acts 15 and the epistle to the Galatians).

Another possibility is the fear of danger as the party moved into new and difficult areas. But whatever the cause of his defection, John Mark did something so serious that Paul did not want him back on his “team” again (Acts 15:36ff.)! Later, Paul would enlist Timothy to take John Mark’s place (Acts 16:1–5). John Mark did redeem himself and was eventually accepted and approved by Paul (2 Tim. 4:11).

During my years of ministry as a pastor and as a member of several mission boards, I have seen first-term workers do what John Mark did, and it has always been heartbreaking. But I have also seen some of them restored to missionary service, thanks to the prayers and encouragement of God’s people. A. T. Robertson said that Mark “flickered in the crisis,” but the light did not completely go out. This is an encouragement to all of us.

Antioch in Pisidia—Disputation (13:14–52)

Paul and Barnabas traveled 100 miles north and about 3,600 feet up to get to this important city on the Roman road. As you follow Paul’s journeys in Acts, you will notice that he selected strategic cities, planted churches in them, and went on from the churches to evangelize the surrounding areas. You will also notice that, where it was possible, he started his ministry in the local synagogue, for he had a great burden for his people (Rom. 9:1–5; 10:1), and he found in the synagogue both Jews and Gentiles ready to hear the Word of God.

This is the first of Paul’s sermons recorded in the book of Acts, and it may be divided into three parts, each of which is introduced by the phrase “men and brethren.”

Preparation (vv. 16–25). In this section, Paul reviewed the history of Israel, climaxing with the ministry of John the Baptist and the coming of their Messiah. He made it clear that it was God who was at work in and for Israel, preparing the way for the coming of the promised Messiah. He also reminded his hearers that the nation had not always been faithful to the Lord and the covenant, but had often rebelled.

Acts 13—14

Every pious Jew knew that the Messiah would come from David's family, and that a prophet would announce His coming beforehand. John the Baptist was that prophet.

Declaration (vv. 26–37). As Paul addressed both the Jews and the Gentile “God-fearers” in the congregation, he changed his approach from third person (“they”) to second person (“you”). He explained to them why their leaders in Jerusalem rejected and crucified the nation's Messiah. It was not because they had not read or heard the message of the prophets, but because they did not understand the message. Furthermore, the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth was even promised in the prophets. (Peter took this same approach in his second message, Acts 3:12–18.)

It was the resurrection of Jesus Christ that was the crucial event: “But God raised him from the dead” (Acts 13:30). (See Acts 13:33–34, 37, and note that “raised” in Acts 13:22–23 means “brought”) Paul has declared the gospel to them, “the word of this salvation” (Acts 13:26) and “the glad tidings” (Acts 13:32). Christ died, He was buried, and He arose again!

Since Paul was addressing a synagogue congregation, he used the Old Testament Scriptures to support his argument. In Acts 13:33, Psalm 2:7 is quoted; note that it refers to the *resurrection* of Christ, not to the birth of Christ. The “virgin tomb” (John 19:41) was like a “womb” that gave birth to Jesus Christ in resurrection glory.

Then he quoted Isaiah 55:3, referring to the covenant that God made with David, “the sure mercies of David.” God had promised David that from him the Messiah would come (2 Sam. 7:12–17). This was an “everlasting covenant” with a throne to be established forever (2 Sam. 7:13, 16). If Jesus is the Messiah, and He died and remained dead, this covenant could never be fulfilled. Therefore, Jesus had to be raised from the dead or the covenant would prove false.

His third quotation was from Psalm 16:10, the same passage Peter quoted in his message at Pentecost (Acts 2:24–28). The Jews considered Psalm 16 to be a messianic psalm, and it was clear that this promise did not apply to David, who was dead, buried, and decayed. It had to apply to Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

Application (vv. 38–52). Paul had declared the good news to them (Acts 13:32), and now all that remained was to make the personal application and “draw the net.” He told them that through faith in Jesus Christ, they could have two blessings that the law could never provide: the forgiveness of their sins and justification before the throne of God.

Justification is the act of God whereby He declares the believing sinner righteous in Jesus Christ. It has to do with the believer's standing before the throne of God. The Jews were taught that God justified the righteous and punished the wicked (2 Chron. 6:22–23). But God justifies the ungodly who will put their faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 4:1–8).

The law cannot justify the sinner; it can only condemn him (Rom. 3:19–20; Gal. 2:16). God not only forgives our sins, but He also gives us the very righteousness of Christ and puts it on our account! This was certainly good news delivered by Paul to that searching congregation of Jews and Gentiles who had no peace in their hearts, even though they were religious.

Paul closed his message with a note of warning taken from Habakkuk 1:5 (and see Isa. 29:14). In Habakkuk's day, the “unbelievable work” God was doing was the raising up of the Chaldeans to chasten His people, a work so remarkable that nobody would believe it. After all, why would God use an evil pagan nation to punish His own chosen people, sinful though they might be? God was using Gentiles to punish Jews! But the “wonderful work” in Paul's day was that God was using the Jews to save the Gentiles!

What was the result? Many Jews and Gentile proselytes believed and associated with Paul and Barnabas. The Gentiles were especially excited about Paul's message and wanted him to tell them more, which he did the next Sabbath. The people had done a good job of spreading the news, because a great crowd gathered. They were probably predominantly Gentiles, which made the Jews envious and angry.

Paul's final message in the synagogue declared that God had sent the Word to the Jews first (Acts 3:26; Rom. 1:16), but they had now rejected it. Therefore, Paul would now take the good news to the Gentiles, and he quoted Isaiah 49:6 to back up his decision. (Note also Luke 2:29–32.) He was ready to go to the ends of the earth to win souls to Christ!

Acts 13:48 gives us the divine side of evangelism, for God has His elect people (Eph. 1:4). The word translated *ordained* means “enrolled,” and indicates that God's people have their names written in God's book (Luke 10:20; Phil. 4:3). But Acts 13:49 is the human side of evangelism: if we do not preach the Word, then nobody can believe and be saved. It takes both (see 2 Thess. 2:13–14; Rom. 10:13–15).

The unbelieving Jews were not going to sit back and let Paul and Barnabas take over. First, they disputed with them, and then they brought legal action against them and expelled them from their borders. The missionaries were not discouraged: they shook off the dust of their feet against them (Luke 9:5; 10:11) and went to the next town, leaving behind them a group of joyful disciples.

Iconium—Division (14:1–7)

This city, more Greek than Roman, was in the Roman province of Galatia. Paul's ministry in the synagogue was singularly blessed and a multitude of Jews and Gentiles believed. Once again, the unbelieving Jews stirred up hatred and opposition, but the missionaries stayed on and witnessed boldly for Christ. (Note the “therefore” in Acts 14:3.)

God also enabled the men to perform signs and wonders as their “credentials” that they were indeed the

servants of the true God (see Acts 15:12; Gal. 3:5; Heb. 2:4). Faith is not based on miracles (Luke 16:27–31; John 2:23–25), but faith can be bolstered by miracles. The important thing is “the word of his grace” that performs the work of His grace (Acts 14:26).

The result? The city was divided and the Christians were threatened with public disgrace and stoning. Obedient to their Lord’s counsel in Matthew 10:23, they fled from that area into a different Roman district and continued to minister the Word of God.

Lystra—Delusion (14:8–20)

Lystra was in the Roman province of Galatia, about eighteen miles southwest of Iconium. This was the first of three visits Paul made to this city, and an eventful visit it was! On his second missionary journey, Paul enlisted Timothy in Lystra (Acts 16:1–5), and he made a visit to this church on his third journey as well (Acts 18:23). We should note four different responses during this visit.

The crippled man’s response to the Word (vv. 8–10). Both Peter and Paul healed men who were lame from birth (Acts 3). Had their lameness been caused by disease or accident, the cure might have been attributed to a sudden change in their health. As it was, the cure was obviously miraculous.

The word translated “speak” in Acts 14:9 means ordinary conversation, though it can refer to formal speaking. It is likely that Paul was simply conversing with some of the citizens in the marketplace, telling them about Jesus, and the lame man overheard what he said. The Word produced faith (Rom. 10:17) and faith brought healing.

The crowd’s response to the crippled man (vv. 11–13). Miracles by themselves do not produce either conviction or faith. They must be accompanied by the Word (Acts 14:3). This was a superstitious crowd that interpreted events in the light of their own mythology. They identified Barnabas as Jupiter (Zeus), the chief of the gods; and Paul, the speaker, they identified with Mercury (Hermes), the messenger of the gods. Jupiter was the patron deity of the city, so this was a great opportunity for the priest of Jupiter to become very important and lead the people in honoring their god.

The apostles’ response to the crowd (vv. 14–19). How easy it would have been to accept this worship and try to use the honor as a basis for teaching the people the truth, but that is not the way God’s true servants minister (2 Cor. 4:1–2; 1 Thess. 2:1–5). Paul and Barnabas opposed what they were doing and boldly told the people that the gods of Lystra were “vanities.”

Paul’s message was not based on the Old Testament, because this was a pagan Gentile audience. He started with the witness of God in creation (see Acts 17:22ff.). He made it clear that there is but one God who is the living God, the giving God, and the forgiving God. And He has been patient with the sinning nations (Acts

17:30) and has not judged them for their sins as they deserve.

The crowd quieted down, but when some trouble-making Jews arrived from Antioch and Iconium, the crowd followed their lead and stoned Paul. One minute, Paul was a god to be worshipped; the next minute, he was a criminal to be slain! Emerson called a mob “a society of bodies voluntarily bereaving themselves of reason.” Often this is true.

The disciples’ response to Paul (v. 20). There were new believers in Lystra, and this was a crisis situation for them. They were a minority, their leader had been stoned, and their future looked very bleak. But they stood by Paul! It is likely that they joined hearts and prayed for him, and this is one reason God raised him up. Was Paul dead? We are not told. This is the only stoning he ever experienced (2 Cor. 11:25), but from it came glory to God. It may have been this event that especially touched Timothy and eventually led to his association with Paul (2 Tim. 3:10).

Antioch in Syria—Declaration (14:21–28)

On their return trip to Antioch, the missionaries were engaged in several important ministries.

First, they preached the gospel and made disciples (“taught many”). It is difficult to understand how they got back into the cities from which they had been expelled, but the Lord opened the doors.

Second, they strengthened (“confirmed”) the believers in the things of Christ and encouraged (“exhorted”) them to continue in the faith. Continuance is a proof of true faith in Jesus Christ (John 8:31–32; Acts 2:42). Paul made it very clear that living the Christian life was not an easy thing and that they would all have to expect trials and sufferings before they would see the Lord in glory.

Third, they organized the churches (Acts 14:23–25). The local church is both an organism and an organization, for if an organism is not organized, it will die! Paul and Barnabas ordained spiritual leaders and gave them the responsibility of caring for the flock. If you compare Titus 1:5 and 7, you will see that “elder” and “bishop” (overseer) refer to the same office, and both are equivalent to “pastor” (shepherd).

The word translated *ordained* means “to elect by a show of hands.” It is possible that Paul chose the men and the congregation voted its approval, or that the people selected them by vote and Paul ordained them (see Acts 6:1–6).

Finally, they reported to their “sending church” on the work God had done (Acts 14:26–28). They had been gone at least a year, and it must have been exciting for them and for the church when they arrived back home. They had, by the grace of God, fulfilled the work God had given them to do, and they joyfully reported the blessings to the church family.

This is perhaps the first “missionary conference” in church history, and what a conference it must have been! A church officer once said to me, “I don’t care

Acts 14—15

how much money you want for missions, I'll give it, but *just don't make me listen to missionaries speak!*" I felt sorry for him that his spiritual temperature was so low that he could not listen to reports of what God was doing in the difficult corners of the harvest field.

As you review Paul's first missionary journey, you can see the principles by which he operated, principles that are still applicable today.

He worked primarily in the key cities and challenged the believers to take the message out to the more remote areas. The gospel works in the population centers, and we must carry it there.

He used one approach with the synagogue congregations and another with the Gentiles. He referred the Jews and Jewish proselytes to the Old Testament Scriptures, but when preaching to the Gentiles, he emphasized the God of creation and His goodness to the nations. His starting point was different, but his finishing point was the same: faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

He majored on establishing and organizing local churches. Jesus had the local church in mind when He gave what we call the "Great Commission" (Matt. 28:19–20). After we make disciples ("teach"), we must baptize them (the responsibility primarily of a local church) and then teach them the Word of God. Merely winning people to Christ is but fulfilling one-third of the commission! It takes the local assembly of believers to help us fulfill all of what Jesus commanded us to do.

He grounded the believers in the Word of God. This is the only source of strength and stability when persecution comes, as it inevitably does come. Paul did not preach a popular "success gospel" that painted a picture of an easy Christian life.

The amazing thing is that Paul and his associates did all of this without the modern means of transportation and communication that we possess today. Dr. Bob Pierce used to say to us in Youth for Christ, "Others have done so much with so little, while we have done so little with so much!" The wasted wealth of American believers alone, if invested in world evangelization, might lead to the salvation of millions of lost people.

Paul and Barnabas announced that the "door of faith" had been opened to the Gentiles.

That door is still open, to Jews and Gentiles alike—to a whole world! Walk through that open door and help take the gospel to others.

Be daring!

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Acts 15:1–35

DON'T CLOSE THE DOORS!

The progress of the gospel has often been hindered by people with closed minds who stand in front of open doors and block the way for others.

In 1786, when William Carey laid the burden of world missions before a ministerial meeting in Northampton, England, the eminent Dr. Ryland said to him, "Young man, sit down! When God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine!" More than one Spirit-filled servant of God has had to enter open doors of opportunity without the support of churches and religious leaders.

Paul and his associates faced this same challenge at the Jerusalem Conference about twenty years after Pentecost. Courageously, they defended both the truth of the gospel and the missionary outreach of the church. There were three stages in this event.

The Dispute (15:1–5)

It all started when some legalistic Jewish teachers came to Antioch and taught that the Gentiles, in order to be saved, had to be circumcised and obey the law of Moses. These men were associated with the Jerusalem congregation but not authorized by it (Acts 15:24). Identified with the Pharisees (Acts 15:5), these teachers were "false brethren" who wanted to rob both Jewish and Gentile believers of their liberty in Christ (Gal. 2:1–10; 5:1ff.).

It is not surprising that there were people in the Jerusalem church who were strong advocates of the law of Moses but ignorant of the relationship between law and grace. These people were Jews who had been trained to respect and obey the law of Moses, and after all, Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews had not yet been written! There was a large group of priests in the Jerusalem assembly (Acts 6:7), as well as people who still followed some of the Old Testament practices (see Acts 21:20–26). It was a time of transition, and such times are always difficult.

What were these legalists actually doing and why were they so dangerous? They were attempting to mix law and grace and to pour the new wine into the ancient brittle wineskins (Luke 5:36–39). They were stitching up the rent veil (Luke 23:45) and blocking the new and living way to God that Jesus had opened when He died on the cross (Heb. 10:19–25). They were rebuilding the wall between Jews and Gentiles that Jesus had torn down on the cross (Eph. 2:14–16). They were putting the heavy Jewish yoke on Gentile shoulders (Acts 15:10; Gal. 5:1) and asking the church to move out of the sunlight into the shadows (Col. 2:16–17; Heb. 10:1). They were saying, "A Gentile must first become a Jew before he can become a Christian! It is not sufficient for them simply to trust Jesus Christ. They must also obey Moses!"

Several important issues are involved here, not the least of which is the work of Christ on the cross as declared in the message of the gospel (1 Cor. 15:1–8; Heb. 10:1–18). God pronounces a solemn anathema on anyone who preaches any other gospel than the gospel of the grace of God found in Jesus Christ His Son (Gal. 1:1–9). When any religious leader says, "Unless you belong to our group, you cannot be

saved!” or, “Unless you participate in our ceremonies and keep our rules, you cannot be saved!” he is adding to the gospel and denying the finished work of Jesus Christ. Paul wrote his epistle to the Galatians to make it clear that salvation is wholly by God’s grace, through faith in Christ, *plus nothing!*

Another issue involved was the nature of the church’s missionary program. If these legalists (we call them “the Judaizers”) were correct, then Paul and Barnabas had been all wrong in their ministry. Along with preaching the gospel, they should have been teaching the Gentiles how to live as good Jews. No wonder Paul and Barnabas debated and disputed with these false teachers (Acts 15:2, 7)! The Antioch believers were being “troubled” and “subverted” (Acts 15:24), and this same confusion and disruption would soon spread to the Gentile churches Paul and Barnabas had founded. This was a declaration of war that Paul and Barnabas could not ignore.

God gave Paul a revelation instructing him to take the whole matter to the Jerusalem church leaders (Gal. 2:2), and to this the Antioch assembly agreed (“they” in Acts 15:2). The gathering was not a “church council” in the denominational sense, but rather a meeting of the leaders who heard the various groups and then made their decision. Though the “mother church” in Jerusalem did have great influence, each local church was autonomous.

The Defense (15:6–18)

It appears that at least four different meetings were involved in this strategic conference: (1) a public welcome to Paul and his associates, Acts 15:4; (2) a private meeting of Paul and the key leaders, Galatians 2:2; (3) a second public meeting at which the Judaizers presented their case, Acts 15:5–6 and Galatians 2:3–5; and (4) the public discussion described in Acts 15:6ff. In this public discussion, four key leaders presented the case for keeping the doors of grace open to the lost Gentiles.

Peter reviewed the past (vv. 6–11). We get the impression that Peter sat patiently while the disputing (“questioning”) was going on, waiting for the Spirit to direct him. “He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him” (Prov. 18:13 NKJV). Peter reminded the church of four important ministries that God had performed for the Gentiles, ministries in which he had played an important part.

First, God made a choice that Peter should preach the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 15:7). Jesus had given the keys of the kingdom to Peter (Matt. 16:19), and he had used them to open the door of faith to the Jews (Acts 2), the Samaritans (Acts 8:14–17), and the Gentiles (Acts 10). The apostles and brethren in Judea had censured Peter for visiting the Gentiles and eating with them, but he had satisfactorily defended himself (Acts 11:1–18). Note that Peter made it clear that Cornelius and his household were saved by hearing and believing, not by obeying the law of Moses.

Second, God gave the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles to bear witness that they truly were born again (Acts 15:8). Only God can see the human heart; so, if these people had not been saved, God would never have given them the Spirit (Rom. 8:9). But they did not receive the Spirit by keeping the law, but by believing God’s Word (Acts 10:43–46; see Gal. 3:2). Peter’s message was “whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins” (Acts 10:43 NKJV), not “whoever believes and obeys the law of Moses.”

Third, God erased a difference (Acts 15:9, 11). For centuries, God had put a difference between Jews and Gentiles, and it was the task of the Jewish religious leaders to protect and maintain that difference (Lev. 10:10; Ezek. 22:26; 44:23). Jesus taught that the Jewish dietary laws had nothing to do with inner holiness (Mark 7:1–23), and Peter had learned that lesson again when he had that vision on the housetop in Joppa (Acts 10:1ff.).

Ever since the work of Christ on Calvary, God has made no difference between Jews and Gentiles as far as sin (Rom. 3:9, 22) or salvation (Rom. 10:9–13) are concerned. Sinners can have their hearts purified only by faith in Christ; salvation is not by keeping the law (Acts 15:9). We would expect Peter to conclude his defense by saying, “They [the Gentiles] shall be saved even as we Jews,” but he said just the reverse! “We [Jews] shall be saved, even as they!”

God’s fourth ministry—and this was Peter’s strongest statement—was the removing of the yoke of the law (Acts 15:10). The law was indeed a yoke that burdened the Jewish nation, but that yoke has been taken away by Jesus Christ (see Matt. 11:28–30; Gal. 5:1ff.; Col. 2:14–17). After all, the law was given to the Jewish nation to protect them from the evils of the Gentile world and prepare them to bring the Messiah into the world (Gal. 4:1–7). The law cannot purify the sinner’s heart (Gal. 2:21), impart the gift of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 3:2), or give eternal life (Gal. 3:21). What the law could not do, God did through His own Son (Rom. 8:1–4). Those who have trusted Christ have the righteousness of God’s law in their hearts and, through the Spirit, obey His will. They are not motivated by fear, but by love, for “love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom. 13:8–10).

Paul and Barnabas reported on the present (v. 12). Peter’s witness made a great impact on the congregation because they sat in silence after he was finished. Then Paul and Barnabas stood up and told the group what God had done among the Gentiles through their witness. Dr. Luke devoted only one summary sentence to their report since he had already given it in detail in Acts 13–14. Paul and Barnabas were greatly respected by the church (see Acts 15:25–26), and their testimony carried a great deal of weight.

Their emphasis was on the miracles that God had enabled them to perform among the Gentiles. These miracles were proof that God was working with them (Mark 16:20; Acts 15:4) and that they were God’s chosen

Acts 15

messengers (Rom. 15:18–19; Heb. 2:24). “Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?” (Gal. 3:5 niv). They had preached grace, not law, and God had honored this message.

If you will review the record of the first missionary journey (Acts 13–14), you will see that the emphasis is on what God did in response to men’s faith. See Acts 13:8, 12, 39, 41, 48; 14:1, 22–23, 27. Note also the emphasis on grace (Acts 13:43; 14:3, 26). God opened for the Gentiles “the door of faith,” not “the door of law.” For that matter the Antioch church, which commissioned Paul and Barnabas, was founded by people who “believed and turned unto the Lord” (Acts 11:21) and experienced the grace of God (Acts 11:23). They were saved the same way sinners are saved today, “by grace, through faith” (Eph. 2:8–9).

Both Peter and Paul received from God special visions directing them to go to the Gentiles (Acts 10:1ff.; 22:21). However, it was Paul whom God set apart as the apostle to the Gentiles (Rom. 11:13; Gal. 2:6–10; Eph. 3:1–12). If Gentile sinners had to obey the law of Moses in order to be saved, then why did God give Paul the gospel of grace and send him off to the Gentiles? God could just as well have sent Peter!

Peter reviewed God’s ministries to the Gentiles in the past, and Paul and Barnabas reported on God’s work among the Gentiles in that present day. James was the final speaker, and he focused on the future.

James related it all to the future (vv. 13–18). James was a brother to Jesus (Matt. 13:55; Gal. 1:19) and the writer of the epistle of James. He and his brethren were not believers in Christ until after the resurrection (John 7:5; 1 Cor. 15:7; Acts 1:14). James had strong leanings toward the law (there are at least ten references to law in his epistle), so he was most acceptable to the legalistic party in the Jerusalem church.

The key idea in James’ speech is *agreement*. First, he expressed his full agreement with Peter that God was saving the Gentiles by grace. It must have startled the Judaizers when James called these saved Gentiles “a people for his [God’s] name,” because for centuries the Jews had carried that honorable title (see Deut. 7:6; 14:2; 28:10). Today, God is graciously calling out a people, the church, from both Jews and Gentiles. In fact, the Greek word for “church” (*ekklesia*) means “a called-out assembly” (*kaleo* = to call; *ek* = out). But if they are called out, then their salvation is all of grace and not through the keeping of the law!

The Judaizers did not understand how the Gentiles and the Jews related to each other in the church, or how the church fit into God’s promise to establish a kingdom for Israel. The Old Testament declared both the salvation of the Gentiles (Isa. 2:2; 11:10) and the future establishing of a glorious kingdom for Israel (Isa. 11–12; 35; 60), but it did not explain how they related to each other. The legalists in the church were jealous for both the future glory of Israel and the past glory of Moses and the law. It seemed to them that

their acceptance of the Gentiles as “spiritual equals” jeopardized the future of Israel.

We today have a better grasp of this truth because Paul explained it in Ephesians 2–3 and Romans 9–11. Saved Jews and Gentiles are both members of the same body and “one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). The truth about the church, the body of Christ, was a “mystery” (a sacred secret) hidden in past ages and revealed to the church by the Spirit. God’s “mystery program” for the church does not cancel His great “prophecy program” for Israel. Paul makes it clear in Romans 9–11 that there is a future for Israel and that God will keep His “kingdom promises” to His people.

James stated that the prophets also agreed with this conclusion, and he cited Amos 9:11–12 to prove his point. Note that he did not state that what Peter, Paul, and Barnabas had said was a *fulfillment* of this prophecy. He said that what Amos wrote *agreed with their testimony*. A careful reading of Amos 9:8–15 reveals that the prophet is describing events in the end times, when God will regather His people Israel to their land and bless them abundantly. If we “spiritualize” these promises, we rob them of their plain meaning and James’ argument falls apart.

Amos also prophesied that the fallen house (“tent”) of David would be raised up and God would fulfill His covenant with David that a king would sit on his throne (see 2 Sam. 7:25–29). This future King, of course, will be Jesus Christ the Son of David (2 Sam. 7:13, 16; Isa. 9:6–7; Luke 1:32), who will reign over Israel during the kingdom. In fact, the only Jew alive today who can prove His genealogy and defend His kingship is Jesus Christ!

God revealed these truths gradually to His people, but His plan had been settled from the beginning. Neither the cross nor the church were afterthoughts with God (Acts 2:23; 4:27–28; Eph. 1:4). The Judaizers thought that Israel had to “rise” in her glorious kingdom before the Gentiles could be saved, but God revealed that it was through Israel’s “fall” that the Gentiles would find salvation (Rom. 11:11–16). At the time of the Jerusalem Conference, David’s house and throne indeed were fallen, but they would be restored one day and the kingdom established.

The Decision (15:19–35)

The leaders and the whole church (Acts 15:22), directed by the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28), made a twofold decision: a doctrinal decision about salvation, and a practical decision about how to live the Christian life.

The doctrinal decision we have already examined. The church concluded that Jews and Gentiles are all sinners before God and can be saved only by faith in Jesus Christ. There is one need, and there is but one gospel to meet that need (Gal. 1:6–12). God has today but one program: He is calling out a people for His name. Israel is set aside but not cast away (Rom. 11:1ff.), and when God’s program for the church is

completed, He will begin to fulfill His kingdom promises to the Jews.

But all doctrine must lead to duty. James emphasized this in his epistle (James 2:14–26), and so did Paul in his letters. It is not enough for us simply to accept a biblical truth; we must apply it personally in everyday life. Church problems are not solved by passing resolutions, but by practicing the revelations God gives us from His Word.

James advised the church to write to the Gentile believers and share the decisions of the conference. This letter asked for obedience to two *commands* and a willingness to agree to two personal *concessions*. The two commands were that the believers avoid idolatry and immorality, sins that were especially prevalent among the Gentiles (see 1 Cor. 8—10). The two concessions were that they willingly abstain from eating blood and meat from animals that had died by strangulation. The two commands do not create any special problems, for idolatry and immorality have always been wrong in God's sight, both for Jews and Gentiles. But what about the two concessions concerning food?

Keep in mind that the early church did a great deal of eating together and practicing of hospitality. Most churches met in homes, and some assemblies held a "love feast" in conjunction with the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:17–34). It was probably not much different from our own potluck dinners. If the Gentile believers ate food that the Jewish believers considered "unclean," this would cause division in the church. Paul dealt clearly with this whole problem in Romans 14—15.

The prohibition against eating blood was actually given by God before the time of the law (Gen. 9:4), and it was repeated by Moses (Lev. 17:11–14; Deut. 12:23). If an animal is killed by strangulation, some of the blood will remain in the body and make the meat unfit for Jews to eat. Hence, the admonition against strangulation. "Kosher" meat is meat that comes from clean animals that have been killed properly so that the blood has been totally drained from the body.

It is beautiful to see that this letter expressed the loving unity of people who had once been debating with each other and defending opposing views. The legalistic Jews willingly gave up insisting that the Gentiles had to be circumcised to be saved, and the Gentiles willingly accepted a change in their eating habits. It was a loving compromise that did not in any way affect the truth of the gospel. As every married person and parent knows, there are times in a home when compromise is wrong, but there are also times when compromise is right. Wise Samuel Johnson said, "Life cannot subsist in society but by reciprocal concessions." The person who is always right, and who insists on having his or her own way, is difficult to live with happily.

What did this decision accomplish in a practical way? At least three things. First, it strengthened the unity of the church and kept it from splitting into two extreme "law" and "grace" groups. President

Eisenhower called the right kind of compromise "all of the usable surface. The extremes, right or left, are in the gutters." Again, this is not *doctrinal* compromise, for that is always wrong (Jude 3). Rather, it is learning to give and take in the practical arrangements of life so that people can live and work together in love and harmony.

Second, this decision made it possible for the church to present a united witness to the lost Jews (Acts 15:21). For the most part, the church was still identified with the Jewish synagogue, and it is likely that in some cities, entire synagogue congregations believed on Jesus Christ—Jews, Gentile proselytes, and Gentile "God-fearers" together. If the Gentile believers abused their freedom in Christ and ate meat containing blood, this would offend both the saved Jews and their unsaved friends whom they were trying to win to Christ. It was simply a matter of not being a stumbling block to the weak or to the lost (Rom. 14:13–21).

Third, this decision brought blessing as the letter was shared with the various Gentile congregations. Paul and Barnabas, along with Judas and Silas, took the good news to Antioch, and the church rejoiced and was encouraged because they did not have to carry the burdensome yoke of the law (Acts 15:30–31). On his second missionary journey, Paul shared the letter with the churches he had founded on his first missionary journey. The result was a strengthening of the churches' faith and an increase of their number (Acts 16:5).

We today can learn a great deal from this difficult experience of the early church. To begin with, problems and differences are opportunities for growth just as much as temptations for dissension and division. Churches need to work together and take time to listen, love, and learn. How many hurtful fights and splits could have been avoided if only some of God's people had given the Spirit time to speak and to work.

Most divisions are caused by "followers" and "leaders." A powerful leader gets a following, refuses to give in on even the smallest matter, and before long there is a split. Most church problems are not caused by doctrinal differences but by different viewpoints on practical matters. What color shall we paint the church kitchen? Can we change the order of the service? I heard of one church that almost split over whether the organ or the piano should be on the right side of the platform!

Christians need to learn the art of loving compromise. They need to have their priorities in order so they know when to fight for what is really important in the church. It is sinful to follow some impressive member of the church who is fighting to get his or her way on some minor issue that is not worth fighting about. Every congregation needs a regular dose of the love described in 1 Corinthians 13 to prevent division and dissension.

As we deal with our differences, we must ask, "How will our decisions affect the united witness of the church to the lost?" Jesus prayed that His people might be united so that the world might believe on Him

Acts 15—16

(John 17:20–21). Unity is not uniformity, for unity is based on love and not law. There is a great need in the church for diversity in unity (Eph. 4:1–17), for that is the only way the body can mature and do its work in the world.

God has opened a wonderful door of opportunity for us to take the gospel of God’s grace to a condemned world. But there are forces in the church even today that want to close that door. There are people who are preaching “another gospel” that is not the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Help keep that door open—and reach as many as you can!

Be daring!

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Acts 15:36—16:40

MORE OPEN DOORS

For the apostle Paul, the church at Antioch was not a parking lot: it was a launching pad. He could never settle down to a “comfortable ministry” anywhere as long as there were open doors for the preaching of the gospel.

Paul would have agreed enthusiastically with the words of Robertson McQuilken from his book *The Great Omission*: “In a world in which nine out of every ten people are lost, three out of four have never heard the way out, and one of every two cannot hear, the church sleeps on. Could it be we think there must be some other way? Or perhaps we don’t really care that much.” Paul cared—and so should we.

There were several new elements in this second journey that indicated that God was still at work, in spite of the seeming obstacles and personal difficulties that arose.

A New Partner (15:36–41)

Paul and Barnabas agreed on the importance of the trip, but they could not agree on the composition of the “team.” Here were two dedicated men who had just helped bring unity to the church, and yet they could not settle their own disagreements! Disturbing and painful as these conflicts are, they are often found in church history, and yet God is able to overrule them and accomplish His purposes.

That Barnabas would champion John Mark is certainly no surprise. He and Mark were cousins (Col. 4:10 NASB), and the family ties would be strong. But even more, Barnabas was the kind of man who eagerly tried to help others, which is why the early church named him “son of encouragement” (Acts 4:36). He was ready to give John Mark an opportunity to serve the Lord and to prove himself. Barnabas “kept on insisting” (WUEST) that they take Mark along.

But Paul was just as adamant that they *not* take

Mark! After all, on the first missionary journey, John Mark had deserted them to return home (Acts 13:13), and this was a mark of weakness. The ministry was too important, and the work too demanding, to enlist someone who might prove unreliable.

As the discussion continued, it turned into a real argument (the word *paroxysm* comes from the word translated “contention”), and it seemed like the only solution was for the friends to divide the territory and separate. Barnabas took Mark and went to his native Cyprus, and Paul took Silas and headed for Syria and Cilicia (note Acts 15:23).

Who was right? It really doesn’t make much difference. Perhaps both men were right on some things and wrong on other things. We know that John Mark ultimately did succeed in the ministry and that Paul came to love and appreciate him (see Col. 4:10; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philem. 23–24). Good and godly people in the church do disagree; this is one of the painful facts of life that we must accept. Paul looked at people and asked, “What can they do for God’s work?” while Barnabas looked at people and asked, “What can God’s work do for them?” Both questions are important to the Lord’s work, and sometimes it is difficult to keep things balanced.

Paul selected a new partner, Silas, a chief man in the church, a prophet (Acts 15:22, 32), and one chosen to take the Jerusalem Conference decrees to the churches (Acts 15:27). “Silas” is probably a Greek version of the name *Saul*. He was coauthor with Paul of the Thessalonian epistles, and he was the secretary for Peter’s first epistle (1 Peter 5:12). Like Paul, he was a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37).

God changes His workmen, but His work goes right on. Now there were *two* missionary teams instead of one! If God had to depend on perfect people to accomplish His work, He would never ever get anything done. Our limitations and imperfections are good reasons for us to depend on the grace of God, for our sufficiency is from Him alone (2 Cor. 3:5).

A New Helper (16:1–5)

Paul and Silas approached their destination from the east, so they came first to Derbe and then to Lystra, just the reverse of the first journey (Acts 14:6–20). The preachers went from church to church, delivering the decrees and helping establish the believers in the faith. The result was fruit from the witness of the believers so that the churches increased in number daily (see Acts 2:47). It was certainly a most successful tour, but I wonder if any of the believers asked about Barnabas. And what did Paul tell them?

Perhaps the best thing that happened at Lystra was the enlistment of Timothy to replace John Mark as Paul’s special assistant. Timothy was probably converted through Paul’s ministry when the apostle first visited Lystra, for Paul called him “my beloved son” (1 Cor. 4:17) and “my own son in the faith” (1 Tim. 1:2). Timothy’s mother and grandmother had prepared the

way for his decision by being the first in the family to trust Christ (2 Tim. 1:5). Young Timothy undoubtedly witnessed Paul's sufferings in Lystra (Acts 14:19–20; 2 Tim. 3:10–11) and was drawn by the Lord to the apostle. Timothy was Paul's favorite companion and coworker (Phil. 2:19–23), perhaps the son Paul never had but always wanted.

Because he had a good report from the churches (1 Tim. 3:7), Timothy was ordained by Paul and added to his "team" (1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6). Paul's next step was to have Timothy circumcised, an action that seems to contradict the decision of the Jerusalem Conference. However, there was an important spiritual principle behind Paul's decision.

The decision at the Jerusalem Conference was that it was not necessary to be circumcised *in order to be saved*. Paul did not allow Titus to be circumcised lest the enemy think he was promoting their cause (Gal. 2:1–5). The battle in Jerusalem was over the truth of the gospel, not over the fitness of a man to serve. Paul's concern with Timothy was not his salvation but his fitness for service.

Timothy would be working with both Jews and Gentiles in the churches, and it was essential that he not offend them. That was why Paul had Timothy circumcised (see 1 Cor. 9:19–23). Again, it was not a matter of Timothy's salvation or personal character, but rather of avoiding serious problems that would surely become stumbling blocks as the men sought to serve the Lord (Rom. 14:13–15). It is a wise spiritual leader who knows how and when to apply the principles of the Word of God, when to stand firm and when to yield.

In the years that followed, Timothy played an important part in the expansion and strengthening of the churches. He traveled with Paul and was often his special ambassador to the "trouble spots" in the work, such as Corinth. He became shepherd of the church in Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3) and probably joined Paul in Rome shortly before the apostle was martyred (2 Tim. 4:21).

A New Vision (16:6–40)

In this section, we see three wonderful "openings."

God opened the way (vv. 6–12). After visiting the churches he had founded, Paul tried to enter new territory for the Lord by traveling east into Asia Minor and Bythina, but the Lord closed the door. We don't know how God revealed His will in this matter, but we can well imagine that Paul was disappointed and perhaps a bit discouraged. Everything had been going so smoothly on this second journey that these closed doors must have come as a great surprise. However, it is comforting to know that even apostles were not always clear as to God's will for their ministries! God planned for the message to get there another time (Acts 18:19–19:41; see 1 Peter 1:1).

In His sovereign grace, God led Paul west into Europe, not east into Asia. It is interesting to speculate

how world history might have been changed had Paul been sent to Asia instead of to Europe. At Troas, Paul was called to Macedonia by a man whom he saw in a night vision. "Nothing makes a man strong like a call for help," wrote George MacDonald, and Paul was quick to respond to the vision (compare Acts 26:19).

Note the pronoun *we* in Acts 16:10, for Dr. Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, joined Paul and his party at Troas. There are three "we" sections in Acts: 16:10–17; 20:5–15; and 27:1–28:16. Luke changed from "we" to "they" in Acts 17:1, which suggests that he may have remained in Philippi to pastor the church after Paul left. The next "we" section begins in Acts 20:5 in connection with Paul's trip from Macedonia. Luke devoted a good deal of space to Paul's ministry in Philippi, so perhaps he was a resident of that city. Some students think Luke may have been the man Paul saw in the vision.

From Troas to Neapolis, the port of Philippi was a distance of about 150 miles, and it took them two days to make the journey. Later, the trip in the opposite direction would take five days, apparently because of contrary winds (Acts 20:6). Philippi lay ten miles inland from Neapolis, and the way Luke described the city would suggest that he was indeed one of its proudest citizens.

Philippi was a Roman colony, which meant that it was a "Rome away from Rome." The emperor organized "colonies" by ordering Roman citizens, especially retired military people, to live in selected places so there would be strong pro-Roman cities in these strategic areas. Though living on foreign soil, the citizens were expected to be loyal to Rome, to obey the laws of Rome, and to give honor to the Roman emperor. In return, they were given certain political privileges, not the least of which was exemption from taxes. This was their reward for leaving their homes in Italy and relocating elsewhere.

God opened Lydia's heart (vv. 13–15). Paul and his friends did not plunge immediately into evangelizing the city, even though they knew God had called them there. No doubt they needed to rest and pray and make their plans together. It is not enough to know *where* God wants us to work; we must also know *when* and *how* He wants us to work.

The Jewish population in Philippi must have been very small since there was no synagogue there, only a place of prayer by the river outside the city. (It required ten men for the founding of a synagogue.) Paul had seen a *man* in the vision at Troas, but here he was ministering to a group of *women!* "It is better that the words of the law be burned than be delivered to a woman!" said the rabbis, but that was no longer Paul's philosophy. He had been obedient and the Lord had gone before to prepare the way.

Lydia was a successful businesswoman from Thyatira, a city renowned for its purple dye. She probably was in charge of a branch office of her guild in

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Philippi. God brought her all the way to Greece so that she might hear the gospel and be converted. She was “a worshipper of God,” a Gentile who was not a full Jewish proselyte but who openly worshipped with the Jews. She was seeking truth.

Paul shared the Word (“spoken” in Acts 16:14 means personal conversation, not preaching), God opened her heart to the truth, and she believed and was saved. She boldly identified herself with Christ by being baptized, and she insisted that the missionaries stay at her house. All of her household had been converted, so this was a good opportunity for Paul and his associates to teach them the Word and establish a local church. (We will deal with “household salvation” when we get to Acts 16:31.)

We must not conclude that because *God* opened Lydia’s heart, Lydia’s part in her conversion was entirely passive. She listened attentively to the Word, and it is the Word that brings the sinner to the Savior (John 5:24). The same God who ordained the end, Lydia’s salvation, also ordained the *means to the end*, Paul’s witness of Jesus Christ. This is a beautiful illustration of 2 Thessalonians 2:13–14.

God opened the prison doors (vv. 16–40). No sooner are lost people saved than Satan begins to hinder the work. In this case, he used a demonized girl who had made her masters wealthy by telling fortunes. As Paul and his “team” went regularly to the place of prayer, still witnessing to the lost, this girl repeatedly shouted after them, “These men are the servants of the Most High God, who show us the way of salvation!” Paul did not want either the gospel or the name of God to be “promoted” by one of Satan’s slaves, so he cast out the demon. After all, Satan may speak the truth one minute and the next minute tell a lie, and the unsaved would not know the difference.

The owners had no concern for the girl; they were interested only in the income she provided, and now that income was gone. (The conflict between money and ministry appears often in Acts: 5:1–11; 8:18–24; 19:23ff.; 20:33–34.) Their only recourse was the Roman law, and they thought they had a pretty good case because the missionaries were Jewish and were propagating a religion not approved by Rome. Moved by both religious and racial prejudices, the magistrates acted rashly and did not investigate the matter fully. This neglect on their part later brought them embarrassment.

Why didn’t Paul and Silas plead their Roman citizenship (see Acts 22:25–29; 25:11–12)? Perhaps there was not time, or perhaps Paul was saving that weapon for better use later on. He and Silas were stripped and beaten (see 2 Cor. 11:23, 25) and put in the city prison. It looked like the end of their witness in Philippi, but God had other plans.

Instead of complaining or calling on God to judge their enemies, the two men prayed and praised God. When you are in pain, the midnight hour is not the

easiest time for a sacred concert, but God gives “songs in the night” (Job 35:10; also see Ps. 42:8). “Any fool can sing in the day,” said Charles Haddon Spurgeon. “It is easy to sing when we can read the notes by daylight; but the skilful stager is he who can sing when there is not a ray of light to read by ... Songs in the night come only from God; they are not in the power of men.”

Prayer and praise are powerful weapons (2 Chron. 20:1–22; Acts 4:23–37). God responded by shaking the foundations of the prison, opening all the doors, and loosening the prisoners’ bonds. They could have fled to freedom, but instead they remained right where they were. For one thing, Paul immediately took command, and, no doubt, the fear of God was on these pagan men. The prisoners must have realized that there was something very special about those two Jewish preachers!

Paul’s attention was fixed on the jailer, the man he really wanted to win to Christ. It was a Roman law that if a guard lost a prisoner, he was given the same punishment the prisoner would have received, so there must have been some men in the prison who had committed capital crimes. The jailer would rather commit suicide than face shame and execution. A hard-hearted person seeking vengeance would have let the cruel jailer kill himself, but Paul was not that kind of a man (see Matt. 5:10–12, 43–48). It was the jailer who was the prisoner, not Paul, and Paul not only saved the man’s life, but pointed him to eternal life in Christ.

“What must I do to be saved?” is the cry of lost people worldwide, and we had better be able to give them the right answer. The legalists in the church would have replied, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1 NKJV). But Paul knew the right answer—faith in Jesus Christ. In the book of Acts, the emphasis is on faith in Jesus Christ alone (Acts 2:38–39; 4:12; 8:12, 37; 10:10–43; 13:38–39).

The phrase “and thy house” does not mean that the faith of the jailer would automatically bring salvation to his family. Each sinner must trust Christ personally in order to be born again, for we cannot be saved “by proxy.” The phrase means “and your household will be saved if they will also believe.” We must not read into this statement the salvation of infants (with or without baptism), because it is clear that Paul was dealing with people old enough to hear the Word (Acts 16:32), to believe, and to rejoice (Acts 16:34).

So-called “household salvation” has no basis in the Word of God—that is, that the decision of the head of the household brings salvation to the members of the household. The people in the household of Cornelius were old enough to respond to his call (Acts 10:24) and to understand the Word and believe (Acts 10:44; 11:15–17; 15:7–9). The household of Crispus was composed of people old enough to hear and believe God’s Word (Acts 18:8). There is

no suggestion here that the adults made decisions for infants or children.

It is touching to see the change in the attitude of the jailer as he washed the wounds of these two prisoners who were now his brothers in Christ. One of the evidences of true repentance is a loving desire to make restitution and reparation wherever we have hurt others. We should not only wash one another's feet (John 13:14–15), but we should also cleanse the wounds we have given to others.

What about the other prisoners? Luke doesn't give us the details, but it is possible that some of them were also born again through the witness of Paul and Silas and the jailer. Some of these prisoners may have been waiting for execution, so imagine their joy at hearing a message of salvation! Paul and Silas thought nothing of their own pains as they rejoiced in what God did in that Philippian jail! No doubt the jailer later joined with Lydia in the assembly.

The city officials knew that they had no convincing case against Paul and Silas, so they sent word to the jailer to release them. Paul, however, was unwilling to “sneak out of town,” for that kind of exit would have left the new church under a cloud of suspicion. People would have asked, “Who were those men? Were they guilty of some crime? Why did they leave so quickly? What do their followers believe?” Paul and his associates wanted to leave behind a strong witness of their own integrity as well as a good testimony for the infant church in Philippi.

It was then that Paul made use of his Roman citizenship and boldly challenged the officials on the legality of their treatment. This was not personal revenge but a desire to give protection and respect for the church. While the record does not say that the magistrates officially and publicly apologized, it does state that they respectfully came to Paul and Silas, escorted them out of the prison, and politely asked them to leave town. Paul and Silas remained in Philippi long enough to visit the new believers and encourage them in the Lord.

As you review this chapter, you can see that the work of the Lord progresses through difficulties and challenges. Sometimes the workers have problems with each other, and sometimes the problems come from the outside. It is also worth noting that not every sinner comes to Christ in exactly the same manner. Timothy was saved partly through the influence of a godly mother and grandmother. Lydia was converted through a quiet conversation with Paul at a Jewish prayer meeting, while the jailer's conversion was dramatic. One minute he was a potential suicide, and the next minute he was a child of God!

Different people with different experiences, and yet all of them changed by the grace of God.

Others just like them are waiting to be told God's simple plan of salvation.

Will you help them hear?

In your own witness for Christ, will you be daring?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Acts 17

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

This chapter describes Paul's ministry in three cities and how some of the people in those cities responded to the Word of God. These pictures are snapshots, not murals, for Dr. Luke did not give us many details. However, as we study these three different responses, we can certainly see our modern world and better understand what to expect as we seek to witness for Christ today.

Thessalonica—Resisting the Word (17:1–9)

Following the famous Egnatian Way, Paul and Silas went one hundred miles from Philippi to Thessalonica. (Timothy is not mentioned again until Acts 17:14, so he may have remained in Philippi.) As far as we can tell, they did not pause to minister in either Amphipolis or Apollonia. Perhaps there were no synagogues in those cities, and Paul certainly expected the new believers in Philippi to carry the message to their neighbors. It was Paul's policy to minister in the larger cities and make them centers for evangelizing a whole district (see Acts 19:10, 26; 1 Thess. 1:8).

Paul knew that Thessalonica (our modern Salonika) was a strategic city for the work of the Lord. Not only was it the capital of Macedonia, but it was also a center for business, rivaled only by Corinth. It was located on several important trade routes, and it boasted an excellent harbor. The city was predominantly Greek, even though it was controlled by Rome. Thessalonica was a “free city,” which meant that it had an elected citizens' assembly, it could mint its own coins, and it had no Roman garrison within its walls.

Paul labored at his tentmaking trade (Acts 18:3; 1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:7–10), but on the Sabbath ministered in the Jewish synagogue where he knew he would find both devout Jews and Gentiles, “God-seekers” and proselytes. This witness went on for only three Sabbaths; then he had to minister outside the synagogue. We do not know exactly how long Paul remained in Thessalonica, but it was long enough to receive financial help twice from the church in Philippi (Phil. 4:15–16). Read 1 Thessalonians 1 to learn how God blessed Paul's ministry and how the message spread from Thessalonica to other places. It was not a long ministry, but it was an effective one.

Four key words in Acts 17:2–3 describe Paul's approach to the synagogue congregation. First, he *reasoned*, which means he dialogued with them through questions and answers. He *explained* (“opening”) the Scriptures to them and *proved* (“alleging”) that Jesus is indeed the Messiah. The word translated “alleging” means “to lay down alongside, to prove by presenting the evidence.” The apostle set before them one Old Testament proof after another that Jesus of

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Nazareth is Messiah God. Paul was careful to *announce* (“preach”) the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is the message of the gospel (1 Cor. 15:1ff.). In the sermons in Acts, you will find an emphasis on the resurrection, for the believers were called to be witnesses of His resurrection (Acts 1:21–22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32). “Christianity is in its very essence a resurrection religion,” says Dr. John Stott. “The concept of resurrection lies at its heart. If you remove it, Christianity is destroyed.”

As the result of three weeks’ ministry, Paul saw a large number of people believe, especially Greek proselytes and influential women. Among the men were Aristarchus and Secundus, who later traveled with Paul (Acts 20:4). Luke’s phrase “not a few” (Acts 17:4, 12) is one way of saying, “It was a big crowd!”

But these results did not bring joy to everybody. The unbelieving Jews envied Paul’s success and were grieved to see the Gentiles and the influential women leaving the synagogue. Paul hoped that the salvation of the Gentiles would “provoke” the Jews into studying the Scriptures and discovering their promised Messiah (Rom. 11:13–14), but in this case, it only provoked them into persecuting the infant church.

The Jews wanted to drag the missionaries before their city assembly (“the people,” Acts 17:5; see 19:30), so they manufactured a riot to get the attention of the magistrates. Unable to find the missionaries, the mob seized Jason, host to Paul and his friends, and took him and some of the believers instead. The Jews’ accusations were similar to the ones used at the trial of Jesus: disturbing the peace and promoting treason (Luke 23:2). Their crime was that of “saying that there is another king, one Jesus.”

The Greek word translated “another” means “another of a different kind,” that is, a king unlike Caesar. When you read Paul’s two Thessalonian letters, you see the strong emphasis he gave in Thessalonica on the kingship of Christ and the promise of His return. Of course, our Lord’s kingdom is neither political nor “of this world” (John 18:36–37), but we cannot expect unsaved pagans to understand this.

The kingship of Jesus Christ is unlike that of the rulers of this world. He conquers with ambassadors, not armies, and His weapons are truth and love. He brings men peace by upsetting the peace and turning things upside down! He conquers through His cross, where He died for a world of lost sinners. He even died for His enemies (Rom. 5:6–10)!

The mob was agitated because they could not find Paul and Silas, so they settled for second best and obtained a peace bond against them. Jason had to put up the money and guarantee that Paul and Silas would leave the city and not return. It is possible that Jason was a relative of Paul’s, which would make the transaction even more meaningful (Rom. 16:21). Paul saw this prohibition as a device of Satan to hinder the work (1 Thess. 2:18), but it certainly did not hinder the Thessalonian church from

“sounding out the word” and winning the lost (1 Thess. 1:6–9).

Berea—Receiving the Word (17:10–15)

Under cover of night, Paul and Silas left the city and headed for Berea, about forty-five miles away. It does not appear that Timothy was with them, as he was probably working in Philippi. Later, he would join Paul in Athens (Acts 17:15) and then be sent to Thessalonica to encourage the church in its time of persecution (1 Thess. 3: 1ff.). Since Timothy was a Gentile, and had not been present when the trouble erupted, he could minister in the city freely. The peace bond could keep Paul out, but it would not apply to Paul’s young assistant.

Paul went into the synagogue and there discovered a group of people keenly interested in the study of the Old Testament Scriptures. In fact, they met *daily* to search the Scriptures to determine whether or not what Paul was saying was true. Paul had been overjoyed at the way the people in Thessalonica had received the Word (1 Thess. 2:13), so these “noble Bereans” must have really encouraged his heart. All of us should imitate these Bereans by faithfully studying God’s Word daily, discussing it, and testing the messages that we hear.

God used His Word so that many people trusted Christ. One of the men who was converted was Sopater, who later assisted Paul (Acts 20:4). He may be the same man (Sosipater) who later sent greetings to the Christians in Rome (Rom. 16:21).

Once again, Satan brought the enemy to the field as the unbelieving Jews from Thessalonica came to Berea and stirred up the people (note 1 Thess. 2:13–20). How did these men hear that Paul and Silas were ministering in Berea? Perhaps the growing witness of the Berean believers reached as far as Thessalonica, or it may be that some troublemaker took the message to his friends in Thessalonica. Satan also has his “missionaries” and they are busy (2 Cor. 11:13–15).

The believers in Berea outwitted the enemy by taking Paul to the sea and putting him on a ship bound for Athens. Once more, Paul had to leave a place of rich ministry and break away from dear people he had come to love. Silas and Timothy later joined Paul in Athens, and then Timothy was sent to Thessalonica to help the saints there (1 Thess. 3:1–6). Silas was also sent on a special mission somewhere in Macedonia (Philippi?), and later both men met Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:1–5).

Athens—Ridiculing the Word (17:16–34)

Paul arrived in the great city of Athens, not as a sight-seer, but as a soul-winner. The late Noel O. Lyons, for many years director of the Greater Europe Mission, used to say, “Europe is looked over by millions of visitors and is overlooked by millions of Christians.” Europe needs the gospel today just as it did in Paul’s day, and we dare not miss our opportunities. Like Paul, we must have open eyes and broken hearts.

The city. Athens was in a period of decline at this time, though still recognized as a center of culture and education. The glory of its politics and commerce had long since faded. It had a famous university and numerous beautiful buildings, but it was not the influential city it once had been. The city was given over to a “cultured paganism” that was nourished by idolatry, novelty (Acts 17:21), and philosophy.

“The Greek religion was a mere deification of human attributes and the powers of nature,” wrote Conybeare and Howson in their classic *Life and Epistles of St. Paul*. “It was a religion which ministered to art and amusement, and was entirely destitute of moral power” (280–281). The Greek myths spoke of gods and goddesses that, in their own rivalries and ambitions, acted more like humans than gods, and there were plenty of deities to choose from! One wit jested that in Athens it was easier to find a god than a man. Paul saw that the city was “wholly given to idolatry,” and it broke his heart.

We today admire Greek sculpture and architecture as beautiful works of art, but in Paul’s day, much of this was directly associated with their religion. Paul knew that idolatry was demonic (1 Cor. 10:14–23) and that the many gods of the Greeks were only characters in stories who were unable to change men’s lives (1 Cor. 8:1–6). With all of their culture and wisdom, the Greeks did not know the true God (1 Cor. 1:18–25).

As for novelty, it was the chief pursuit of both the citizens and the visitors (Acts 17:21). Their leisure time was spent telling or hearing “some new thing.” Eric Hoffer wrote that “the fear of becoming a ‘has been’ keeps some people from becoming anything.” The person who chases the new and ignores the old soon discovers that he has no deep roots to nourish his life. He also discovers that nothing is really new; it’s just that our memories are poor (Eccl. 1:8–11).

The city was also devoted to philosophy. When you think of Greece, you automatically think of Socrates and Aristotle and a host of other thinkers whose works are still read and studied today. Newspaper columnist Franklin P. Adams once defined philosophy as “unintelligible answers to insoluble problems,” but the Greeks would not have agreed with him. They would have followed Aristotle, who called philosophy “the science which considers truth.”

Paul had to confront two opposing philosophies as he witnessed in Athens, those of the Epicureans and the Stoics. We today associate the word *Epicurean* with the pursuit of pleasure and the love of “fine living,” especially fine food. But the Epicurean philosophy involved much more than that. In one sense, the founder Epicurus was an “existentialist” in that he sought truth by means of personal experience and not through reasoning. The Epicureans were materialists and atheists, and their goal in life was pleasure. To some, “pleasure” meant that which was grossly physical, but to others, it meant a life of refined serenity, free from pain and anxiety. The true Epicurean avoided

extremes and sought to enjoy life by keeping things in balance, but pleasure was still his number one goal.

The Stoics rejected the idolatry of pagan worship and taught that there was one “World God.” They were pantheists, and their emphasis was on personal discipline and self-control. Pleasure was not good and pain was not evil. The most important thing in life was to follow one’s reason and be self-sufficient, unmoved by inner feelings or outward circumstances. Of course, such a philosophy only fanned the flames of pride and taught men that they did not need the help of God. It is interesting that the first two leaders of the Stoic school committed suicide.

The Epicureans said “Enjoy life!” and the Stoics said “Endure life!” but it remained for Paul to explain how they could enter into life through faith in God’s risen Son.

The witness. “Left at Athens alone” (1 Thess. 3:1), Paul viewed the idolatrous city and his spirit was “stirred” (same word as “contention” in Acts 15:39—“paroxysm”). Therefore, he used what opportunities were available to share the good news of the gospel. As was his custom, he “dialogued” in the synagogue with the Jews, but he also witnessed in the marketplace (*agora*) to the Greeks. Anyone who was willing to talk was welcomed by Paul to his daily “classes.”

It did not take long for the philosophers to hear about this “new thing” that was going on in the *agora*, and they came and listened to Paul and probably debated with him. As they listened, they gave two different responses. One group ridiculed Paul and his teachings and called him a “babbling.” The word literally means “birds picking up seed,” and it refers to someone who collects various ideas and teaches as his own the secondhand thoughts he borrows from others. It was not a very flattering description of the church’s greatest missionary and theologian.

The second group was confused but interested. They thought Paul believed as they themselves did in many gods, because he was preaching “Jesus and Anastasis” (the Greek word for “resurrection”). The word translated “preached” in Acts 17:18 means “to preach the gospel.” Those who say that Paul modified his evangelistic tactics in Athens, hoping to appeal to the intellectuals, have missed the point. He preached the gospel as boldly in Athens as he did in Berea and would do in Corinth.

The defense. The Council of the Aeropagus was responsible to watch over both religion and education in the city, so it was natural for them to investigate the “new doctrine” Paul was teaching. They courteously invited Paul to present his doctrine at what appears to have been an informal meeting of the council on Mars’ Hill. Paul was not on trial; the council members only wanted him to explain what he had been telling the people in the *agora*. After all, life in Athens consisted in hearing and telling new things, and Paul had something new!

Paul’s message is a masterpiece of communication.

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He started where the people were by referring to their altar dedicated to an unknown god. Having aroused their interest, he then explained who that God is and what He is like. He concluded the message with a personal application that left each council member facing a moral decision, and some of them decided for Jesus Christ.

Paul opened his address with a compliment: “I see that in every way you are very religious” (Acts 17:22 NIV). They were so religious, in fact, that they even had an altar to “the unknown god,” lest some beneficent deity be neglected. If they did not know this god, how could they worship him? Or how could he help them? It was this God that Paul declared.

In this message, which is similar to his sermon at Lystra (Acts 14:15–17), Paul shared four basic truths about God.

The greatness of God: He is Creator (v. 24). Every thinking person asks, “Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going?” Science attempts to answer the first question, and philosophy wrestles with the second, but only the Christian faith has a satisfactory answer to all three. The Epicureans, who were atheists, said that all was matter and matter always was. The Stoics said that everything was God, “the Spirit of the Universe.” God did not create anything; He only organized matter and impressed on it some “law and order.”

But Paul boldly affirmed, “In the beginning, God!” God made the world and everything in it, and He is Lord of all that He has made. He is not a distant God, divorced from His creation, nor is He an imprisoned God, locked in creation. He is too great to be housed in man-made temples (1 Kings 8:27; Isa. 66:1–2; Acts 7:48–50), but He is not too great to be concerned about man’s needs (Acts 17:25). We wonder how the Council members reacted to Paul’s statement about temples, for right there on the Acropolis were several shrines dedicated to Athena.

The goodness of God: He is Provider (v. 25). Men may pride themselves in serving God, but it is God who serves man. If God is God, then He is self-sufficient and needs nothing that man can supply. Not only do the temples not contain God, but the services in the temples add nothing to God! In two brief statements, Paul completely wiped out the entire religious system of Greece!

It is God who gives to us what we need: “life, and breath, and all things.” God is the source of every good and perfect gift (James 1:17). He gave us life and He sustains that life by His goodness (Matt. 5:45). It is the goodness of God that should lead men to repentance (Rom. 2:4). But instead of worshipping the Creator and glorifying Him, men worship His creation and glorify themselves (Rom. 1:18–25).

The government of God: He is Ruler (vv. 26–29). The gods of the Greeks were distant beings who had no concern for the problems and needs of men. But the God of creation is also the God of history

and geography! He created mankind “from one man” (Acts 17:36 NIV) so that all nations are made of the same stuff and have the same blood. The Greeks felt that they were a special race, different from other nations, but Paul affirmed otherwise. Even their precious land that they revered came as a gift from God. It is not the power of man, but the government of God, that determines the rise and fall of nations (Dan. 4:35).

God is not a distant deity; “He [is] not far from every one of us” (Acts 17:27). Therefore, men ought to seek God and come to know Him in truth. Here Paul quoted from the poet Epimenides: “For in him we live, and move, and have our being.” Then he added a quotation from two poets, Aratus and Cleanthes: “For we are also his offspring.” Paul was not saying that all people on earth are the spiritual children of God, for sinners become God’s children only by faith in Jesus Christ (John 1:11–13). Rather, he was affirming the “Fatherhood of God” in a *natural* sense, for man was created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26). In this sense, Adam was a “son of God” (Luke 3:38).

This led to Paul’s logical conclusion: God made us in His image, so it is foolish for us to make gods in our own image! Greek religion was nothing but the manufacture and worship of gods who were patterned after men and who acted like men. Paul not only showed the folly of temples and the temple rituals, but also the folly of all idolatry.

The grace of God: He is Savior (vv. 30–34). As he brought his message to a close, Paul summarized the clear evidences of God’s grace. For centuries, God was patient with man’s sin and ignorance (see Acts 14:16; Rom. 3:25). This does not mean that men were not guilty (Rom. 1:19–20), but only that God held back divine wrath. In due time, God sent a Savior, and now He commands all men to repent of their foolish ways. This Savior was killed and then raised from the dead, and one day, He will return to judge the world. The proof that He will judge is that He was raised from the dead.

It was the doctrine of the resurrection that most of the members of the Council could not accept. To a Greek, the body was only a prison, and the sooner a person left his body, the happier he would be. Why raise a dead body and live in it again? And why would God bother with a personal judgment of each man? This kind of teaching was definitely incompatible with Greek philosophy. They believed in immortality, but not in resurrection.

There were three different responses to the message. Some laughed and mocked and did not take Paul’s message seriously. Others were interested but wanted to hear more. A small group accepted what Paul preached, believed on Jesus Christ, and were saved. We wonder if the others who postponed their decision eventually trusted Christ. We hope they did.

When you contrast the seeming meager results in Athens with the great harvests in Thessalonica and Berea, you are tempted to conclude that Paul’s ministry

there was a dismal failure. If you do, you might find yourself drawing a hasty and erroneous conclusion. Paul was not told to leave, so we assume he lingered in Athens and continued to minister to both believers and unbelievers. Proud, sophisticated, wise Athens would not take easily to Paul's humbling message of the gospel, especially when he summarized all of Greek history in the phrase "the times of this ignorance." The soil here was not deep and it contained many weeds, but there was a small harvest.

And, after all, one soul is worth the whole world!

We still need witnesses who will invade the "halls of academe" and present Christ to people who are wise in this world but ignorant of the true wisdom of the world to come. "Not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called" (1 Cor. 1:26), but some *are* called, and God may use you to call them.

Take the gospel to your "Athens."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Acts 18:1–22

IT'S ALWAYS TOO SOON TO QUIT

A man was shoveling snow from his driveway when two boys carrying snow shovels approached him. "Shovel your snow, Mister?" one of them asked. "Only two dollars!"

Puzzled, the man replied, "Can't you see that I'm doing it myself?"

"Sure," said the enterprising lad; "that's why we asked. We get most of our business from people who are half through and feel like quitting!"

Dr. V. Raymond Edman used to say to the students at Wheaton (Illinois) College, "It's always too soon to quit!" And Charles Spurgeon reminded his London congregation, "By perseverance, the snail reached the ark."

Corinth, with its 200,000 people, would not be the easiest city in which to start a church, and yet that's where Paul went after leaving Athens. And he went alone! The going was tough, but the apostle did not give up.

Corinth's reputation for wickedness was known all over the Roman Empire. (Rom. 1:18–32 was written in Corinth!) Thanks to its location, the city was a center for both trade and travel. Money and vice, along with strange philosophies and new religions, came to Corinth and found a home there. Corinth was the capital of Achaia and one of the two most important cities Paul visited. The other was Ephesus.

When God opens doors, the enemy tries to close them, and there are times when we close the doors on ourselves because we get discouraged and quit. As Paul ministered in Corinth, the Lord gave him just the encouragements that he needed to keep him going, and these same encouragements are available to us today.

Devoted Helpers (18:1–5)

Paul came to Corinth following his ministry to the philosophers in Greece, and he determined to magnify Jesus Christ and the cross, to depend on the Holy Spirit, and to present the gospel in simplicity (1 Cor. 2:1–5). There were many philosophers and itinerant teachers in Corinth, preying on the ignorant and superstitious population, and Paul's message and ministry could easily be misunderstood.

One way Paul separated himself from the "religious hucksters" was by supporting himself as a tentmaker. By the providence of God, he met a Jewish couple, Aquila and Priscilla ("Prisca," 2 Tim. 4:19), who were workers in leather as was Paul. Jewish rabbis did not accept money from their students but earned their way by practicing a trade. All Jewish boys were expected to learn a trade, no matter what profession they might enter. "He who does not teach his son to work, teaches him to steal!" said the rabbis, so Saul of Tarsus learned to make leather tents and to support himself in his ministry (see Acts 18:3; 1 Cor. 9:6–15; 2 Cor. 11:6–10).

Were Aquila and Priscilla Christian believers at that time? We don't know for certain, but it's likely that they were. Perhaps they were even founding members of the church in Rome. We do know that this dedicated couple served most faithfully and even risked their lives for Paul (Rom. 16:3–4). They assisted him in Ephesus (Acts 18:18–28), where they even hosted a church in their home (1 Cor. 16:19). Aquila and Priscilla were an important part of Paul's "team," and he thanked God for them. They are a good example of how "lay ministers" can help to further the work of the Lord. Every pastor and missionary thanks God for people like Aquila and Priscilla, people with hands, hearts, and homes dedicated to the work of the Lord.

Paul lived and worked with Aquila and Priscilla, but on the Sabbath days witnessed boldly in the synagogue. After all, that was why he had come to Corinth. When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia (Acts 17:14–15; 18:5), they brought financial aid (2 Cor. 11:9), and this enabled Paul to devote his full time to the preaching of the gospel. What a joy it must have been for Paul to see his friends and to hear from them the good news of the steadfastness of the Christians in the churches they had planted together (1 Thess. 3).

Everyone agrees that Paul was a great Christian and a great missionary evangelist, but how much would Paul have accomplished *alone*? Friends like Aquila and Priscilla, Silas and Timothy, and the generous believers in Macedonia, made it possible for Paul to serve the Lord effectively. His Christian friends, new and old, encouraged him at a time when he needed it the most.

Of course, this reminds us that we should encourage our friends in the work of the Lord. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "God evidently does not intend us all to be rich or powerful or great, but He does intend us all to be friends." "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" is the way Paul expressed it

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(Gal. 6:2). Humanly speaking, there would have been no church in Corinth were it not for the devotion and service of many different people.

Opposition (18:6–8)

Whenever God is blessing a ministry, you can expect increased opposition as well as increased opportunities. “For a great and effective door has opened to me, and there are many adversaries” (1 Cor. 16:9 *ἄκρῳ*). After all, the enemy gets angry when we invade his territory and liberate his slaves. As in Thessalonica and Berea (Acts 17:5–13), the unbelieving Jews who rejected the Word stirred up trouble for Paul and his friends (see 1 Thess. 2:14–16). Such opposition is usually proof that God is at work, and this ought to encourage us. Spurgeon used to say that the devil never kicks a dead horse!

Jewish opposition had forced Paul to leave Thessalonica and Berea, but in Corinth, it only made him determined to stay there and get the job done. It is always too soon to quit! Like the undaunted Christopher Columbus, Paul could write in his journal, “Today we sailed on!”

Two interesting Old Testament images are found in Acts 18:6. To shake out one’s garments was an act of judgment that said, “You have had your opportunity, but now it’s over!” Today we might say that we were washing our hands of a situation. (See Neh. 5:13; and compare Acts 13:51 and Matt. 10:14.) While Paul never ceased witnessing to the Jews, his primary calling was to evangelize the Gentiles (Acts 13:46–48; 28:28).

To have blood *on your hands* means that you bear the responsibility for another’s death because you were not faithful to warn him. The image comes from the watchman on the city walls whose task it was to stay alert and warn of coming danger (see Ezek. 3:17–21; 33:1–9). But to have blood *on your head* means that you are to blame for your own judgment. You had the opportunity to be saved, but you turned it down (see Josh. 2:19). Paul’s hands were clean (Acts 20:26) because he had been faithful to declare the message of the gospel. The Jews had their own blood on their own heads because they rejected God’s truth.

At just the right time, God brought another friend into Paul’s life—Gentile, God-fearing Titus Justus. Some Bible students think his full name was Gaius Titus Justus and that he was the “Gaius my host” referred to in Romans 16:23. The connection between Gaius and Crispus in Acts 18:7–8 and 1 Corinthians 1:14 is certainly significant.

Paul departed from the synagogue and began using the house of Titus Justus as his preaching station, right next to the synagogue! This was certainly a wise decision on Paul’s part, because it gave him continued contact with the Jews and Gentile proselytes, and as a result, even the chief ruler of the synagogue was converted! It was the ruler’s job to see to it that the synagogue building was cared for and that the services were held in a regular and orderly manner. We have

here another instance of an entire family turning to the Lord (Acts 10:24, 44; 16:15, 34). How that must have stirred the Jewish population in Corinth!

When you examine Paul’s ministry in Corinth, you will see that he was fulfilling the Lord’s commission given in Matthew 28:19–20. Paul came to Corinth (“Go”), he won sinners to Christ (“make disciples”), he baptized, and he taught them (note Acts 18:11). He even experienced the assurance of the Lord’s “Lo, I am with thee always” (Acts 18:9–10).

Paul’s associates baptized most of the new converts (1 Cor. 1:11–17), just as our Lord’s disciples did when He ministered on earth (John 4:1–2; and note Acts 10:46–48). The important thing is the believer’s obedience to the Lord and not the name of the minister who does the baptizing. When I became senior pastor at the Moody Church in Chicago, an older member boastfully said to me, “I was baptized by Dr. Ironside!” He was surprised that I was not impressed. I was sure that Dr. Ironside would have lovingly rebuked him for speaking like that, for Dr. Ironside was a humble man who wanted Christ’s name exalted, not his own.

To walk by faith means to see opportunities even in the midst of opposition. A pessimist sees only the problems; an optimist sees only the potential; but a realist sees the potential in the problems. Paul did not close his eyes to the many dangers and difficulties in the situation at Corinth, but he did look at them from the divine point of view.

Faith simply means obeying God’s will in spite of feelings, circumstances, or consequences. There never was an easy place to serve God, and if there is an easy place, it is possible that something is wrong. Paul reminded Timothy, “Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (2 Tim. 3:12 *ἄκρῳ*).

“Prosperity is the blessing of the Old Testament,” wrote Francis Bacon; “adversity is the blessing of the New.” Paul did not allow adversity to keep him from serving God.

The Word of Assurance (18:9–17)

The conversion of Crispus, an important Jewish leader, opened up more opportunities for evangelism and brought more opposition from the enemy! The Jewish community in Corinth was no doubt furious at Paul’s success and did everything possible to silence him and get rid of him. Dr. Luke does not give us the details, but I get the impression that between Acts 18:8 and 9, the situation became especially difficult and dangerous. Paul may have been thinking about leaving the city when the Lord came to him and gave him the assurance that he needed.

It is just like our Lord to speak to us when we need Him the most. His tender “Fear not!” can calm the storm in our hearts regardless of the circumstances around us. This is the way He assured Abraham (Gen. 15:1), Isaac (Gen. 26:24), and Jacob (Gen. 46:3), as well as Jehoshaphat (2 Chron. 20:15–17), Daniel

(Dan. 10:12, 19), Mary (Luke 1:30), and Peter (Luke 5:10). The next time you feel alone and defeated, meditate on Hebrews 13:5 and Isaiah 41:10 and 43:1–7, and claim by faith the presence of the Lord. He is with you!

When he was a young man, the famous British preacher G. Campbell Morgan used to read the Bible each week to two elderly women. One evening, when he finished reading the closing words of Matthew 28, Morgan said to the ladies, “Isn’t that a wonderful promise!” and one of them replied, “Young man, that is not a promise—it is a fact!”

Jesus had already appeared to Paul on the Damascus road (Acts 9:1–6; 26:12–18) and also in the temple (Acts 22:17–18). Paul would be encouraged by Him again when he was imprisoned in Jerusalem (Acts 23:11) and later in Rome (2 Tim. 4:16–17). Our Lord’s angel would also appear to Paul in the midst of the storm and give him a word of assurance for the passengers and crew (Acts 27:23–25). One of our Lord’s names is “Emmanuel—God with us” (Matt. 1:23), and He lives up to His name.

Paul was encouraged not only by the presence of the Lord, but also by His promises. Jesus assured Paul that no one would hurt him and that he would bring many sinners to the Savior. The statement “I have many people in this city” implies the doctrine of divine election, for “the Lord knows those who are His” (2 Tim. 2:19 *νηκν*). God’s church is made up of people who were “chosen ... in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4; and see Acts 13:48).

Please note that divine sovereignty in election is not a deterrent to human responsibility in evangelism. Quite the opposite is true! Divine election is one of the greatest encouragements to the preaching of the gospel. Because Paul knew that God already had people set apart for salvation, he stayed where he was and preached the gospel with faith and courage. Paul’s responsibility was to obey the commission; God’s responsibility was to save sinners. If salvation depends on sinful man, then all of our efforts are futile, but if “salvation is of the Lord” (Jonah 2:9), then we can expect Him to bless His Word and save souls.

“Scripture nowhere dispels the mystery of election,” writes John Stott in *God’s New Society* (InterVarsity, 37), “and we should beware of any who try to systematize it too precisely or rigidly. It is not likely that we shall discover a simple solution to a problem which has baffled the best brains of Christendom for centuries.”

The important thing is that we accept God’s truth and act on it. Paul did not spend his time speculating about divine sovereignty and human responsibility, the way some ivory-tower Christians do today. *He got busy and tried to win souls to Christ!* You and I do not know who God’s elect are, so we take the gospel to every creature and let God do the rest. And we certainly do not discuss election with the lost! D. L. Moody once told some unconverted people, “You have no more to do

with the doctrine of election than you have with the government of China!”

Before leaving this theme, we should note that it is our personal responsibility to make sure that we are among God’s elect. “Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your calling and election sure” (2 Peter 1:10 *νηκν*). To the inquisitive theorist who asked about the number of the elect, Jesus replied, “Strive to enter in at the narrow gate” (Luke 13:23–24). In other words, “What you need is salvation for yourself, not speculation about others! Be sure you are saved yourself; then we can talk about these wonderful truths.”

Paul continued in Corinth, knowing that God was with Him and that people would be saved. During those eighteen months of witness, Paul saw many victories in spite of Satan’s opposition. The church was not made up of many mighty and noble people (1 Cor. 1:26–31), but of sinners whose lives were transformed by the grace of God (1 Cor. 6:9–11).

Dr. Luke shared only one example of divine protection during Paul’s ministry in Corinth (Acts 18:12–17), but it is a significant one. The arrival of a new proconsul gave the unbelieving Jews hope that Rome might declare this new “Christian sect” illegal. They broke the law by attacking Paul and forcing him to go to court. This was not the first time that fanatical Jews had tried to prove that Paul was breaking the Roman law (Acts 16:19–24; 17:6–7).

Being a Roman citizen, Paul was prepared to defend himself, but this turned out to be unnecessary because Gallio defended Paul! The proconsul immediately saw that the real issue was not the application of the Roman law but the interpretation of the Jewish religion, so he refused to try the case!

But that was not the end of the matter. The Greeks who were witnessing the scene got hold of Sosthenes, the man who replaced Crispus as ruler of the synagogue, and beat him right before the eyes of the proconsul! It was certainly a flagrant display of anti-Semitism, but Gallio looked the other way. If this is the same Sosthenes mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:1, then he too got converted, and the Jews had to find another ruler for their synagogue! It would be interesting to know exactly how it happened. Did Paul and some of the believers visit Sosthenes and minister to him? Perhaps his predecessor Crispus helped “wash the wounds” (Acts 16:33) and used this as an opportunity to share the love of Christ.

How strange and wonderful are the providences of God! The Jews tried to force the Roman proconsul to declare the Christian faith illegal, but Gallio ended up doing just the opposite. By refusing to try the case, Gallio made it clear that Rome would not get involved in cases involving Jewish religious disputes. As far as he was concerned, Paul and his disciples had as much right as the Jews to practice their religion and share it with others.

In the book of Acts, Luke emphasizes the relationship between the Roman government and the

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Christian church. While it was true that the *Jewish* council prohibited the apostles to preach (Acts 4:17–21; 5:40), there is no evidence in Acts that Rome ever did so. In fact, in Philippi (Acts 16:35–40), Corinth, and Ephesus (Acts 19:31), the Roman officials were not only tolerant but almost cooperative. Paul knew how to use his Roman citizenship wisely so that the government worked for him and not against him, and he was careful not to accuse the government or try to escape its authority (Acts 25:10–12).

God's Will (18:18–22)

“If God will” (Acts 18:21) was more than a religious slogan with Paul; it was one of the strengths and encouragements of his life and ministry. Knowing and doing God’s will is one of the blessings of the Christian life (Acts 22:14). In some of his letters, Paul identified himself as “an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God” (1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1). At a most critical time in his life and ministry, Paul found courage in affirming, “The will of the Lord be done” (Acts 21:14).

After eighteen months of ministry, Paul decided that it was God’s will for him to leave Corinth and return to his home church in Antioch. His friends Priscilla and Aquila (note how Luke varies the order of their names) accompanied him to Ephesus and remained there when he departed for Caesarea. In Acts 18:24, we will pick up the story of the church in Ephesus and the important part played by Aquila and Priscilla.

Cenchraea was the seaport for Corinth, and there was a Christian congregation there (Rom. 16:1). Here Paul had his head shorn, “for he had a vow.” This probably refers to the Nazarite vow described in Numbers 6. Since the Nazarite vow was purely voluntary, Paul was not abandoning grace for law when he undertook it. The vow was not a matter of salvation but of personal devotion to the Lord. He allowed his hair to grow for a specific length of time and then cut it when the vow was completed. He also abstained from using the fruit of the vine in any form.

We are not told why Paul took this vow. Perhaps it was a part of his special dedication to God during the difficult days of the early ministry in Corinth. Or perhaps the vow was an expression of gratitude to God for all that He had done for him and his associates. According to Jewish law, the Nazarite vow had to be completed in Jerusalem with the offering of the proper sacrifices. The hair was shorn at the completion of the vow, not at the beginning, and it was not necessary for one to be in Jerusalem to make the vow.

Luke does not tell us how long Paul was in Ephesus, but the time was evidently very short. The Jews there were much more receptive to the gospel and wanted Paul to stay, but he wanted to get to Jerusalem to complete his vow, and then to Antioch to report to the church. However, he did promise to return, and he kept that promise (Acts 19:1).

The statement “I must by all means keep this feast that cometh in Jerusalem” (Acts 18:21) must not be interpreted to mean that Paul and the early Christians felt obligated to observe the Jewish feasts (see Acts 20:16). Being in Jerusalem during the important feasts (in this case, Passover) would give Paul opportunity to meet and witness to key Jewish leaders from throughout the Roman Empire. He would also be able to minister to Christian Jews who returned to their homeland.

Paul taught clearly that the observing of religious feasts was neither a means of salvation nor an essential for sanctification (Gal. 4:1–11). Christians are at liberty to follow their own conscience so long as they do not judge others or cause others to stumble (Rom. 14:1–15:7). Also, keep in mind Paul’s personal policy with regard to these matters of Jewish practice (1 Cor. 9:19–23).

Arriving at Caesarea, Paul went up to Jerusalem and greeted the believers there. He then went to Antioch and reported to his home church all that God had done on this second missionary journey. He had been gone from Antioch perhaps two years or more, and the saints were no doubt overjoyed to see him and hear about the work of God among the Gentiles.

There’s no proof, but likely Paul kept reminding the believers in Antioch, “It’s always too soon to quit!”

That’s a good reminder for us to heed today.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Acts 18:23–19:41

EXCITEMENT IN EPHESUS

We don’t know how long Paul remained in Antioch before leaving on his third missionary journey, but perhaps it was as long as a year. As in his second journey, he visited the churches and strengthened the believers. Luke does not describe this journey in detail because his main purpose is to get Paul to Ephesus. He wants to share with his readers the marvelous ministry God gave to Paul in that strategic city so steeped in idolatry and the occult.

Ephesus, with its 300,000 inhabitants, was the capital city of the Roman province of Asia and its most important commercial center. Thanks to a large harbor, Ephesus grew wealthy on trade, and, thanks to the temple of Diana, it attracted hosts of visitors who wanted to see this building that was one of the seven wonders of the world.

The temple was probably four centuries old in Paul’s day. It measured 418 feet by 239 feet, and boasted of 100 columns that stood over 50 feet high. In the sacred enclosure of the temple stood the “sacred image” of Artemis (Diana) that was supposed to have fallen from heaven (Acts 19:35). It was probably a meteorite. Since Artemis was a fertility goddess, cultic prostitution was an important part of her worship,

and hundreds of “priestesses” were available in the temple.

Paul’s three years in Ephesus (Acts 20:31)—the longest he stayed in any city—were certainly exciting and fruitful. Let’s meet some of the people who were involved.

A Man with an Incomplete Message (18:23–28)

When Paul departed from Ephesus for Jerusalem, he left his friends Aquila and Priscilla behind to carry on the witness in the synagogue. Imagine their surprise one Sabbath to hear a visiting Jewish teacher named Apollos preach many of the truths that they themselves believed and taught!

Apollos was certainly an exceptional man in many ways. He came from Alexandria, the second most important city in the Roman Empire. A center for education and philosophy, the city was founded by (and named after) Alexander the Great, and it boasted a university with a library of almost 700,000 volumes. The population of Alexandria (about 600,000) was quite cosmopolitan, being made up of Egyptians, Romans, Greeks, and Jews. At least a quarter of the population was Jewish, and the Jewish community was very influential.

Apollos knew the Old Testament Scriptures well and was able to teach them with eloquence and power. He was fervent (“boiling”) in his spirit and diligent in his presentation of the message. He was bold enough to enter the synagogue and preach to the Jews. The only problem was that this enthusiastic man was declaring an incomplete gospel. His message got as far as John the Baptist and then stopped! He knew nothing about Calvary, the resurrection of Christ, or the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. He had zeal, but he lacked spiritual knowledge (Rom. 10:1–4).

The ministry of John the Baptist was an important part of God’s redemptive plan. God sent John to prepare the nation of Israel for their Messiah (John 1:15–34). John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance; those who were baptized looked forward to the coming Messiah (Acts 19:4). John also announced a future baptism of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:8), which took place on the day of Pentecost (Acts 1:5). Apollos knew about the promises, but he did not know about their fulfillment.

Where did Apollos get his message to begin with? Since Alexandria was a famous center for learning, it is possible that some of John the Baptist’s disciples (Matt. 14:12; Luke 11:1) had gone there while Christ was still ministering on earth, and shared with the Jews as much as they knew. The word *instructed* in Acts 18:25 means “catechized” and suggests that Apollos had personal formal training in the Scriptures. However, that training was limited to the facts about the ministry of John the Baptist. Apollos’ message was not inaccurate or insincere; it was just incomplete.

When I travel in conference ministry, I depend on my wife to plan the routes and do the navigating. (I can

get lost in a parking lot!) On one particular trip, we got confused because we could not find a certain road. Then we discovered that our map was out of date! We quickly obtained a new map and everything was fine. Apollos had an old map that had been accurate in its day, but he desperately needed a new one. That new map was supplied by Aquila and Priscilla.

Aquila and Priscilla did not instruct him in public because that would have only confused the Jews. They took him home to a Sabbath dinner and then told him about Jesus Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit. They led him into a deeper knowledge of Christ, and the next Sabbath, Apollos returned to the synagogue and gave the Jews the rest of the story! In fact, so effective was his ministry that the believers in Ephesus highly recommended him to the churches in Achaia. Here Apollos not only strengthened the saints, but he also debated with the unbelieving Jews and convinced many of them that Jesus is the Messiah.

Apollos ministered for a time to the church in Corinth (Acts 19:1), where his learning and eloquence attracted attention (1 Cor. 1:12; 3:4–6, 22; 4:6). It is unfortunate that a clique gathered around him and helped bring division to the church, because he was definitely one of Paul’s friends and a trusted helper (1 Cor. 16:12; Titus 3:13).

Twelve Men with an Inconsistent Witness (19:1–10)

When Paul arrived back in Ephesus, he met twelve men who professed to be Christian “disciples” but whose lives gave evidence that something was lacking. Paul asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” (Acts 19:2 NIV, NASB, NKJV). The question was important because *the witness of the Spirit is the one indispensable proof that a person is truly born again* (Rom. 8:9, 16; 1 John 5:9–13), and you receive the Spirit when you believe on Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:13).

Their reply revealed the vagueness and uncertainty of their faith, for they did not even know that the Holy Spirit had been given! As disciples of John the Baptist, they knew that there was a Holy Spirit, and that the Spirit would one day baptize God’s people (Matt. 3:11; Luke 3:16; John 1:32–33). It is possible that these men were Apollos’ early “converts” and therefore did not fully understand what Christ had done.

Why did Paul ask about their baptism? Because in the book of Acts, a person’s baptismal experience is an indication of his or her spiritual experience. Acts 1–10 records a transition period in the history of the church, from the apostles’ ministry to the Jews to their ministry to the Gentiles. During this transition period, Peter used “the keys of the kingdom” (Matt. 16:19) and opened the door of faith to the Jews (Acts 2), the Samaritans (Acts 8:14ff.), and finally to the Gentiles (Acts 10).

It is important to note that God’s pattern for today is given in Acts 10:43–48: sinners hear the Word, they believe on Jesus Christ, they *immediately* receive the

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Spirit, and then they are baptized. The Gentiles in Acts 10 did not receive the Spirit by means of water baptism or by the laying on of the apostles' hands (Acts 8:14–17).

The fact that these men did not have the Spirit dwelling within was proof that they had never truly been born again. But they had been baptized by John's baptism, the same baptism that the apostles had received (see Acts 1:21–22)! What was wrong with them?

Some people say that these men were already saved, but they lacked the fullness of the Spirit in their lives. So Paul explained how to be “baptized in the Spirit,” and this led to a new life of victory. But that's not what the record says. Paul sensed that these men did not have the witness of the Spirit in their lives, and therefore they were not converted men. He certainly would not discuss the fullness of the Spirit with unsaved people! No, these twelve men had been baptized and were seeking to be religious, but something was missing. Alas, we have people just like them in our churches today!

Paul explained to them that John's baptism was a baptism of repentance that *looked forward* to the coming of the promised Messiah, while Christian baptism is a baptism that *looks back* to the finished work of Christ on the cross and His victorious resurrection. John's baptism was on “the other side” of Calvary and Pentecost. It was correct for its day, but now that day was ended.

Keep in mind that John the Baptist was a prophet who ministered under the old dispensation (Matt. 11:7–14). The old covenant was ended, not by John at the Jordan, but by Jesus Christ at Calvary (Heb. 10:1–18). The baptism of John was important to the Jews of that time (Matt. 21:23–32), but it is no longer valid for the church today. In a very real sense, these twelve men were like “Old Testament believers” who were anticipating the coming of the Messiah. Certainly Paul explained to the men many basic truths that Luke did not record. Then he baptized them, for their first “baptism” was not truly Christian baptism.

Why was it necessary for Paul to lay hands on these men before they could receive the Spirit? Didn't this contradict the experience of Peter recorded in Acts 10:44–48? Not if you keep in mind that this was a special group of men who would help form the nucleus of a great church in Ephesus. By using Paul to convey the gift of the Spirit, God affirmed Paul's apostolic authority and united the Ephesian church to the other churches as well as to the “mother church” in Jerusalem. When Peter and John laid hands on the believing Samaritans, it united them to the Jerusalem church and healed a breach between Jews and Samaritans that had existed for centuries.

What God did through Paul for these twelve men was not normative for the church today. How do we know? Because it was not repeated. The people who

were converted in Ephesus under Paul's ministry all received the gift of the Holy Spirit *when they trusted the Savior*. Paul makes this clear in Ephesians 1:13–14, and this is the pattern for us today.

In Acts 19:6, we have the last instance of the gift of tongues in the book of Acts. The believers spoke in tongues at Pentecost and praised God, and their listeners recognized these tongues as known languages (Acts 2:4–11) and not as some “heavenly speech.” The Gentile believers in the house of Cornelius also spoke in tongues (Acts 10:44–46), and their experience was identical to that of the Jews in Acts 2 (see Acts 11:15). This was of historic significance since the Spirit was baptizing Jews (Acts 2) and Gentiles (Acts 10) into the body of Christ (see 1 Cor. 12:13).

Today, the gift of tongues is not an evidence of the baptism of the Spirit or the fullness of the Spirit. Paul asked, “Do all speak with tongues?” (1 Cor. 12:30), and the Greek construction demands no as an answer. When Paul wrote to his Ephesian friends about the filling of the Holy Spirit, he said nothing about tongues (Eph. 5:18ff.). Nowhere in Scripture are we admonished to seek a baptism of the Holy Spirit, or to speak in tongues, but we are commanded to be filled with the Spirit. Read Paul's letter to the Ephesian church and note the many references to the Holy Spirit of God and His work in the believer.

Seven Men with Inadequate Power (19:11–20)

It is remarkable that Paul was able to witness in the synagogue for three months before he had to leave. No doubt the faithful ministry of Aquila and Priscilla played an important part in this success. However, hardness of heart set in (Heb. 3:7ff.), so Paul left the synagogue and moved his ministry to a schoolroom, taking his disciples with him. He probably used the room during the “off hours” each day (11 a.m. to 4 p.m.), when many people would be resting. Paul ministered in this way for about two years and “all they who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:10).

What a victorious ministry! It appears that everybody knew what Paul was saying and doing (see Acts 19:17, 20)! Even Paul's enemies had to admit that the Word was spreading and people were being saved (Acts 19:26). Two factors made this possible: the witness of the believers as they went from place to place, and the “special miracles” that God enabled Paul to perform in Ephesus (Acts 19:11).

In Bible history, you will find three special periods of miracles: (1) the time of Moses; (2) the time of Elijah and Elisha; and (3) the time of Jesus and His apostles. Each period was less than one hundred years. Depending on how some of these events are classified, the total number of miracles for all three periods is less than one hundred. Of course, not all the miracles were recorded (see John 20:30–31).

When our Lord performed miracles, He usually had at least three purposes in mind: (1) to show His

compassion and meet human needs; (2) to teach a spiritual truth; and (3) to present His credentials as the Messiah. The apostles followed this same pattern in their miracles. In fact, the ability to do miracles was one of the proofs of apostolic authority (Mark 16:20; Rom. 15:18–19; 2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:1–4). Miracles *of themselves* do not save lost sinners (Luke 16:27–31; John 2:23–25). Miracles must be tied to the message of the Word of God.

God enabled Paul to perform “special miracles” because Ephesus was a center for the occult (Acts 19:18–19), and Paul was demonstrating God’s power right in Satan’s territory. But keep in mind that wherever God’s people minister the truth, Satan sends a counterfeit to oppose the work. Jesus taught this truth in His parable of the tares (Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43); Peter experienced it in Samaria (Acts 8:9ff.); and Paul experienced it at Paphos (Acts 13:4–12). Satan imitates whatever God’s people are doing, because he knows that the unsaved world cannot tell the difference (2 Cor. 11:13–15).

It was not unusual for Jewish priests to seek to cast out demons (Luke 11:19), but it was unusual for them to use the name of Jesus Christ. Since these men had no personal relationship with the Savior, they had to invoke the name of Paul as well, but their scheme did not work. The demon said, “Jesus I recognize, and Paul I am acquainted with; but who are you?” (literal translation). The demonized man then attacked the seven priests and drove them from the house.

Had this exorcism succeeded, it would have discredited the name of Jesus Christ and the ministry of the church in Ephesus. (Paul faced a similar situation in Philippi. See Acts 16:16ff.) However, God used the scheme to defeat Satan and to bring conviction to the believers who were still involved in magical arts. Instead of disgracing the name of Jesus, the event magnified His name and caused the Word of God to spread even more rapidly.

The tense of the verbs in Acts 19:18 indicates that the people “kept coming ... kept confessing ... kept showing.” These believers apparently had not made a clean break with sin and were still practicing their magic, but the Lord had dealt with them. The total value of the magical books and spells that they burned was equivalent to the total salaries of 150 men working for a whole year! These people did not count the cost but repented and turned from their sins.

A Mob of Indignant Citizens (19:21–41)

In Acts 19:21, we have the first mention of Paul’s plan to go to Rome. The fulfilling of this plan will be described in the last third of the book of Acts. Paul would soon write to the saints in Rome and express this desire to them (Rom. 1:13–15; 15:22–29). But first he had to visit the churches in Macedonia and Achaia in order to complete the “love offering” that he was taking for the poor saints in Jerusalem (Acts 24:17; Rom. 15:25–33; 1 Cor. 16:3–7). While he

remained in Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:8–9), he sent Timothy to help him finish the job (1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10–11).

It was at this point that Satan attacked again, not as the deceiver (2 Cor. 11:3–4), but as the destroyer (1 Peter 5:8) and the murderer (John 8:44). Satan incited the guild of silversmiths to stage a public protest against Paul and the gospel. Paul may have been referring to this riot when he wrote, “I have fought with beasts at Ephesus” (1 Cor. 15:32). The enemy had been repeatedly defeated throughout Paul’s three years of ministry in Ephesus. It would have been a master stroke on Satan’s part to climax that ministry with a citywide attack that could result in Paul’s arrest, or even his death.

Wherever the gospel is preached in power, it will be opposed by people who make money from superstition and sin. Paul did not arouse the opposition of the silversmiths by picketing the temple of Diana or staging anti-idolatry rallies. All he did was teach the truth daily and send out his converts to witness to the lost people in the city. As more and more people got converted, fewer and fewer customers were available.

“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (1 Tim. 6:10 NKJV). Demetrius and his silversmiths were promoting idolatry and immorality in order to make a living, while Paul was declaring the true God and pointing people to cleansing and purity through the free grace of God. The silversmiths were really more concerned about their jobs and their income than they were about Diana and her temple, but they were wise enough not to make this known.

Benjamin Franklin said that a mob was “a monster with heads enough, but no brains.” How sad it is when people permit themselves to be led by a few selfish leaders who know the art of manipulation. Demetrius made use of the two things the Ephesians loved the most: the honor of their city and the greatness of their goddess and her temple. Without the help of radio, TV, or newspaper, he got his propaganda machine going and soon had the whole city in an uproar.

Max Lerner wrote in *The Unfinished Country*, “Every mob, in its ignorance and blindness and bewilderment, is a League of Frightened Men that seeks reassurance in collective action.” It was a “religious mob” that shouted “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!” to Pilate, and eventually got its way. Had this Ephesian mob succeeded in its plans, Paul would have been arrested and executed before the law could have stepped in to protect him.

The confused crowd, some twenty-five thousand shouting people, finally filled up the amphitheater; most of them did not know what was happening or why they were there. Since the mob could not find Paul, they seized two of his helpers, Gaius (*not* the Gaius of Acts 20:4; Rom. 16:23; 1 Cor. 1:14) and Aristarchus (Acts 20:4). Paul wanted to enter the theater—what an opportunity for preaching the

gospel!—but the believers and some of the city leaders wisely counseled him to stay away (Acts 19:30–31).

Before long, race prejudice entered the picture, when a Jew named Alexander tried to address the crowd (Acts 19:33–34). No doubt he wanted to explain to them that the Jews living in Ephesus did not endorse Paul’s message or ministry, and, therefore, must not be made scapegoats just to satisfy the crowd. But his very presence only aroused the mob even more, and they shouted for two more hours, “Great is Diana of the Ephesians!” The crowd knew that the Jews did not approve of idols and would not honor Diana. The only thing that protected the Jews was the Roman law that gave them freedom of religion.

It was the city clerk who finally got matters under control, and he did it primarily for political reasons. Ephesus was permitted by Rome to exist as a “free city” with its own elected assembly, but the Romans would have rejoiced to find an excuse for removing these privileges (Acts 19:40). The same tactics that the silversmiths used to arouse the mob, the clerk used to quiet and reassure them—the greatness of their city and of their goddess.

Luke records the official statement that the believers were innocent of any crime, either public (Acts 19:37) or private (Acts 19:38). Paul had this same kind of “official approval” in Philippi (Acts 16:35–40) and in Corinth (Acts 18:12–17), and he would receive it again after his arrest in Jerusalem. Throughout the book of Acts, Luke makes it clear that the persecution of the Christian church was incited by the unbelieving Jews and not by the Romans. If anything, Paul used his Roman citizenship to protect himself, his friends, and the local assemblies.

The crowd was dismissed, and no doubt the people went home congratulating themselves that they had succeeded in defending their great city and their famous goddess. It is doubtful that many of them questioned the truthfulness of their religion or determined to investigate what Paul had been preaching for three years. It is much easier to believe a lie and follow the crowd.

But Ephesus is gone, and so is the worldwide worship of Diana of the Ephesians. The city and the temple are gone, and the silversmiths’ guild is gone. Ephesus is a place visited primarily by archeologists and people on Holy Land tours. Yet the gospel of God’s grace and the church of Jesus Christ are still here! We have four inspired letters that were sent to the saints in Ephesus—Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Revelation 2:1–7. The name of Paul is honored, but the name of Demetrius is forgotten. (Were it not for Paul, we would not have met Demetrius in the first place!)

The church ministers by persuasion, not propaganda. We share God’s truth, not man’s religious lies. Our motive is love, not anger; and the glory of God, not the praise of men. This is why the church goes on, and we must keep it so.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Acts 20

A MINISTER’S FAREWELL

In the final third of the book of Acts, Dr. Luke records Paul’s journey to Jerusalem, his arrest there, and his voyage to Rome. The gospel of Luke follows a similar pattern as Luke describes Christ’s journey to Jerusalem to die (Luke 9:53; 13:33; 18:31; 19:11, 28). Much as Jesus set His face “like a flint” to do the Father’s will (Isa. 50:7; Luke 9:51), so Paul determined to finish his course with joy, no matter what the cost might be (Acts 20:24).

This chapter describes three “farewell events” as Paul closed his ministry in Macedonia, Achaia, and Asia.

A Farewell Journey (20:1–5)

“I do not expect to visit this country again!” D. L. Moody spoke those words in 1867 when he made his first trip to England. He was so seasick during the voyage that he decided he would never sail again, but he made five more visits to England, seasickness notwithstanding.

Paul was ready for another journey. He wanted to make at least one more visit to the churches the Lord had helped him to found, because Paul was a man with a concerned heart. “The care of all the churches” was his greatest joy as well as his heaviest burden (2 Cor. 11:23–28).

After the riot, Paul left Ephesus and headed toward Macedonia and Achaia (see Acts 19:21). He expected to meet Titus at Troas and get a report on the problems in Corinth, but Titus did not come (2 Cor. 2:12–13). The men finally met in Macedonia and Paul rejoiced over the good news Titus brought (2 Cor. 7:5–7). Paul had originally planned to make two visits to Corinth (2 Cor. 1:15–16), but instead he made one visit that lasted three months (Acts 20:3; 1 Cor. 16:5–6). During that visit, he wrote his epistle to the Romans.

Paul had two goals in mind as he visited the various churches. His main purpose was to encourage and strengthen the saints so that they might stand true to the Lord and be effective witnesses. His second purpose was to finish taking up the collection for the needy believers in Jerusalem (Rom. 15:25–27; 1 Cor. 16:1–9; 2 Cor. 8–9). The men who accompanied him (Acts 20:4) were representatives of the churches, appointed to travel with Paul and help handle the funds (2 Cor. 8:18–24).

Once again, Paul had to change his plans, this time because of a Jewish plot to kill him at sea. Instead of sailing from Corinth, he traveled overland through Achaia and Macedonia, sailing from Philippi to Troas, where his “team” agreed to rendezvous. As a person who dislikes travel and changes in plans, I admire Paul for his courage, stamina, and adaptability. In spite of

the complications and delays in travel today, we have a much easier time than Paul did—and we complain! He kept going!

A Farewell Service (20:6–12)

Paul was not able to make it to Jerusalem for the annual Passover celebration, so now his goal was to arrive there at least by Pentecost (Acts 20:16). Note the pronoun change to “us” and “we,” for Dr. Luke has now joined the party (see Acts 16:17). He had probably been ministering at Philippi where he joined Paul for the last leg of the journey. Paul must have rejoiced to have Luke, Titus, and Timothy at his side again. The men remained at Troas a week so that they might fellowship with the believers there. Perhaps they were also waiting for the departure of the next ship.

Luke gives us a brief report of a local church service in Troas, and from it we learn something of how they met and worshipped the Lord. Consider the elements involved.

The Lord’s Day. To begin with, they met on the first day of the week and not on the seventh day, which was the Sabbath (see also 1 Cor. 16:1–2). The first day came to be called “the Lord’s Day” because on it the Lord Jesus Christ arose from the dead (Rev. 1:10). We should also remember that the church was born on the first day of the week when the Spirit came at Pentecost. During the early years of the church, the believers did maintain some of the Jewish traditions, such as the hours of prayer (Acts 3:1). But as time went on, they moved away from the Mosaic calendar and developed their own pattern of worship as the Spirit taught them.

The Lord’s people. The church met in the evening because Sunday was not a holiday during which people were free from daily employment. Some of the believers would no doubt be slaves, unable to come to the assembly until their work was done. The believers met in an upper room because they had no church buildings in which to gather. This room may have been in the private home of one of the believers. The assembly would have been a cosmopolitan group, but their social and national distinctions made no difference: they were “all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

The Lord’s Supper. The early church shared a “potluck” meal called the “love feast” (*agape*), after which they would observe the Lord’s Supper (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 11:17–34). The “breaking of bread” in Acts 20:7 refers to the Lord’s Supper, whereas in Acts 20:11 it describes a regular meal. By sharing and eating with one another, the church enjoyed fellowship and also gave witness of their oneness in Christ. Slaves would actually eat at the same table with their masters, something unheard of in that day.

It is likely that the church observed the Lord’s Supper each Lord’s Day when they met for fellowship and worship. In fact, some believers probably ended many of their regular meals at home by taking the bread and wine and remembering the Lord’s death. While Scripture does not give us specific instructions

in the matter (“as often,” 1 Cor. 11:26), the example of the early church would encourage us to meet at the Lord’s table often. However, the Communion must not become routine, causing us to fail to receive the blessings involved.

The Lord’s message. The Word of God was always declared in the Christian assemblies, and this included the public reading of the Old Testament Scriptures (1 Tim. 4:13) as well as whatever apostolic letters had been received (Col. 4:16). It is sad to see how the Word is neglected in church services today. Knowing that this would probably be his last meeting with the saints at Troas, Paul preached a long sermon, after which he ate and conversed with the people until morning. It’s doubtful that anybody complained. How we today wish we could have been there to hear the apostle Paul preach!

The Word of God is important to the people of God, and the preaching and teaching of the Word must be emphasized. The church meets for edification as well as for celebration, and that edification comes through the Word. “Preach the word!” is still God’s admonition to spiritual leaders (2 Tim. 4:2). According to Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, “the decadent periods and eras in the history of the church have always been those periods when preaching has declined” (*Preachers and Preaching*, Zondervan, 24).

The Lord’s power. Whether it was the lateness of the hour or the stuffiness of the room (surely not the dullness of Paul’s sermon!), Eutychus (“Fortunate”) fell asleep and then fell out the window, and was killed by the fall. However, Paul raised him from the dead and left him and the church comforted. God’s power was present to work for His people.

How old was Eutychus? The Greek word *manias* in Acts 20:9 means a man from twenty-four to forty years of age. The word *pais* in Acts 20:12 means a young child or youth. Dr. Howard Marshall, an eminent Greek scholar, says he was a “young lad of eight to fourteen years. Since the word *pais* can mean “a servant,” Eutychus may have been a young man who was also a servant. He may have worked hard that day and was weary. No wonder he fell asleep during the lengthy sermon!

Let’s not be too hard on Eutychus. At least he was there for the service, and he did try to keep awake. He sat near ventilation, and he must have tried to fight off the sleep that finally conquered him. The tense of the Greek verb indicates that he was gradually overcome, not suddenly.

Also, let’s not be too hard on Paul. After all, he was preaching his farewell sermon to this assembly, and he had a great deal to tell them for their own good. Those sitting near should have been watching Eutychus, but, of course, they were engrossed in what Paul was saying. Paul did interrupt his sermon to rush downstairs to bring the young man back to life. His approach reminds us of Elijah (1 Kings 17:21–22) and Elisha (2 Kings 4:34–35).

Acts 20

Perhaps each of us should ask ourselves, “What really keeps me awake?” Christians who slumber during one hour in church somehow manage to stay awake during early-morning fishing trips, lengthy sporting events and concerts, or late-night TV specials. Also, we need to prepare ourselves physically for public worship to make sure we are at our best. “Remember,” said Spurgeon, “if we go to sleep during the sermon and die, there are no apostles to restore us!”

A Farewell Message (20:13–38)

Paul chose to walk from Troas to Assos, a distance of about twenty miles. Why? For one thing, it enabled him to stay longer with the saints in Troas, while he sent Luke and the party on ahead (Acts 20:13). It would take the ship at least a day to sail from Troas to Assos, and Paul could probably walk it in ten hours or less. Also, Paul probably wanted time alone to commune with the Lord about his trip to Jerusalem. The apostle must have sensed already that difficult days lay ahead of him. He may also have been pondering the message he would give to the Ephesian elders. Finally, the exercise was certainly beneficial! Even inspired apostles need to care for their bodies. I personally would prefer walking to sailing!

There were fifty days between Passover (Acts 20:6) and Pentecost (Acts 20:16), and Paul’s trip from Philippi to Troas had already consumed twelve of them (Acts 20:6). It took another four days to get to Miletus, so Paul decided not to go to Ephesus lest he lose any more valuable time. Instead, he invited the leaders of the Ephesian church to travel about thirty miles and meet him at Miletus, where the ship was waiting to unload cargo and take on more. Paul was not one to waste time or to lose opportunities.

In the book of Acts, Luke reports eight messages given by the apostle Paul to various people: a Jewish synagogue congregation (Acts 13:14–43), Gentiles (Acts 14:14–18; 17:22–34), church leaders (Acts 20:17–38), a Jewish mob (Acts 22:1–21), the Jewish council (Acts 23:1–10), and various government officials (Acts 24:10–21; 26:1–32). His address to the Ephesian elders is unique in that it reveals Paul the pastor rather than Paul the evangelist or Paul the defender of the faith. The message enables us to get a glimpse of how Paul ministered in Ephesus for three years.

The word *elder* is *presbutos* in the Greek (“presbyter”) and refers to a mature person who has been selected to serve in office (Acts 14:23). These same people are called “overseers” in Acts 20:28, which is *episkopos* or “bishop.” They were chosen to “feed the church” (Acts 20:28), which means “to shepherd.” Paul called the local church “a flock” (Acts 20:28–29), so these men were also pastors. (The word *pastor* means “shepherd.”) Thus in the New Testament churches, the three titles *elder*, *bishop*, and *pastor* were synonymous. The qualifications for this office are given in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9.

There were three parts to Paul’s farewell message.

First he reviewed the past (Acts 20:18–21); then he discussed the present (Acts 20:22–27); and finally, he spoke about the future (Acts 20:28–35). In the first part, he emphasized his faithfulness to the Lord and to the church as he ministered for three years in Ephesus. The second section reveals Paul’s personal feelings in view of both the past and the future. In the third part, he warned them of the dangers that the churches faced.

A review of the past (vv. 18–21). Paul was not one to work into his ministry gradually like a diplomat feeling his way. “From the first day” he gave himself unsparingly to the work of the Lord in Ephesus, for Paul was an ambassador and not a diplomat.

The *motive* for Paul’s ministry is found in the phrase “serving the Lord” (Acts 20:19). He was not interested in making money (Acts 20:33) or in enjoying an easy life (Acts 20:34–35), for he was the bondsman of Jesus Christ (Acts 20:24; Rom. 1:1). Paul was careful to let people know that his motives for ministry were spiritual and not selfish (1 Thess. 2:1–13).

The *manner* of his ministry was exemplary (Acts 20:18–19). He lived a consistent life that anybody could inspect, for he had nothing to hide. He served in humility and not as a “religious celebrity” demanding that others serve him. But his humility was not a sign of weakness, for he had the courage to face trials and dangers without quitting. Paul was not ashamed to admit to his friends that there had also been times of tears (see also Acts 20:31, 37; Rom. 9:1–2; 2 Cor. 2:4; Phil. 3:18).

The *message* of his ministry (Acts 20:20–21) was also widely known, because he announced it and taught it publicly (Acts 19:9) as well as in the various house churches of the fellowship. He told sinners to repent of their sins and believe in Jesus Christ. This message was “the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24), and it is the *only* message that can save the sinner (1 Cor. 15:1–8; Gal. 1:6–12).

Furthermore, Paul reminded them that, in his ministry, he had not held back anything that was profitable to them. He declared to them “all the counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). His was a balanced message that included the doctrines and duties, as well as the privileges and responsibilities, that belonged to the Christian life. In his preaching, he neither compromised nor went to extremes, but kept things in balance. Paul also kept his outlook and congregation balanced, witnessing both to Jews and to Gentiles.

A testimony of the present (vv. 22–27). The phrase “And now, behold” shifts the emphasis from the past to the present as Paul opens his heart and tells his friends just how he feels. He did not hide from them the fact that he was bound in his spirit (Acts 19:21) to go to Jerusalem, even though he knew that danger and possible death awaited him there. The Holy Spirit had witnessed this message to him in city after city. A lesser man would have found some way to escape, but not Paul. He was too gripped by his calling and his devotion to Jesus Christ to look for some safe and easy way

out. In his testimony, Paul used six graphic pictures of his ministry to explain why he would not quit but would go to Jerusalem to die for Jesus Christ if necessary. Paul could say, “None of these things move me!” because he knew what he was as a minister of Jesus Christ.

Paul saw himself as *an accountant* (Acts 20:24) who had examined his assets and liabilities and decided to put Jesus Christ ahead of everything else. He had faced this kind of reckoning early in his ministry and had willingly made the spiritual the number one priority in his life (Phil. 3:1–11).

He also saw himself as a *runner* who wanted to finish his course in joyful victory (Phil. 3:12–14; 2 Tim. 4:8). The three phrases “my life, my course, the ministry” are the key. Paul realized that his life was God’s gift to him, and that God had a special plan for his life that would be fulfilled in his ministry. Paul was devoted to a great Person (“serving the Lord”) and motivated by a great purpose, the building of the church.

Paul’s third picture is that of the *steward*, for his ministry was something that he had “received of the Lord.” The steward owns little or nothing, but he possesses all things. His sole purpose is to serve his master and please him. “Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful” (1 Cor. 4:2 NKJV). The steward must one day give an account of his ministry, and Paul was ready for that day.

The next picture is that of the *witness*, “testifying of the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24; and note v. 21). The word means “to solemnly give witness,” and it reminds us of the seriousness of the message and of the ministry. As we share the gospel with others, it is a matter of life or death (2 Cor. 2:15–16). Paul was a faithful witness both in the life that he lived (Acts 20:18) and the message that he preached.

Picture number five is the *herald* (Acts 20:25). The word *preaching* means “to declare a message as the herald of the king.” The witness tells what has happened to him, but the herald tells what the king tells him to declare. He is a man commissioned and sent with a message, and he must not change that message in any way. And since he is sent by the king, the people who listen had better be careful how they treat both the messenger and the message.

The final picture, and perhaps the most dramatic, is that of the *watchman* (Acts 20:26). As in Acts 18:6, this is a reference to the “watchman on the walls” in Ezekiel 3:17–21; 33:1–9. What a serious calling it was to be a watchman! He had to stay awake and alert, ready to sound the alarm if he saw danger approaching. He had to be faithful, not fearful, because the safety of many people rested with him. Paul had been a faithful watchman (Acts 20:31), for he had declared to sinners and saints all the counsel of God. Unfortunately, we have today many unfaithful watchmen who think only of themselves (Isa. 56:10–13).

A group of servicemen asked their new chaplain if he believed in a real hell for lost sinners, and he smiled

and told them that he did not. “Then you are wasting your time,” the men replied. “If there is no hell, we don’t need you; and if there is a hell, you are leading us astray. Either way, we’re better off without you!”

A warning about the future (vv. 28–38). Paul brought his farewell message to a close by warning the leaders of the dangers they had to recognize and deal with if they were to protect and lead the church. Never underestimate the great importance of the church. The church is important to God the Father because His name is on it—“the church of God.” It is important to the Son because He shed His blood for it, and it is important to the Holy Spirit because He is calling and equipping people to minister to the church. It is a serious thing to be a spiritual leader in the church of the living God.

To begin with, there are dangers *around us*, “wolves” that want to ravage the flock (Acts 20:29). Paul was referring to false teachers, the counterfeits who exploit the church for personal gain (Matt. 7:15–23; 10:16; Luke 10:3; 2 Peter 2:1–3). How important it is that believers know the Word of God and be able to detect and defeat these religious racketeers.

But there are also dangers *among us* (Acts 20:30), because of people within the church who are ambitious for position and power. Church history, ancient and modern, is filled with accounts of people like Diotrephes who love to have preeminence (3 John 9–11). It is shocking to realize that more than one false prophet got his or her start within the Christian church family! Read 1 John 2:18–19 and take heed.

There are also dangers *within us* (Acts 20:31–35), and this seems to be where Paul put the greatest emphasis. “Take heed, therefore, unto yourselves” (Acts 20:28). He names five sins that are especially destructive to the life and ministry of spiritual leaders in the church.

The first is *carelessness* (Acts 20:31), failing to stay alert and forgetting the price that others have paid so that we might have God’s truth. “Watch and remember!” are words we had better heed. It is so easy for us today to forget the toil and tears of those who labored before us (Heb. 13:7). Paul’s warning and weeping should be constant reminders to us to take our spiritual responsibilities seriously.

The second sin is *shallowness* (Acts 20:32). We cannot build the church unless God is building our lives daily. There is a balance here between prayer (“I commend you to God”) and the Word of God (“the word of his grace”), because these two must always work together (1 Sam. 12:23; John 15:7; Acts 6:4). The Word of God alone is able to edify and enrich us, and the spiritual leader must spend time daily in the Word of God and prayer. *Covetousness* is the third sin we must avoid (Acts 20:33). It means a consuming and controlling desire for what others have and for more of what we ourselves already have. “Thou shalt not covet” is the last of the Ten Commandments, but if we do covet, we will end up breaking all the other nine! Those who

Acts 20—21

cover will steal, lie, and murder to get what they want, and even dishonor their own parents. Covetousness is idolatry (Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5). In the qualifications for an elder, it is expressly stated that he must not be guilty of the sin of covetousness (1 Tim. 3:3).

Paul also mentioned *laziness* (Acts 20:34). Paul earned his own way as a tentmaker, even though he could have used his apostolic authority to demand support and thereby have an easier life. It is not wrong for Christian workers to receive salaries, for “the laborer is worthy of his hire” (Luke 10:7; 1 Tim. 5:18). But they should be certain that they are really *earning* those salaries! (Read Prov. 24:30–34.)

Finally, Paul warned about *selfishness* (Acts 20:35). True ministry means giving, not getting; it means following the example of the Lord Jesus Christ. Dr. Earl V. Pierce used to call this “the supreme beatitude” because, unlike the other beatitudes, it tells us how to be *more* blessed! These words of Jesus are not found anywhere in the Gospels, but they were a part of the oral tradition, and Paul memorized them.

This beatitude does not suggest that people who receive are “less blessed” than people who give. (The beggar in Acts 3 would argue about that!) It could be paraphrased, “It’s better to share with others than to keep what you have and collect more.” In other words, the blessing does not come in accumulating wealth, but in sharing it. After all, Jesus became poor that we might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9). One of the best commentaries on this statement is Luke 12:16–31.

Paul closed this memorable occasion by kneeling down and praying for his friends, and then they all wept together. It is a difficult thing to say good-bye, especially when you know you will not see your friends again in this life. But we have the blessed assurance that we will one day see our Christian friends and loved ones in heaven, when Jesus Christ returns (1 Thess. 4:13–18).

Meanwhile, there is a job to be done—so, let’s do it!

CHAPTER TWENTY

Acts 21:1—22:29

THE MISUNDERSTOOD MISSIONARY

Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood?” asked Ralph Waldo Emerson. “Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton ... To be great is to be misunderstood.”

Emerson might have added that the apostle Paul was misunderstood, by friends and foes alike. Three of these misunderstandings—and their consequences—are recorded in these chapters.

Paul’s Friends Misunderstood His Plans (21:1–17)

Paul had to tear himself away from the Ephesian elders, so great was his love for them. He and his party sailed

from Miletus to Cos, then to Rhodes, and then to Patara, a total of three days’ journey. But Paul was uncomfortable with a “local coastal” ship that stopped at every port, so when he found a boat going directly to Phoenicia, he and his friends boarded it. It would be a voyage of about four hundred miles.

Tyre (vv. 3–6). This would have been Paul’s first contact with the believers in Tyre, though it is likely that his persecution of the Jerusalem believers helped to get this church started (Acts 11:19). The men had to seek out the believers, so it must not have been a large assembly, and apparently there was no synagogue in the town. They stayed a week with the saints while their ship unloaded its cargo and took on new cargo.

Paul had devoted a good part of his third missionary journey to taking up a love gift for the Jews in Judea. It was a practical way for the Gentiles to show their oneness with their Jewish brothers and sisters, and to repay them for sharing the gospel with the Gentiles (Rom. 15:25–27). There was in the church a constant threat of division, for the Jewish extremists (the Judaizers) wanted the Gentiles to live like Jews and follow the law of Moses (Acts 15:1ff.). Wherever Paul ministered, these extremists tried to hinder his work and steal his converts. Paul hoped that his visit to Jerusalem with the offering would help to strengthen the fellowship between Jews and Gentiles.

Now, Paul began to get messages from his friends that his visit to Jerusalem would be difficult and dangerous. Of course, he had already suspected this, knowing how the false teachers operated (Rom. 15:30–31), but these messages were very personal and powerful. In Tyre, the believers “kept on saying to him” (literal Greek) that he should not set foot in Jerusalem.

After a week in Tyre, Paul and his party departed. It is touching to see how the believers had come to love Paul, though they had known him only a week. The first stop was Ptolemais, where they visited the believers for a day, and then they sailed to Caesarea, their final destination.

Caesarea (vv. 7–14). The men stayed with Philip, one of the original deacons (Acts 6:1–6) who also served as an evangelist (Acts 8:5ff.). It was now some twenty years since he had come to Caesarea and made it his headquarters (Acts 8:40). Since Philip had been an associate of Stephen, and Paul had taken part in Stephen’s death, this must have been an interesting meeting.

While Paul rested in Caesarea, the prophet Agabus came to give him a second warning message from the Lord. Some fifteen years before, Paul and Agabus had worked together in a famine relief program for Judea (Acts 11:27–30), so they were not strangers. Agabus delivered his message in a dramatic way as he bound his own hands and feet with Paul’s girdle and told the apostle that he would be bound in Jerusalem.

As did the saints in Tyre, so the believers in Caesarea begged Paul not to go to Jerusalem. Surely the men chosen by the churches could deliver the love

offering to James and the Jerusalem elders, and it would not be necessary for Paul to go personally. But Paul silenced them and told them that he was prepared (“ready”) not only to be bound, but also to die if necessary for the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now we must pause to consider whether Paul was right or wrong in making that trip to Jerusalem. If it seems improper, or even blasphemous, so to examine the actions of an apostle, keep in mind that he was a human being like anyone else. His epistles were inspired, but this does not necessarily mean that everything he did was perfect. Whether he was right or wrong, we can certainly learn from his experience.

On the *con* side, these repeated messages do sound like warnings to Paul to stay out of Jerusalem. For that matter, over twenty years before, the Lord had commanded Paul to get out of Jerusalem because the Jews would not receive his testimony (Acts 22:18). Paul had already written to the Romans about the dangers in Judea (Acts 15:30–31), and he had shared these same feelings with the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:22–23), so he was fully aware of the problems involved.

On the *pro* side, the prophetic utterances can be taken as warnings (“Get ready!”) rather than as prohibitions (“You must not go!”). The statement in Acts 21:4 does not use the Greek negative *ou*, which means absolute prohibition, but *me*, used “where one *thinks* a thing is not” (*Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, by G. Abbott-Smith, 289). Agabus did not forbid Paul to go to Jerusalem; he only told him what to expect if he did go. As for the Lord’s command in Acts 22:18, it applied to that particular time and need not be interpreted as a prohibition governing the rest of Paul’s life. While it is true that Paul avoided Jerusalem, it is also true that he returned there on other occasions: with famine relief (Acts 11:27–30); to attend the Jerusalem Conference (Acts 15:1ff.); and after his second missionary journey (Acts 18:22—“going up to greet the church” refers to Jerusalem).

In view of Paul’s statement in Acts 23:1, and the Lord’s encouraging words in Acts 23:11, it is difficult to believe that the apostle deliberately disobeyed the revealed will of God. God’s prophecy to Ananias (Acts 9:15) certainly came true in the months that followed as Paul had opportunity to witness for Christ.

Instead of accusing Paul of compromise, we ought to applaud him for his courage. Why? Because in going to Jerusalem, he took his life in his hands in order to try to solve the most pressing problem in the church: the growing division between the “far right” legalistic Jews and the believing Gentiles. Ever since the Jerusalem Conference (Acts 15), trouble had been brewing, and the legalists had been following Paul and seeking to capture his converts. It was a serious situation, and Paul knew that he was a part of the answer as well as a part of the problem. But he could not solve the problem by remote control through representatives; he had to go to Jerusalem personally.

Jerusalem (vv. 15–17). A company of believers left

Caesarea and traveled with Paul to Jerusalem, probably to celebrate the feast. It was a journey of sixty-five miles that took at least three days by foot—two days if they had animals. What fellowship they must have enjoyed as they recounted what God had done in and through them! What a great encouragement it was for Paul to have these friends at his side as he faced the challenge of Jerusalem.

The city would be crowded with pilgrims, but Paul and his party planned to live with Mnason, “an early disciple,” who lived in Jerusalem and had been visiting Caesarea. Was he perhaps converted under Peter’s preaching at Pentecost? Or did his fellow Cypriot Barnabas win him to Christ (Acts 4:36)? We are not told, but we do know that Mnason was a man given to hospitality, and his ministry helped Paul at a strategic time in the apostle’s ministry.

We could wish that Dr. Luke had told us more about that first meeting with the church leaders in Jerusalem. James and the other leaders did receive them gladly, but how did they respond to the gift from the Gentiles? Nothing is said about it. Were some of them perhaps a bit suspicious? A few years later, the Roman writer Martial would say, “Gifts are like hooks!” and perhaps some of the Jerusalem elders felt that way about this gift. Certainly the legalistic wing of the church would question anything that Paul said or did.

The Jerusalem Church Misunderstood His Message (21:18–26)

Apparently that first meeting was devoted primarily to fellowship and personal matters, because the second meeting was given over to Paul’s personal report of his ministry to the Gentiles. The Jerusalem leaders had agreed years before that Paul should minister to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:7–10), and the elders rejoiced at what they heard. The phrase “declared particularly” means “reported in detail, item by item.” Paul gave a full and accurate account, not of what he had done, but of what the Lord had done through his ministry (see 1 Cor. 15:10).

You get the impression that the legalists had been working behind the scenes. No sooner had Paul finished his report than the elders brought up the rumors that were then being circulated about Paul among the Jewish Christians. It has well been said that, though a rumor doesn’t have a leg to stand on, it travels mighty fast!

What were his enemies saying about Paul? Almost the same things they said about Jesus and Stephen: he was teaching the Jews to forsake the laws and customs given by Moses and the fathers. They were not worried about what Paul taught the Gentile believers, because the relationship of the Gentiles to the law had been settled at the Jerusalem Conference (Acts 15). In fact, the elders carefully rehearsed the matter (Acts 21:25), probably for the sake of Paul’s Gentile companions. The leaders were especially concerned that Paul’s presence in the city not cause division or disruption among

Acts 21—22

the “thousands of Jews ... zealous of the law” (Acts 21:20).

But, why were so many believing Jews still clinging to the law of Moses? Had they not read Romans and Galatians? Probably not, and even if they had, old customs are difficult to change. In fact, one day God would have to send a special letter to the Jews, the epistle to the Hebrews, to explain the relationship between the old and new covenants. As Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse used to say, “The book of Hebrews was written to the Hebrews to tell them to stop being Hebrews!” It was not until the city and the temple were destroyed in AD 70 that traditional Jewish worship ceased.

Paul did warn the Gentiles not to get involved in the old Jewish religion (Gal. 4:1–11), but he nowhere told the Jews that it was wrong for them to practice their customs, *so long as they did not trust in ceremony or make their customs a test of fellowship* (Rom. 14:1–15:7). There was freedom to observe special days and diets, and believers were not to judge or condemn one another. The same grace that gave the Gentiles freedom to abstain also gave the Jews freedom to observe. All God asked was that they receive one another and not create problems or divisions.

It seems incredible that Paul’s enemies would accuse him of these things, for all the evidence was against them. Paul had Timothy circumcised before taking him along on that second missionary journey (Acts 16:1–3). Paul had taken a Jewish vow while in Corinth (Acts 18:18), and it was his custom not to offend the Jews in any way by deliberately violating their customs or the law of Moses (1 Cor. 9:19–23). However, rumors are not usually based on fact, but thrive on half-truths, prejudices, and outright lies.

The leaders suggested that Paul demonstrate publicly his reverence for the Jewish law. All they asked was that he identify himself with four men under a Nazarite vow (Num. 6), pay for their sacrifices, and be with them in the temple for their time of purification. He agreed to do it. If it had been a matter involving somebody’s personal salvation, you can be sure that Paul would never have cooperated, for that would have compromised his message of salvation by grace, through faith. But this was a matter of personal conviction on the part of Jewish believers, who were given the freedom to accept or reject the customs.

Paul reported to the priest the next day and shared in the purification ceremony, but he himself did not take any vows. He and the men had to wait seven days and then offer the prescribed sacrifices. The whole plan appeared to be safe and wise, but it did not work. Instead of bringing peace, it caused an uproar, and Paul ended up a prisoner.

The Jews Misunderstood Paul’s Ministry (21:27—22:29)

In the temple, separating the court of the Gentiles from the other courts, stood a wall beyond which no

Gentile was allowed to go (note Eph. 2:14). On the wall was this solemn inscription: “No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the sanctuary and enclosure. Anyone who is caught so doing will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.” The Romans had granted the Jewish religious leaders authority to deal with anybody who broke this law, and this included the right of execution. This law plays an important role in what happened to Paul a week after he and the four Nazarites began their purification ceremonies.

Some Jews from Asia saw Paul in the temple and jumped to the conclusion that he had polluted their sacred building by bringing Gentiles past the barricade. It is likely that these Jews came from Ephesus, because they recognized Paul’s friend Trophimus, who came from Ephesus. With their emotions running at full speed, and their brains in neutral, these men argued: (1) wherever Paul went, his Gentile friends went; (2) Paul was seen in the temple; therefore, his friends had been in the temple too! Such is the logic of prejudice.

They seized Paul and would have killed him had the Roman guards not intervened in the nick of time. (At least one thousand soldiers were stationed in the Antonia Fortress at the northwest corner of the temple area.) The temple crowd was in an uproar, completely ignorant of what was going on. The scene reminds you of the riot in Ephesus. (Compare Acts 21:30 with Acts 19:29, and Acts 21:34 with Acts 19:32.) It required the chief captain (Claudius Lysias, Acts 23:26), two centurions, and perhaps two hundred soldiers to get the mob under control and to rescue Paul. The captain actually thought Paul was an Egyptian rebel who was wanted by the Romans for inciting a revolt (Acts 21:38). This explains why he had Paul bound with two chains (see Acts 21:11).

When Claudius interrogated the people, they could not explain what caused the riot because they did not really know. The original troublemakers must have escaped during the great excitement, knowing that they could not actually substantiate their charges. Since Claudius could get no help from the people in the temple, he decided to interrogate Paul, so his soldiers carried Paul from the court of the Gentiles up the stairs into the barracks. As Paul was borne away, the crowd shouted angrily, “Away with him!” This again reminds us of our Lord’s arrest and trial (Luke 23:18, 21; John 19:15).

At this point, Paul decided it was time to speak up, and the captain was amazed that his dangerous prisoner could speak Greek. When Paul asked for permission to address the Jews, Claudius consented, hoping that perhaps he would get enough information for an official report. He never did (see Acts 23:23–30). Paul spoke to the Jews in their native Aramaic, and this helped quiet them down. He was never able to finish his speech, but he did get to explain three important aspects of his life and ministry.

His early conduct (22:3–5). Paul had been a

leading rabbi in his day (Gal. 1:13–14), so he was certainly known to some of the people in the crowd. Note how Paul piled up his Jewish credentials: he was a Jew, a native of Tarsus, brought up in Jerusalem, trained by Gamaliel, a follower of the law, a zealous persecutor of the church, and a representative of the Sanhedrin. How could his countrymen not respectfully listen to a man with that kind of record!

Instead of accusing them of participating in a riot, he commended them for being “zealous toward God.” (He had used a similar approach with the Athenians; Acts 17:22.) He admitted that he too had been guilty of having people arrested and bound, and even killed. The Christian faith was known as “the way” (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 24:14, 22), probably a reference to our Lord’s statement, “I am the way” (John 14:6).

His wonderful conversion (22:6–16). Luke recorded Paul’s conversion experience in Acts 9, and Paul would repeat the account later for Felix and Agrippa (Acts 26:1–32). It is difficult to imagine a comparable crowd today quietly listening to that kind of a testimony. However, people in that day expected miraculous things to happen and were no doubt fascinated by Paul’s story (see Acts 23:9). Also, Paul was on official Sanhedrin business when these events took place, which at least gave it some aura of authority.

In his testimony, Paul affirmed that Jesus of Nazareth was alive. Paul saw His glory and heard His voice. The people listening in the temple courts knew the official Jewish position that Jesus of Nazareth was an impostor who had been crucified and His body stolen from the tomb by His disciples, who then started the rumor that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Of course, Paul himself had believed this story when he was persecuting the church.

The men with Paul saw the bright light, but were not blinded as he was, and they heard a sound, but could not understand what was being said (Acts 9:7). Imagine Paul’s amazement to discover that Jesus was alive! Instantly, he had to change his whole way of thinking (repentance) and let the risen Lord have control.

Note Paul’s wisdom as he identified himself with Ananias, a devout Jew who kept the law and who called him “brother.” Note also that Ananias attributed Paul’s great experience to “the God of our fathers.” In quoting Ananias, Paul gave reason for his listeners to accept his salvation experience and his call to service. Paul had seen “the Just [Righteous] One,” which was a title for Messiah (see Acts 3:14; 7:52). Paul was now commissioned by God to take His message to “all men.” This would include the Gentiles, but Paul did not say so until later.

Acts 22:16 in the King James Version seems to suggest that baptism is required for the washing away of our sins, but such is not the case. In his *Expanded Translation of the New Testament*, Greek scholar Kenneth Wuest puts it, “Having arisen, be baptized and wash away your sins, having previously called

upon His Name.” We are saved by calling on the Lord by faith (Acts 2:21; 9:14), and we give evidence of that faith by being baptized. According to Acts 9:17, Paul was filled with the Spirit *before* he was baptized, and this would indicate that he was already born again. It is the “calling,” not the baptizing, that effects the cleansing.

Certainly many of Paul’s listeners knew about the new “Christian sect” that had sprung up, the baptisms that had taken place, the stoning of Stephen, and the miracles that these “people of the way” had wrought. Paul was not speaking to ignorant people, because these things had not been “done in a corner” (Acts 26:26).

His special calling (22:17–29). After his conversion, Paul had ministered in Damascus and then had gone to Arabia, perhaps to evangelize and to meditate on God’s Word (Acts 9:19–25; Gal. 1:16–17). When Paul did return to Jerusalem, the church leaders did not accept him until Barnabas interceded and got him in (Acts 9:26–29). Note how Paul again emphasized the Jewish elements in his experience, for the Jews would be impressed with a man who prayed in the temple and had a vision from God.

The Lord told Paul to leave Jerusalem quickly, because the people would not receive his witness. By obeying this command, Paul saved his life, because the Hellenistic Jews had plotted to kill him (Acts 9:29–30). But first, Paul debated with the Lord! He wanted to show the Jews that he was a new person and tell them that Jesus was the Messiah, and He was alive. If Paul won some of them to the Lord, it would perhaps help to compensate for all the damage he had done, especially in the killing of Stephen.

The Lord’s command was, “Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles” (Acts 22:21 *ΝΚΙΥ*). Paul was about to explain why he was involved with the Gentiles, but the Jews in the temple courts would not permit him to go on. No devout Jew would have anything to do with the Gentiles! Had Paul not uttered that one word, he might have later been released, *and perhaps he knew this*. However, he had to be faithful in his witness, no matter what it cost him. Paul would rather be a prisoner than give up his burden for lost souls and for missions! We could use more Christians like that today.

When Claudius saw that the riot was starting again, he took Paul into the barracks for “examination by torture.” The apostle had already mentioned that he was born in Tarsus, but he had not told them that his citizenship was Roman. It was unlawful for a Roman citizen to be scourged. We do not know how people proved their citizenship in those days; perhaps they carried the first-century equivalent of an ID card.

Claudius must have been shocked that this little Jewish troublemaker who spoke Aramaic and Greek was actually a Roman citizen. “With great sum I obtained this freedom,” Claudius boasted, indicating that he had gotten his citizenship by bribing the Roman officials,

for it could not be actually purchased. But Paul was ahead of the Roman captain, for he had been born into freedom and Roman citizenship, thanks to his father. How Paul's father obtained his freedom, we do not know. We do know that Paul knew how to make use of his Roman citizenship for the cause of Christ.

The soldiers had made two mistakes, and they were quick to undo them: they had bound Paul and had planned to scourge him. No doubt Claudius and his men were especially kind to Paul now that they knew he was a Roman citizen. God was using the great power of the empire to protect His servant and eventually get him to Rome.

Paul's entire time in Jerusalem was one filled with serious misunderstandings, but he pressed on. Perhaps at this point some of his friends were saying, "We told him so! We warned him!" For Paul and his associates, it may have looked like the end of the road, but God had other plans for them. Paul would witness again and again, and to people he could never have met had he not been a Roman prisoner. God's missionary did get to Rome—and the Romans paid the bill!

That's what happens when God's people are willing to be daring!

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Acts 22:30—23:35

PAUL THE PRISONER

I was once called to be a character witness in a child custody case involving a man who had served time in prison. This was a new experience for me, and I was completely unprepared for the first question the attorney asked me: "Reverend, do you think that a man who has been a prisoner is fit to raise a child?"

"That depends on the man," I replied bravely. "Some of the greatest men in history have been prisoners—John the Baptist, John Bunyan, and even the apostle Paul."

"Simply answer yes or no!" said the judge curtly, and that was the end of my sermon.

"Paul the prisoner" (Acts 23:18) was the name the Roman soldiers used for the apostle, a designation he himself often used (Eph. 3:1; 4:1; 2 Tim. 1:8; Philem. 1, 9). Paul was under "military custody," which meant he was bound to a Roman soldier who was responsible for him. Prisoners under "public custody" were put in the common jail, a horrible place for any human being to suffer (Acts 16:19–24).

Paul's friends could visit him and help meet his personal needs. It is sad that we don't read, "And prayer was made fervently by the church for Paul" (see Acts 12:5). There is no record that the Jerusalem church took any steps to assist him, either in Jerusalem or during his two years in Caesarea.

This is an exciting chapter, and in it we read of three confrontations that Paul experienced.

Paul and the Jewish Council (22:30—23:10)

Having discovered that Paul was a Roman citizen, the Roman captain now had two serious problems to solve. First, he needed to let the prisoner know what the official charges were against him, since that was Paul's right as a Roman citizen. Second, he also needed to have some official charges for his own records and to share with his superiors. He was sure that Paul had done something notorious, otherwise why would so many people want to do away with him? Yet nobody seemed to know what Paul's crimes were. What a plight for a Roman official to be in!

The logical thing was to let Paul's own people try him, so the captain arranged for a special meeting of the Jewish council (Sanhedrin). This group was composed of seventy (or seventy-one) of the leading Jewish teachers, with the high priest presiding. It was their responsibility to interpret and apply the sacred Jewish law to the affairs of the nation, and to try those who violated that law. The Romans gave the council permission to impose capital punishment where the offense deserved it.

The captain and his guard (Acts 23:10) brought Paul into the council chamber and stepped aside to watch the proceedings. Knowing how the Jews in the temple had treated Paul, Claudius remained there on guard lest his prisoner be taken from him and killed. No Roman soldier could afford to lose a prisoner, for that might mean the forfeiting of his own life. The loss of a prisoner against whom the charges were nebulous would be especially embarrassing for any Roman officer.

As Paul faced the council and examined it carefully, he decided to start with a personal approach. "Men and brethren" immediately identified him as a Jew and no doubt helped win the attention of his countrymen.

The Greek word translated "lived" means "to live as a citizen." It gives us the English word *politics*. Paul affirmed that he was a loyal Jew who had lived as a good Jewish citizen and had not broken the law. His conscience did not condemn him even though the Jews had condemned him.

"Conscience" is one of Paul's favorite words; he used it twice in Acts (23:1; 24:16) and twenty-one times in his letters. The word means "to know with, to know together." Conscience is the inner "judge" or "witness" that approves when we do right and disapproves when we do wrong (Rom. 2:15). Conscience does not *set* the standard; it only *applies* it. The conscience of a thief would bother him if he told the truth about his fellow crooks just as much as a Christian's conscience would convict him if he told a lie about his friends. Conscience does not make the standards; it only applies the standards of the person, whether they are good or bad, right or wrong.

Conscience may be compared to a window that lets in the light. God's law is the light, and the cleaner the window is, the more the light shines in. As the window gets dirty, the light gets dimmer, and finally the light

becomes darkness. A good conscience, or pure conscience (1 Tim. 3:9), is one that lets in God's light so that we are properly convicted if we do wrong and encouraged if we do right. A defiled conscience (1 Cor. 8:7) is one that has been sinned against so much that it is no longer dependable. If a person continues to sin against his conscience, he may end up with an evil conscience (Heb. 10:22) or a seared conscience (1 Tim. 4:2). Then he would feel convicted if he did what was *right* rather than what was wrong!

Paul had persecuted the church and had even caused innocent people to die, so how could he claim to have a good conscience? *He had lived up to the light that he had*, and that is all that a good conscience requires. After he became a Christian and the bright light of God's glory shone into his heart (2 Cor. 4:6), Paul then saw things differently and realized that he was "the chief of sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15).

Ananias the high priest (not to be confused with Annas in Acts 4:6) was so incensed at Paul's saying that he had "lived in all good conscience" that he ordered the nearest Jewish council members to slap Paul across the mouth. (Jesus had been treated in a similar way—John 18:22.) This was, of course, illegal and inhumane, for, after all, Paul had not even been proven guilty of anything. Certainly the high priest would be expected to show honesty and fairness, if not compassion and concern (Lev. 19:15; Heb. 5:2).

Paul responded with what appears to me to be justified anger, though many disagree about this. When called to account for what he had said, Paul did not apologize. Rather, he showed respect for the *office* but not for the *man*. Ananias was indeed one of the most corrupt men ever to be named high priest. He stole tithes from the other priests and did all he could to increase his authority. He was known as a brutal man who cared more for Rome's favor than for Israel's welfare.

In calling the high priest a "whited wall," Paul was simply saying that the man was a hypocrite (Matt. 23:27; see Ezek. 13:10–12). Paul spoke prophetically, because God did indeed smite this wicked man. When the Jews revolted against Rome in the year 66, Ananias had to flee for his life because of his known sympathies with Rome. The Jewish guerrillas found him hiding in an aqueduct at Herod's palace, and they killed him. It was an ignominious death for a despicable man.

Paul's reply in Acts 23:5 has been variously interpreted. Some say that Paul did not know who the high priest was. Or perhaps Paul was speaking in holy sarcasm: "Could such a man actually be the high priest?" Since this was an informal meeting of the council, perhaps the high priest was not wearing his traditional garments and sitting in his usual place. For that matter, Paul had been away from the Jewish religious scene for many years and probably did not know many people in the council.

The quoting of Exodus 22:28 would indicate that Paul may not have known that it was the high priest who ordered him to be smitten. Again, note that Paul

showed respect for the office, but not for the man who held the office. There is a difference.

Having failed in his personal approach, Paul then used a doctrinal approach. He declared that the real issue was his faith in the doctrine of the resurrection, a doctrine over which the Pharisees and Sadducees violently disagreed. Paul knew that by defending this important doctrine, he would divide the council and soon have the members disputing among themselves, which is exactly what happened. So violent was the response that Claudius and his men had to rush down to the floor of the council chamber and rescue their prisoner for the second time!

Was Paul "playing politics" when he took this approach? I don't think so. After his unfortunate clash with the high priest, Paul realized that he could never get a fair trial before the Sanhedrin. If the trial had continued, he might well have been condemned and taken out and stoned as a blasphemer. The Asian Jews, if given opportunity to testify, could well have added fuel to the fire with their false witness. No, the wisest thing to do was to end the hearing as soon as possible and trust God to use the Roman legions to protect him from the Jews.

There is a second consideration: Paul was absolutely right when he said that the real issue was the doctrine of the resurrection, not "the resurrection" in general, but the resurrection of Jesus Christ (see Acts 24:21; 26:6–8; 28:20). Had he been given the opportunity, Paul would have declared the gospel of "Jesus Christ and the resurrection" just as he had declared it before Jewish congregations in many parts of the empire. The witness in Acts centers on the resurrection (see Acts 1:22; 2:32; 3:15).

Jesus had stood trial before the Sanhedrin, and so had His apostles, and now Paul had witnessed to them. What great opportunities the council had, and yet they would not believe!

Paul and the Lord Jesus (23:11)

A few years after Paul's conversion, when Paul's life was in danger in Jerusalem, Jesus appeared to him in the temple and told him what to do (Acts 22:17–21). When Paul was discouraged in Corinth and contemplated going elsewhere, Jesus appeared to him and encouraged him to stay (Acts 18:9–10). Now, when Paul was certainly at "low ebb" in his ministry, Jesus appeared once again to encourage and instruct him. Paul would later receive encouragement during the storm (Acts 27:22–25) and during his trial in Rome (2 Tim. 4:16–17). "Lo, I am with you always" is a great assurance for every situation (Matt. 28:20).

The Lord's message to Paul was one of *courage*. "Be of good cheer!" simply means "Take courage!" Jesus often spoke these words during His earthly ministry. He spoke them to the palsied man (Matt. 9:2) and to the woman who suffered with the hemorrhage (Matt. 9:22). He shouted them to the disciples in the storm (Matt. 14:27) and repeated them in the Upper Room

Acts 23

(John 16:33). As God's people, we can always take courage in times of difficulty because the Lord is with us and will see us through.

It was also a message of *commendation*. The Lord did not rebuke Paul for going to Jerusalem. Rather, He commended him for the witness he had given, even though that witness had not been received. When you read the account of Paul's days in Jerusalem, you get the impression that everything Paul did failed miserably. His attempt to win over the legalistic Jews only helped cause a riot in the temple, and his witness before the Sanhedrin left the council in confusion. But the Lord was pleased with Paul's testimony, and that's what really counts.

Finally, it was a message of *confidence*: Paul would go to Rome! This had been Paul's desire for months (Acts 19:21; Rom. 15:22–29), but events in Jerusalem had made it look as though that desire would not be fulfilled. What encouragement this promise gave to Paul in the weeks that followed, difficult weeks when leaders lied about him, when fanatics tried to kill him, and when government officials ignored him. In all of this, the Lord was with him and fulfilling His perfect plan to get His faithful servant to Rome.

Paul and the Jewish Conspirators (23:12–35)

Paul's life had been in danger from the very beginning of his ministry, when he witnessed for Christ in Damascus (Acts 9:22–25). During his first visit to Jerusalem after his conversion, the Hellenistic Jews tried to kill him (Acts 9:29). The Jews drove him out of Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:50–51) and threatened to stone him in Iconium (Acts 14:5). Paul was stoned in Lystra (Acts 14:19–20), and in Corinth, the Jews tried to get him arrested (Acts 18:12–17). In Ephesus, the Jews had a plot to kill him (Acts 20:19), and they even planned to kill him at sea (Acts 20:3). Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians 2:14–16 take on special meaning when you consider all that Paul suffered at the hands of his own countrymen.

Perhaps it was the Asian Jews who conspired to kill Paul (Acts 21:27–29). Certain of the chief priests and elders agreed to cooperate with them and try to influence Claudius. It was a natural thing for the council to want further information from Paul, and it would have been an easy thing to ambush Paul's party and kill the apostle. If this got the captain in trouble with his superiors, the high priest could protect him. The Romans and the Jews had cooperated this way before (Matt. 28:11–15).

But the forty fasting men and the scheming religious leaders had forgotten that Paul was an apostle of Jesus Christ, and that the exalted Lord was watching from heaven. At Paul's conversion, the Lord had told him that he would suffer, but He had also promised that He would deliver him from his enemies (Acts 9:15–16; 26:16–17). Paul held on to that promise all of his life, and God was faithful.

We know nothing about Paul's sister and nephew

except what is recorded here. Philippians 3:8 suggests that Paul lost his family when he became a Christian, but we do not know if any of his relatives were converted later. (The word *kinsman* in Rom. 16:7 and 11 means "fellow Jew," as in Rom. 9:3.) Since Paul's family had long been connected with the Pharisees (Acts 23:6), his sister was no doubt in touch with the "powers that be" and able to pick up the news that was passed along. Wives do chat with each other, and a secret is something you tell one person at a time!

It is not likely that either the sister or the nephew were believers, for that certainly would have shut them out of the official religious circle in Jerusalem. But they were devout Jews and knew that the plot was evil (Ex. 23:2). It was in the providence of God that they were able to hear the news and convey it privately to Claudius. St. Augustine said, "Trust the past to the mercy of God, the present to His love, and the future to His providence."

We certainly must admire the integrity and courage of Claudius Lysias, the captain. How did he know the boy was even telling the truth? Paul had already caused Claudius so much trouble that it might be a relief to get rid of him! The Jews did not know that Claudius was aware of their plot, so he could have used his "inside knowledge" for his own profit. No Roman soldier could afford to lose a prisoner, but there were always ways to work things out.

Throughout the book of Acts, Dr. Luke speaks favorably of the Roman military officers, beginning with Cornelius in Acts 10 and ending with Julius (Acts 27:1, 3, 43). There is no record in Acts of *official* Roman persecution against the church; the opposition was instigated by the unbelieving Jews. While the empire had its share of corrupt political opportunists, for the most part, the military leaders were men of quality who respected the Roman law.

Claudius's plan was simple and wise. He knew that he had to get Paul out of Jerusalem or there would be one murderous plot after another, and one of them just might succeed. He also knew that he had better determine the charges against Paul or he might be accused of illegally holding a Roman citizen. He could solve both problems by sending Paul to Caesarea and putting him under the authority of Felix, the Roman governor.

If Paul had been a private citizen, attempting to travel from Jerusalem to Caesarea (about sixty-five miles), he would have been an easy target for the conspirators. But God arranged for 470 Roman soldiers to protect him, almost half of the men in the temple garrison! Once again in his career, Paul was smuggled out of a city under cover of night (Acts 9:25; 17:10).

The captain's official letter is most interesting. Of course, Claudius put himself and his men in the best light, which is to be expected. While it is true they prevented Paul from being killed, it was not because they knew he was a Roman. Claudius thought Paul was an Egyptian and almost had him scourged!

Acts 23:29 is another of Luke's "official statements"

from Roman officials, proving that Christians were not considered criminals. The officials in Philippi had almost apologized to Paul (Acts 16:35–40), and Gallio in Corinth had refused to try him (Acts 18:14–15). In Ephesus, the town clerk told twenty-five thousand people that the Christians were innocent of any crime (Acts 19:40), and now the Roman captain from the temple fortress was writing the same thing. Later, Festus (Acts 25:24–25) and Herod Agrippa (Acts 26:31–32) would also affirm that Paul should have been set free. Even the Jewish leaders in Rome had to confess that they had had no official news against Paul (Acts 28:21).

Leaving at nine o'clock that night, Paul and his escort went from Jerusalem to Antiparis, about thirty-seven miles away. This must have been an all-night forced march for that many people to cover that much ground in that short a time. The cavalry then continued with Paul while the two hundred soldiers returned to the barracks, since the dangerous part of the trip was now over. They traveled another twenty-seven miles to Caesarea, where Paul was officially turned over to Felix. Paul was safe from the Jewish plotters, but was he safe from Felix?

Antonius Felix was governor (procurator) of Judea. He was married to Drusilla, a Jewess who was daughter of Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:1) and who left her husband to become Felix's third wife. She was sister of Herod Agrippa II (Acts 25:13ff.). The Roman historian Tacitus said that Felix "exercised the power of a king in the spirit of a slave." Felix was called "a vulgar ruffian" and lived up to the name.

Not only was Paul protected by an escort fit for a king, but he was put, not in the common prison, but in the palace built by Herod the Great, where the governor had his official headquarters. We wonder if any of the believers in Caesarea knew about Paul's presence and sought to bring him personal aid and encouragement. They would certainly remember the visit of Agabus and realize that his dire prophecy had been fulfilled (Acts 21:10–14).

As you review the events recorded in this chapter, you cannot help but be impressed with the commitment of the apostle Paul to his calling. "None of these things move me" (Acts 20:24). If ever a man dared to follow Christ, come what may, he was that man. Paul did not look for the easy way but for the way that would most honor the Lord and win the lost. He was even willing to become a prisoner if that would further the work of the gospel.

You are also impressed with the amazing providence of God in caring for His servant. "The angel of the Lord encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them" (Ps. 34:7 NKJV). "Let us trust in God, and be very courageous for the gospel," wrote Charles Spurgeon, "and the Lord Himself will screen us from all harm."

God's people can afford to be daring, in the will of God, because they know their Savior will be

dependable and work out His perfect will. Paul was alone—but not alone! His Lord was with him and he had nothing to fear.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Acts 24

PAUL THE WITNESS

Law was the most characteristic and lasting expression of the Roman spirit," wrote historian Will Durant in *Caesar and Christ*. "The first person in Roman law was the citizen." In other words, it was the responsibility of the court to protect the citizen from the State, but too often various kinds of corruption infected the system and made justice difficult for the common man. Paul would soon discover how corrupt a Roman governor could be.

"The secret of Roman government was the principle of indirect rule," wrote Arnold Toynbee. This meant that the real burden of administration was left pretty much on the shoulders of the local authorities. Imperial Rome got involved only if there was danger from without or if the local governing units were at odds with one another.

In this chapter we see the Roman legal system at work and three men each making his contribution.

Tertullus: False Accusations (24:1–9)

In the Bible record, when people go to Jerusalem, they always go up, but when they go *from* Jerusalem, they always go down. This explains why the official Jewish party "descended" when they came to Caesarea. With Ananias the high priest were some of the Jewish elders as well as a lawyer to present the case and defend their charges. Roman law was as complex as our modern law, and it took an expert to understand it and know how to apply it successfully to his client's case.

Tertullus began with the customary *flattery*, a normal part of the judicial routine. After all, before you can win your case, you must win over your judge. Tacitus, the Roman orator and politician, called flatterers "those worst of enemies," and Solomon wrote that "a flattering mouth works ruin" (Prov. 26:28 NKJV).

The lawyer complimented Felix because the governor's many reforms had brought quietness to the land. (Question: Why did it require nearly five hundred soldiers to protect one man in transit from Jerusalem to Caesarea?) It was true that Felix had put down some revolts, but he had certainly not brought peace to the land. In fact, during the time Felix was suppressing robbers in his realm, he was also hiring robbers to murder the high priest Jonathan! So much for his reforms.

But the prosecutor's accusations against Paul were no more truthful than his flattery. He brought three charges: a personal charge ("he is a pestilent fellow"), a political charge (sedition and leading an illegal religion), and a doctrinal charge (profaning the temple).

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As for Paul being “a pest,” it all depends on one’s point of view. The Jews wanted to maintain their ancient traditions, and Paul was advocating something new. The Romans were afraid of anything that upset their delicate “peace” in the empire, and Paul’s record of causing trouble was long and consistent. As Vance Havner used to say, “Wherever Paul went, there was either a riot or a revival!”

This personal charge was based on the Jews’ conflicts with Paul in different parts of the Roman world. I have already pointed out that it was his own countrymen, not the Roman authorities, who caused Paul trouble from city to city. The Jews from Asia (Acts 21:27) would certainly have stories to tell about Lystra, Corinth, and Ephesus! This first accusation reminds us of the charges brought against the Lord Jesus at His trial (Luke 23:1–2, 5).

The political charge was much more serious, because no Roman official wanted to be guilty of permitting illegal activities that would upset the *Pax Romana* (Roman Peace). Rome had given the Jews freedom to practice their religion, but the Roman officials kept their eyes on them lest they use their privileges to weaken the empire. When Tertullus called Paul “an instigator of insurrections among all the Jews throughout the Roman Empire” (WUEST), he immediately got the attention of the governor. Of course, his statement was an exaggeration, but how many court cases have been won by somebody stretching the truth?

Tertullus knew that there was some basis for this charge because Paul had preached to the Jews that Jesus Christ was their King and Lord. To the Romans and the unbelieving Jews, this message sounded like treason against Caesar (Acts 16:20–21; 17:5–9). Furthermore, it was illegal to establish a new religion in Rome without the approval of the authorities. If Paul indeed was a “ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes,” then his enemies could easily build a case against him.

At that time, the Christian faith was still identified with the Jews, and they were permitted by the Romans to practice their religion. There had been Gentile seekers and God-fearers in the synagogues, so the presence of Gentiles in the churches did not create legal problems. Later, when the number of Gentile believers increased and more of the congregations separated from the Jewish synagogues, then Rome saw the difference between Jews and Christians and trouble began. Rome did not want a rival religion thriving in the empire and creating problems.

Tertullus’s third accusation had to be handled with care because it implicated a Roman officer who had saved a man’s life. For the most part, Roman officials like Felix did not want anything to do with cases involving Jewish law (John 18:28–31; Acts 16:35–40; 18:12–17). The fewer Jews who ended up in Roman courts, the better it would be for the empire. Tertullus had to present this third charge in a way that made the Jews look good without making the Romans look too bad, and he did a good job.

To begin with, he softened the charge. The accusation given by the Asian Jews was that Paul had polluted the temple (Acts 21:28), but Tertullus said, “He even tried to profane the temple” (Acts 24:6 ΝΚΙΥ). Why the change? For at least two good reasons. To begin with, Paul’s accusers realized that the original charge could never be substantiated if the facts were investigated. But even more, the Asian Jews who started the story seemed to have vanished from the scene! If there were no witnesses, there could be no evidence or conviction.

When you compare Luke’s account of Paul’s arrest (Acts 21:27–40) with the captain’s account (Acts 23:25–30) and the lawyer’s account (Acts 24:6–8), you can well understand why judges and juries can get confused. Tertullus gave the impression that Paul had actually been guilty of profaning the temple, that the Jews had been within their rights in seizing him, and that the captain had stepped out of line by interfering. It was Claudius, not the Jews, who was guilty of treating a Roman citizen with violence! But Felix had the official letter before him and was more likely to believe his captain than a paid Hellenistic Jewish lawyer.

Tertullus knew that the Jews had authority from Rome to arrest and prosecute those who violated Jewish law. True, the Romans thought that the Jews’ devotion to their traditions was excessive and superstitious, yet Rome wisely let them have their way. The Jews were even permitted to execute guilty offenders in capital cases, such as Paul’s “offense” of permitting Gentiles to cross the protective barricade in the temple (Acts 21:28–29). Tertullus argued that if Claudius had not interfered, the Jews would have tried Paul themselves, and this would have saved Felix and Rome a great deal of trouble and expense.

In closing his argument, Tertullus hinted that Claudius Lysias should have been there personally and had not just sent the Jewish leaders to present the case. Why was he absent? Could he not defend his case? Was he trying to “pass the buck” to others? As far as we know, during the two years Paul was detained in Caesarea, Claudius never did show up to tell his side of the story. We wonder why.

But Paul was there and Felix could get the truth out of him! “If you examine Paul,” the clever lawyer said, “you will find that what I am saying is true.” The other members of the Jewish delegation united in agreeing with their lawyer, which was no surprise to anybody.

Paul: Faithful Answers (24:10–21)

But the governor did not examine Paul. He merely nodded his head as a signal that it was now Paul’s turn to speak. Paul did not flatter Felix (see 1 Thess. 2:1–6); he merely acknowledged that the governor was a man of experience and therefore a man of knowledge. After this brief but honest introduction, Paul then proceeded to answer the charges of Tertullus (Acts 24:10–16), the Asian Jews (Acts 24: 17–19), and the Jewish council (Acts 24:20–21).

As far as the temple charge was concerned, Paul was

in the temple to worship and not to lead a disturbance. In fact, the temple records would show that Paul was registered to pay the costs for four Jews who had taken a Nazarite vow. Paul had not preached in the temple or the synagogues, nor had he preached anywhere in the city. (Years before, Paul had made an agreement with Peter and the Jerusalem elders that he would not evangelize the Jews in Jerusalem. See Gal. 2:7–10.) Nobody could prove that he was guilty of leading any kind of rebellion against the Jews or the Romans.

Furthermore, since he had been in Jerusalem only a week (the twelve days of Acts 24:11, minus the five days of Acts 24:1), there had hardly been time to organize and lead an assault on the temple! While students of Paul's life do not agree on every detail, the order of events was probably something like this:

- Day 1—Paul arrived in Jerusalem (21:17)
- Day 2—Met with James and the elders (21:18)
- Day 3—In the temple with the Nazarites (21:26)
- Day 4—In the temple
- Day 5—In the temple
- Day 6—Arrested in the temple (21:27)
- Day 7—Met with the Jewish council (23:1–10)
- Day 8—Threatened; taken to Caesarea (23:12, 23)
- Day 9—Arrived in Caesarea (23:33)
- Day 10—Waited (Felix sent for the Jewish leaders)
- Day 11—Waited for the Jewish leaders to arrive
- Day 12—Waited—they arrived—hearing scheduled
- Day 13—The hearing conducted

The four men who had taken the Nazarite vow were evidently already involved in their temple duties when James suggested that Paul pay their costs (Acts 21:24). If they had started the day before Paul arrived in Jerusalem, then the day of Paul's arrest would have been the seventh day of their obligations (Acts 21:27). The New American Standard Bible translates Acts 21:27, "And when the seven days were almost over." This implies that the events occurred on the seventh day of their schedule, Paul's sixth day in the city.

It would probably take two days for the official Roman messenger to get from Caesarea to Jerusalem, and another two days for Ananias and his associates to make it to Caesarea. They were not likely to linger; the case was too important.

Having disposed of the temple charges, Paul then dealt with the charges of sedition and heresy. Even though the high priest was a Sadducee, there were certainly Pharisees in the official Jewish delegation, so Paul appealed once again to their religious roots in the Scriptures. The fact that Paul was a Christian did not mean that he worshipped a different God from the God of his fathers. It only meant he worshipped the God of his fathers in a new and living way, for the only acceptable way to worship the Father is through Jesus Christ (John 5:23). His faith was still founded on the Old Testament Scriptures, and they bore witness to Jesus Christ.

The Sadducees accepted the five Books of Moses (the law), but not the rest of the Old Testament. They rejected the doctrine of the resurrection because they said it could not be found anywhere in what Moses wrote. (Jesus had refuted that argument, but they chose to ignore it. See Matt. 22:23–33.) By declaring his personal faith in the resurrection, Paul affirmed his orthodox convictions and identified himself with the Pharisees. Once again, the Pharisees were caught on the horns of a dilemma, for if Paul's faith was that of a heretic, then they were heretics too!

Paul and the early Christians did not see themselves as "former Jews" but as "fulfilled Jews." The Old Testament was a new book to them because they had found their Messiah. They knew that they no longer needed the rituals of the Jewish law in order to please God, but they saw in these ceremonies and ordinances a revelation of the Savior. Both as a Pharisee and a Christian, Paul had "taken pains" always to have a good conscience and to seek to please the Lord.

Having replied to the false charges of Tertullus, Paul then proceeded to answer the false accusation of the Asian Jews that he had profaned the temple (Acts 24:17–19). He had not come to Jerusalem to defile the temple but to bring needed help to the Jewish people and to present his own offerings to the Lord. (This is the only mention in Acts of the special offering.) When the Asians saw him in the temple, he was with four men who were fulfilling their Nazarite vows. How could Paul possibly be *worshipping* God and *profaning* God's house at the same time? A Jewish priest was in charge of Paul's temple activities, so, if the holy temple was defiled, the priest was responsible. Paul was only obeying the law.

Now Paul reached the heart of his defense, for it was required by Roman law that the accusers face the accused at the trial, or else the charges would be dropped. Ananias had wisely not brought any of the Hellenistic Jews with him, for he was sure that their witness would fall down under official examination. These men were good at inciting riots; they were not good at producing facts.

Paul closed his defense by replying to the members of the Jewish council (Acts 24:20–21). Instead of giving him a fair hearing, the high priest and the Sanhedrin had abused him and refused to hear him out. Ananias was no doubt grateful that Paul said nothing about his slap in the face, for it was not legal for a Roman citizen to be treated that way.

Do we detect a bit of holy sarcasm in Paul's closing statement? We might paraphrase it, "If I have done anything evil, it is probably this: I reminded the Jewish council of our great Jewish doctrine of the resurrection." Remember, the book of Acts is a record of the early church's witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ (Acts 1:22). The Sadducees had long abandoned the doctrine, and the Pharisees did not give it the practical importance it deserved. Of

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course, Paul would have related this doctrine to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the Sanhedrin did not want that.

They had accused Paul of being anti-Jewish and anti-Roman, but they could not prove their charges. If the Jewish leaders had further pursued any of these charges, their case would have collapsed. But there was enough circumstantial evidence to plant doubts in the minds of the Roman officials, and perhaps there was enough race prejudice in them to water that seed and encourage it to grow. After all, had not the Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome (Acts 18:2)? Perhaps Paul would bear watching.

Felix: Foolish Attitudes (24:22–27)

If ever a man failed both personally and officially, that man was Felix, procurator of Judea. He certainly could not plead ignorance of the facts, because he was “well acquainted with the Way” (Acts 24:22 NIV). His wife, Drusilla, was a Jewess and perhaps kept him informed of the activities among her people, and as a Roman official, he would carefully (if privately) investigate these things. He saw the light, but he preferred to live in the darkness.

Felix saw to it that Paul was comfortably cared for while at the same time safely guarded. “Liberty” in Acts 24:23 means that he was not put in the common jail or kept in close confinement. He had limited freedom in the palace, chained to a soldier. (The guards were changed every six hours, a perfect captive congregation!) Paul’s friends were permitted to minister to him (Greek: “wait on him as personal servants”), so people could come and go to meet his needs. What Paul’s ministry was during those two years in Caesarea, we do not know, but we can be sure he gave a faithful witness for the Lord.

The record of one such witness is given by Luke, and it makes Felix’s guilt even greater. Not only was Felix’s mind informed, but his heart was moved by fear, and yet he would not obey the truth. It is not enough for a person to know the facts about Christ, or to have an emotional response to a message. He or she must willingly repent of sin and trust the Savior. “But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life” (John 5:40 NKJV).

It must have been the curiosity of his wife, Drusilla, that prompted Felix to give Paul another hearing. She wanted to hear Paul, for, after all, her family had been involved with “the Way” on several occasions. Her great-grandfather tried to kill Jesus in Bethlehem (Matt. 2); her great-uncle killed John the Baptist and mocked Jesus (Luke 23:6–12); and Acts 12:1–2 tells of her father killing the apostle James.

Dr. Luke has given us only the three points of Paul’s sermon to this infamous couple: righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come. But what an outline! Paul gave them three compelling reasons why they should repent and believe on Jesus Christ.

First, they had to do something about *yesterday’s sin*

(“righteousness”). In 1973, Dr. Karl Menninger, one of the world’s leading psychiatrists, published a startling book, *Whatever Became of Sin?* He pointed out that the very word *sin* has gradually dropped out of our vocabulary, “the word, along with the notion.” We talk about mistakes, weaknesses, inherited tendencies, faults, and even errors, but we do not face up to the fact of sin.

“People are no longer sinful,” said Phyllis McGinley, noted American writer and poet. “They are only immature or underprivileged or frightened or, more particularly, sick.” But a holy God demands righteousness; that’s the bad news. Yet the good news is that this same holy God *provides* His own righteousness to those who trust Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:21–26). We can never be saved by our own righteousness of good works. We can be saved only through Christ’s righteousness made available by His finished work of salvation on the cross.

The second point in Paul’s sermon dealt with self-control: we must do something about *today’s temptations*. Man can control almost everything but himself. Here were Felix and Drusilla, prime illustrations of lack of self-control. She divorced her husband to become Felix’s third wife, and though a Jewess, she lived as though God had never given the Ten Commandments at Sinai. Felix was an unscrupulous official who did not hesitate to lie, or even to murder, in order to get rid of his enemies and promote himself. Self-control was something neither of them knew much about.

Paul’s third point was the clincher “judgment to come.” *We must do something about tomorrow’s judgment*. Perhaps Paul told Felix and Drusilla what he told the Greek philosophers: God has “appointed a day, in which he will judge the world in righteousness” by the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 17:31). Jesus Christ is either your Savior or your Judge. How do we know that Jesus Christ is the Judge? “He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17:31 NKJV). Once again, the resurrection!

“Felix trembled” (Acts 24:25), which literally means “Felix became terrified.” Roman leaders prided themselves in their ability to be stoical and restrain their emotions under all circumstances, but a conviction from God gripped Felix’s heart, and he could not hide it. Paul had diagnosed the case and offered the remedy. It was up to Felix to receive it.

What did Felix do? *He procrastinated!* “When I have a convenient time, I will call for you,” he told the apostle. “Procrastination is the thief of time,” wrote Edward Young. Perhaps he was thinking about the English proverb, “One of these days is none of these days.” Procrastination is also the thief of souls. The most “convenient season” for a lost sinner to be saved is *right now*. “Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2).

“I think there’s a special time for each person to be saved,” a man argued to whom I was witnessing. “I can’t get saved until that time comes.”

“What are the signals that your special time has come?” I asked. “Well,” he drawled, “I don’t rightly know.” “Then how will you know when you are supposed to be saved?” I asked. But the stupidity of his position never bothered him. I do hope he was saved before he died.

Consider Felix’s foolish attitudes. He had a foolish attitude toward God’s Word, thinking that he could “take it or leave it.” But God “now *commands* all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30 NKJV, italics mine). When God speaks, men and women had better listen and obey.

Felix had a foolish attitude toward his sins. He knew he was a sinner, yet he refused to break with his sins and obey the Lord. He had a foolish attitude toward God’s grace. The Lord had been long suffering toward Felix, yet the governor would not surrender. Felix was not sure of another day’s life, yet he foolishly procrastinated. “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth” (Prov. 27:1 NIV).

Instead of listening to Paul, Felix tried to “use” Paul as a political pawn, either to get money from the church or to gain favor with the Jews. The fact that Felix had further discussions with Paul is no indication that his heart was interested in spiritual things. Paul’s friends were coming and going, and perhaps some of them had access to the large offering sent by the Gentile churches. Certainly Paul gave further witness to the governor, but to no avail. When Felix was replaced, he left Paul a prisoner, but it was Felix who was really the prisoner.

The governor’s mind was enlightened (Acts 24:22), his emotions were stirred (Acts 24:25), but his will would not yield. He tried to gain the world, but, as far as we know, he lost his soul. He procrastinated himself into hell.

Dr. Clarence Macartney told a story about a meeting in hell. Satan called his four leading demons together and commanded them to think up a new lie that would trap more souls. “I have it!” one demon said. “I’ll go to earth and tell people there is no God.”

“It will never work,” said Satan. “People can look around them and see that there is a God.”

“I’ll go and tell them there is no heaven!” suggested a second demon, but Satan rejected that idea. “Everybody knows there is life after death and they want to go to heaven.”

“Let’s tell them there is no hell!” said a third demon.

“No, conscience tells them their sins will be judged,” said the devil. “We need a better lie than that.”

Quietly, the fourth demon spoke. “I think I’ve solved your problem,” he said. “I’ll go to earth and tell everybody *there is no hurry.*”

The best time to trust Jesus Christ is—*now!*

And the best time to tell others the good news of the gospel is—*now!*

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Acts 25—26

PAUL THE DEFENDER

The new governor, Porcius Festus, was a better man than his predecessor and took up his duties with the intention of doing what was right. However, he soon discovered that Jewish politics was not easy to handle, especially the two-year-old case of the apostle Paul, a prisoner with no official charges against him. Paul was a Jew whose countrymen wanted to kill him, and he was a Roman whose government did not know what to do with him.

What a dilemma! If Festus released Paul, the Jews would cause trouble, and that was something the new governor dared not risk. However, if he held Paul prisoner, Festus would have to explain why a Roman citizen was being held without definite official charges. Festus knew that it was smart for him to act quickly and take advantage of the fact that he was a newcomer on the scene. To delay would only make the problem worse, and it was bad enough already.

These two chapters present Festus in three different situations, each of which related to the apostle Paul.

Conciliation: Festus and the Jewish Leaders (25:1–12)

Knowing how important it was for him to get along well with the Jewish leaders, Festus lost no time in visiting the Holy City and paying his respects, and the leaders lost no time in bringing up Paul’s case. The new high priest was Ishmael; he had replaced Jonathan, who had been killed by Felix. Ishmael wanted to resurrect the plot of two years before and remove Paul once and for all (Acts 23:12–15).

It is not likely that the new governor knew anything about the original plot or even suspected that the Jewish religious leaders were out for blood. Since a Roman court could meet in Jerusalem as well as in Caesarea, transferring Paul would be a normal procedure. Festus would probably not demand that a large retinue go with him, so an ambush would be easy. Finally, since it was a matter involving a Jewish prisoner and the Jewish law, the logical place to meet would be Jerusalem.

“Kill Paul!” had been the cry of the unbelieving Jews ever since Paul had arrived in Jerusalem (Acts 21:27–31; 22:22; 23:10–15; 25:3); however, Festus knew nothing of this. Paul had been warned of this danger, but he had also been assured that the Lord would protect him, use his witness, and then take him safely to Rome (Acts 23:11; 26:17). The situation was growing more serious, for now it was the council itself, and not a group of outsiders, that was plotting Paul’s death. You would think that their anger would have subsided after two years, but it had not. Satan the murderer was hard at work (John 8:44).

Acts 25

Festus was wise not to cooperate with their scheme, but he did invite the leaders to accompany him to Caesarea and face Paul once again. This would give Festus opportunity to review the case and get more facts. The Jews agreed, but the hearing brought out nothing new. The Jewish delegation (this time without their lawyer) only repeated the same unfounded and unproved accusations, hoping that the governor would agree with them and put Paul to death (Acts 25:15–16).

What did Paul do? He once again affirmed that he was innocent of any crime against the Jewish law, the temple, or the Roman government. Festus saw that no progress was being made, so he asked Paul if he would be willing to be tried in Jerusalem. He did this to please the Jews and probably did not realize that he was jeopardizing the life of his famous prisoner. But a Roman judge could not move a case to another court without the consent of the accused, *and Paul refused to go!* Instead, he claimed the right of every Roman citizen to appeal to Caesar.

What led Paul to make that wise decision? For one thing, he knew that his destination was Rome, not Jerusalem, and the fastest way to get there was to appeal to Caesar. Paul also knew that the Jews had not given up their hopes of killing him, so he was wise to stay under the protection of Rome. By appealing to Caesar, Paul forced the Romans to guard him and take him to Rome. Finally, Paul realized that he could never have a fair trial in Jerusalem anyway, so why go?

It must have infuriated the Jewish leaders when Paul, by one statement, took the case completely out of their hands. He made it clear that he was willing to die *if* he could be proved guilty of a capital crime, but first they had to find him guilty. Festus met with his official council, and they agreed to send Paul to Nero for trial. No doubt the new governor was somewhat embarrassed that he had handled one of his first cases so badly that the prisoner was forced to appeal to Caesar, and to Caesar he must go!

Consultation: Festus and Agrippa (25:13–22)

But the new governor's problems were not over. He had managed not to offend the Jews, but he had not determined the legal charges against his prisoner. How could he send such a notable prisoner to the emperor and not have the man's crimes listed against him?

About that time, Festus had a state visit from Herod Agrippa II and Herod's sister, Bernice. This youthful king, the last of the Herodians to rule, was the great-grandson of the Herod who killed the Bethlehem babes, and the son of the Herod who killed the apostle James (Acts 12). The fact that his sister lived with him created a great deal of suspicion on the part of the Jewish people, for their law clearly condemned incest (Lev. 18:1–18; 20:11–21). Rome had given Herod Agrippa II legal jurisdiction over the temple in Jerusalem, so it was logical that Festus share Paul's case with him.

Festus was smart enough to understand that the

Jewish case against Paul had nothing to do with civil law. It was purely a matter of "religious questions" (Acts 18:14–15; 23:29), which the Romans were unprepared to handle, especially the doctrine of the resurrection. Acts 25:19 proves that Paul was defending much more than the resurrection in general. He was declaring and defending the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As we have noted in our studies, this is the key emphasis of the witness of the church in the book of Acts.

Festus gave the impression that he wanted to move the trial to Jerusalem because the "Jewish questions" could be settled only by Jewish people in Jewish territory (Acts 25:20). It was a pure fabrication, of course, because his real reason was to please the Jewish leaders, most of whom King Herod knew. Festus needed something definite to send to the emperor Nero, and perhaps Agrippa could supply it. ("Augustus" in Acts 25:21, 25 is a title, "the august one," and not a proper name.)

The king was an expert in Jewish matters (Acts 26:2–3) and certainly would be keenly interested in knowing more about this man who caused a riot in the temple. Perhaps Herod could assist Festus in finding out the real charges against Paul, and perhaps Festus could assist Herod in learning more about Jewish affairs in the Holy City.

Confrontation: Festus, Agrippa, and Paul (25:23—26:32)

It seems incredible that all of this pomp and ceremony was because of one little Jewish man who preached the gospel of Jesus Christ! But the Lord had promised Paul he would bear witness before "Gentiles and kings" (Acts 9:15), and that promise was being fulfilled again. Once Paul was finished with his witness, all his hearers would know how to be saved and would be without excuse.

They met in an "audience room" in the palace, and the key military men and officers of the Roman government were there. Paul's case had probably been discussed by various official people many times over the past two years, so very few of those present were ignorant of the affair.

Festus was certainly exaggerating when he said that "all the multitude of the Jews" had pressed charges against Paul, but that kind of statement would make the Jews present feel much better. Acts 25:25 gives us the second of Luke's "official statements" declaring Paul's innocence (see Acts 23:29), and there will be others before his book is completed.

In his flowery speech before Agrippa, Festus indicated that he wanted the king to examine Paul (Acts 25:26), but there is no record that he did. In fact, before the session ended, Paul became the judge, and Festus, King Agrippa, and Bernice became the defendants! Paul was indeed defending himself (Acts 26:24 $\kappa\alpha\iota\ \nu\epsilon\mu\omega$), but at the same time, he was presenting the truth of the gospel and witnessing to the difference Jesus Christ can make in a person's life. This is the longest of Paul's speeches found in Acts.

King Agrippa was in charge and told Paul that he

was free to speak. In his brief introduction, Paul sincerely gave thanks that Agrippa was hearing his case, because he knew the king was an expert in Jewish religious matters. Paul did not mention it then, but he also knew that the king believed the Old Testament prophets (Acts 26:27). Paul also hinted that his speech might be a long one and that he would appreciate the king's patience in hearing him out.

Five key statements summarize Paul's defense.

"I lived a Pharisee" (vv. 4–11). Paul's early life in Jerusalem was known to the Jews, so there was no need to go into great detail. He was a devout Pharisee (Phil. 3:5) and the son of a Pharisee (Acts 23:6), and his peers had likely realized he would accomplish great things as a rabbi (Gal. 1:13–14 NTV). It was because of his convictions about the resurrection and "the hope of Israel" that he was now a prisoner (see Acts 23:6; 24:15). Once again, Paul appealed to Jewish orthodoxy and loyalty to the Hebrew tradition.

It is worth noting that Paul mentioned "our twelve tribes" (Acts 26:7). While it is true that the ten northern tribes (Israel) were conquered by Assyria in 722 BC and assimilated to some extent, it is not true that these ten tribes were "lost" or annihilated. Jesus spoke about all twelve tribes (Matt. 19:28), and so did James (James 1:1) and the apostle John (Rev. 7:4–8; 21:12). God knows where His chosen people are, and He will fulfill the promises He has made to them.

The pronoun *you* in Acts 26:8 is plural, so Paul must have looked around at the entire audience as he spoke. The Greeks and Romans, of course, would not believe in the doctrine of the resurrection (Acts 17:31–32), nor would the Sadducees who were present (Acts 23:8). To Paul, this was a crucial doctrine, for if there is no resurrection, then Jesus Christ was not raised and Paul had no gospel to preach. (For Paul's argument about the resurrection and the gospel, see 1 Cor. 15).

Paul was not only a Pharisee, but he had also been a zealous persecutor of the church. He had punished the believers and tried to force them to deny Jesus Christ, and some of them he had helped send to their death. The phrase "gave my voice" (Acts 26:10) literally means "registered my vote." This suggests that Paul had been an official member of the Sanhedrin, but surely if that were true, seemingly he would have mentioned it in one of his speeches. The phrase probably means nothing more than he "voted against them" as a special representative of the high priest (Acts 9:2, 14).

In the early days of the church, the Jewish believers continued to meet in the synagogues, and that was where Paul found them and punished them (Matt. 10:17; 23:34). What Paul in his early years looked on as "religious zeal" (Gal. 1:13–14), in his later years he considered to be "madness" (Acts 26:11). Like a wild animal, he had "made havoc of the church" (Acts 8:3), "breathing out threatenings and slaughter" (Acts 9:1).

"I saw a light" (vv. 12–13). Not content to limit his work to Jerusalem, Paul had asked for authority to

visit the synagogues in distant cities. His zeal had driven out many of the believers and they had taken their message to Jews in other communities (Acts 8:4).

Paul considered himself an enlightened man, for, after all, he was a Jew (Rom. 9:4–5), a scholar (Acts 22:3), and a Pharisee. In reality, Paul had lived in gross spiritual darkness. He knew the law in his preconversion days, but he had not realized that the purpose of the law was to bring him to Christ (Gal. 3:24). He had been a self-righteous Pharisee who needed to discover that his good works and respectable character could never save him and take him to heaven (Phil. 3:1–11).

The light that Paul saw was supernatural, for it was the glory of God revealed from heaven (compare Acts 7:2, 55–56). It actually had blinded Paul for three days (Acts 9:8–9), but his spiritual eyes had been opened to behold the living Christ (2 Cor. 4:3–6). But seeing a light was not enough; he also had to hear the Word of God.

"I heard a voice" (vv. 14–18). Paul's companions had seen the light, but not the Lord, and they had heard a sound, but they could not understand the words. They all fell to the earth, but only Paul remained there (Acts 9:7). Jesus Christ spoke to Paul in the familiar Aramaic tongue of the Jews, called him by name, and told him it was futile for him to continue fighting the Lord. In that moment, Paul had made two surprising discoveries: Jesus of Nazareth was alive, and He was so united to His people that their suffering was His suffering! Paul was persecuting not only the church, but also his own Messiah!

How encouraging it is to know that God in His grace speaks to those who are His enemies. God had been dealing with Paul, but Paul had been resisting Him, kicking against the "goads." What were these "goads"? Certainly the testimony and death of Stephen (Acts 22:20), plus the faithful witness of the other saints who had suffered because of Paul. Perhaps Paul had also struggled with the emptiness and weakness of Judaism and his own inability to meet the demands of the law. Even though he could now say he was "blameless" in conduct and conscience (Acts 23:1; Phil. 3:6), yet within his own heart, he certainly knew how far short he came of meeting God's holy standards (Rom. 7:7–16).

The word *minister* in Acts 26:16 means "an under-rower" and refers to a lowly servant on a galley ship. Paul had been accustomed to being an honored leader, but after his conversion he became a subordinate worker, and Jesus Christ became his Master. The Lord had promised to be with Paul and protect him, and He also promised to reveal Himself to him. Paul saw the Lord on the Damascus road, and again three years later while in the temple (Acts 22:17–21). Later, the Lord appeared to him in Corinth (Acts 18:9) and in Jerusalem (Acts 23:11), and He would appear to him again.

No doubt it was a surprise to Paul after his conversion to hear that the Lord was sending him to the Gentiles. He had a great love for his own people and would gladly have lived and died to win them to Christ

Acts 26

(Rom. 9:1–3), but that was not God’s plan. Paul would always be “the apostle to the Gentiles.”

Acts 26:18 describes both the spiritual condition of the lost and the gracious provision of Christ for those who will believe. You will find parallels in Isaiah 35:5; 42:6ff.; and 61:1. The lost sinner is like a blind prisoner in a dark dungeon, and only Christ can open his eyes and give him light and freedom (2 Cor. 4:3–6). But even after he is set free, what about his court record and his guilt? The Lord forgives his sins and wipes the record clean! He then takes him into His own family as His own child and shares His inheritance with him!

What must the sinner do? He must trust Jesus Christ (“faith that is in me”—Acts 26:18). Paul had to lose his religion to gain salvation! He discovered in a moment of time that all of his righteousnesses were but filthy rags in God’s sight, and that he needed the righteousness of Christ (Isa. 64:6).

“I was not disobedient” (vv. 19–21). When Paul had asked, “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” (Acts 9:6) he meant it sincerely, and when the Lord told him, he obeyed orders immediately. He began right at Damascus and it almost cost him his life (Acts 9:20–25). Likewise, when he had witnessed to the Jews in Jerusalem, they attempted to kill him (Acts 9:29–30). In spite of repeated discouragements and dangers, Paul had remained obedient to the call and the vision that Jesus Christ gave him. Nothing moved him (Acts 20:24)!

In Acts 26:21, Paul clearly explained to Agrippa and Festus what had really happened in the temple and why it had happened. It was “on account of these things” that Paul had been attacked and almost killed: his declaration that Jesus of Nazareth was alive and was Israel’s Messiah, his ministry to the Gentiles, and his offer of God’s covenant blessings to both Jews and Gentiles *on the same terms of repentance and faith* (see Acts 20:21). The proud nationalistic Israelites would have nothing to do with a Jew who treated Gentiles like Jews!

“I continue unto this day” (vv. 22–32). It is one thing to have a great beginning, with visions and voices, but quite another thing to keep on going, especially when the going is tough. The fact that Paul continued was proof of his conversion and evidence of the faithfulness of God. He was saved by God’s grace and enabled to serve by God’s grace (1 Cor. 15:10).

The one word that best summarizes Paul’s life and ministry is “witnessing” (see Acts 26:16). He simply shared with others what he had learned and experienced as a follower of Jesus Christ. His message was not something he manufactured, for it was based solidly on the Old Testament Scriptures. We must remind ourselves that Paul and the other apostles did not have the New Testament, but used the Old Testament to lead sinners to Christ and to nurture the new believers.

Acts 26:23 is a summary of the gospel (1 Cor. 15:3–4), and each part can be backed up from the Old Testament. See, for example, Isaiah 52:13–53:12 and Psalm 16:8–11. Paul could even defend his call to the

Gentiles from Isaiah 49:6 (see also Acts 13:47). Jesus was not the first person to be raised from the dead, but He was the first one to be raised and never die again. He is “the firstfruits of them that slept” (1 Cor. 15:20).

In his message in the temple, when Paul got to the word *Gentiles*, the crowd exploded (Acts 22:21–22). That is the word Paul spoke when Festus responded and loudly accused Paul of being mad. How strange that Festus did not think Paul was mad when he was persecuting the church (Acts 26:11)! Nobody called D. L. Moody crazy when he was energetically selling shoes and making money, but when he started winning souls, people gave him the nickname “Crazy Moody.” This was not the first time Paul had been called “crazy” (2 Cor. 5:13), and he was only following in the footsteps of his Master (Mark 3:20–21; John 10:20).

Paul had been addressing King Agrippa, but the emotional interruption of the governor forced him to reply. He reminded Festus that the facts about the ministry of Jesus Christ, including His death and resurrection, were public knowledge and “not done in a corner.” The Jewish Sanhedrin was involved and so was the Roman governor, Pilate. Jesus of Nazareth had been a famous public figure for at least three years, and huge crowds had followed Him. How then could the governor plead ignorance?

Festus had not interrupted because he really thought Paul was mad. Had that been the case, he would have treated Paul gently and ordered some of his guards to escort him to a place of rest and safety. Furthermore, what official would send a raving madman to be tried before the emperor? No, the governor was only giving evidence of conviction in his heart. Paul’s words had found their mark, and Festus was trying to escape.

But Paul did not forget King Agrippa, a Jew who was an expert in these matters. When Paul asked if Agrippa believed the prophets, he was forcing him to take a stand. Certainly the king would not repudiate what every Jew believed! But Agrippa knew that if he affirmed his faith in the prophets, he must then face the question, “Is Jesus of Nazareth the one about whom the prophets wrote?”

Festus avoided decision by accusing Paul of being mad. King Agrippa eluded Paul’s question (and the dilemma it presented) by adopting a superior attitude and belittling Paul’s witness. His reply in Acts 26:28 can be stated, “Do you think that in such a short time, with such few words, you can persuade *me* to become a Christian?” Perhaps he spoke with a smirk on his face and a sneer in his voice. But he certainly spoke his own death warrant (John 3:18–21, 36).

Paul was polite in his reply. “I would to God, that whether in a short or long time, not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains” (Acts 26:29 NASB). Festus and Agrippa knew that their prisoner had a compassionate concern for them, and they could not easily escape his challenge. The best thing to do was to end the hearing,

so the king stood up, and this told everybody that the audience was over.

Both Agrippa and Festus declared that Paul was innocent of any crime deserving of death. Luke continues to accumulate these official statements so that his readers will understand that Paul was an innocent man (see Acts 16:35–40; 18:12–17; 23:29; 25:25). In fact, Paul might have been set free, had he not appealed to Caesar. Was he foolish in making his appeal? No, he was not, for it was the appeal to Caesar that finally ended the repeated accusations of the Jewish leaders. They knew they could not successfully fight against Rome.

What Agrippa and Festus did not understand was that *Paul* had been the judge and *they* had been the prisoners on trial. They had been shown the light and the way to freedom, but they had deliberately closed their eyes and returned to their sins. Perhaps they felt relieved that Paul would go to Rome and trouble them no more. The trial was over, but their sentence was still to come; and come it would.

What a wonderful thing is the opportunity to trust Jesus Christ and be saved! What a terrible thing is wasting that opportunity and perhaps never having another.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Acts 27—28

PAUL ARRIVES IN ROME

must also see Rome!” Those were Paul’s words during his ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19:21), and little did he realize all that would happen to him before he would arrive in the imperial city: illegal arrest, Roman and Jewish trials, confinement, and even shipwreck. He had long wanted to preach the gospel in Rome (Rom. 1:14–16) and then go on into Spain (Rom. 15:28), but he had not planned to travel as a prisoner. Through it all, Paul trusted God’s promise that he would witness in Rome (Acts 23:11), and the Lord saw him through.

Why would Luke devote such a long section of his book to a description of a voyage and shipwreck? Surely he could have summarized the account for us! But Luke was a skilled writer, inspired by the Spirit of God, and he knew what he was doing. For one thing, this exciting report balances the speeches that we have been reading and brings more drama into the account. Also, Luke was an accurate historian who presented the important facts about his hero and his voyage to Rome.

But perhaps the major purpose Luke had in mind was the presenting of Paul as the courageous leader who could take command of a difficult situation in a time of great crisis. Future generations would love and appreciate Paul all the more for what he did en route to Rome.

Since ancient times, writers have pictured life as a journey or a voyage. *Pilgrim’s Progress* by John Bunyan is based on this theme, and so is Homer’s *Odyssey*. We

sometimes use the “voyage” metaphor in everyday conversation: “Smooth sailing!” or “Don’t make shipwreck!” or “Sink or swim!” When a Christian dies, we might say, “She has reached the other shore.” Dr. Luke was certainly not writing an allegory, but he did use this exciting event to show how one man’s faith can make a big difference for him and others “in the storms of life.” What an encouragement to our own faith!

In Paul’s journey to Rome, we see the great apostle in four important roles.

Paul the Counselor (27:1–20)

Luke had not included himself since Acts 21:18, but now he joined Paul and Aristarchus (Acts 19:29; 20:2, 4) for the voyage to Rome. It is possible that Luke was allowed to go as Paul’s physician and Aristarchus as Paul’s personal attendant. How Paul must have thanked God for his faithful friends who gave up their liberty, and even risked their lives, that he might have the help he needed. There is no evidence that either of these men had been arrested, yet Paul referred to Aristarchus as a “fellow prisoner” (Col. 4:10). This could refer to a voluntary imprisonment on his part in order to assist Paul.

Paul was not the only prisoner that Julius and his men were taking to Rome, for there were “certain other prisoners” with them. The Greek word means “others of a different kind” and may suggest that, unlike Paul, these men were going to Rome to die and not to stand trial. What mercy that they met Paul who could tell them how to go to heaven when they died!

The centurion found a coastal ship leaving Caesarea, so they embarked and covered the eighty miles from Caesarea to Sidon in one day. In Sidon, Paul was permitted to visit his friends and put together the things needed for the long trip. Luke records the kindness of a Roman officer to the apostle Paul (Acts 24:23), as well as the encouragement of the anonymous believers in Sidon. Their names are in God’s book and they shall be rewarded one day (Phil. 4:3).

From Sidon to Myra, the voyage became difficult because of the westerly winds. At Myra, Julius, a Roman officer, found a ship going to Italy, so he abandoned the slower coastal ship and put Paul and the others on board this large grain ship from Egypt that carried 276 passengers (Acts 27:37–38). Rome depended on Egypt for much of its grain supply, and the Roman government gave special consideration to those who ran these ships.

The strong winds again hindered their progress so that “many days” were required to cover the 130 miles from Myra to Cnidus. The pilot then steered south-southwest to Crete, passing Salmone and finally struggling into Fair Havens. It had been a most difficult voyage, a portent of things to come.

The centurion now had to decide whether to winter at Fair Havens or set sail and try to reach the port of Phoenix (Phoenicia, Acts 27:12) on the southern coast of Crete, about forty miles away. His approach to

Acts 27

making this decision is a classic illustration of how *not* to determine the will of God.

Paul admonished them to stay in Fair Havens. They had already encountered adverse winds, and it was now the start of the stormy season. “The fast” refers to the day of Atonement, which fell in September/October, and every sailor knew that sailing was difficult from mid-September to mid-November, and impossible from mid-November to February.

Acts 27:10 sounds so much like a prophecy that we are prone to believe God gave Paul a premonition of danger. Paul had already experienced three shipwrecks (2 Cor. 11:25), so he was certainly speaking from experience. (The Greek word translated “perceive” in Acts 27:10 means “to perceive from past experience.”) However, the men in charge gave little value to Paul’s warning, an attitude they lived to regret.

What were the factors that governed Julius’s decision? To begin with, Fair Havens was not a comfortable place to settle down because it was too open to the winter storms. Phoenix had a more sheltered harbor. Julius also listened to the “expert advice” of the pilot and captain (“master and owner”) of the ship. They advised that the ship head for Phoenix as fast as possible. Surely they could cover forty miles safely, and already they had lost too much time (Acts 27:9). When Julius added up the votes, it was three to one that the ship set sail. After all, the majority cannot be wrong, especially when it includes the experts!

But the clinching argument came with an encouraging change in the weather, for the south wind began to blow gently, and that was just what they needed. As the ship left the harbor, perhaps Julius, the pilot, and the captain smiled tolerantly at Paul and his two friends as if to say, “See, you were wrong!”

However, it was not long before Paul was proved right, for the “soft wind” became a stormy wind. The word translated “tempestuous” gives us the English word *typhoon*. Sailors called this special wind *Euroclydon*, a hybrid Greek and Latin word that means “a northeasterner.” The crew had to let the ship drift because it was impossible to steer it, and the wind drove it twenty-three miles to the south, to the island of Cauda. Here the sailors pulled in the small boat that was towed behind larger ships, lest they lose it or it be driven against the ship and cause damage.

As the storm grew worse, the crew did all it could to keep the ship afloat. They wrapped ropes (or chains) around the hull so the boat would not come apart, and they took down some of the sails. The second day, they started throwing some of the wheat overboard, and the third day they jettisoned the furnishings. (Note Luke’s use of “we” in Acts 27:19.) Because of the storm, they could not see the sun or the stars, so it was impossible to determine their position. The situation seemed hopeless, and it all happened because one man would not listen to God’s messenger.

Sometimes we get ourselves into storms for the same reasons: impatience (Acts 27:9), accepting expert

advice that is contrary to God’s will, following the majority, and trusting “ideal” conditions (Acts 27:13). “He that believeth shall not make haste” (Isa. 28:16). It pays to listen to God’s Word.

Paul the Encourager (27:21–44)

“Paul began as a prisoner,” said Joseph Parker; “he ended as the captain.” Paul “took over” the situation when it was obvious that nobody else knew what to do. A crisis does not make a person; a crisis shows what a person is made of, and it tends to bring true leadership to the fore. Paul gently rebuked the centurion, pilot, and captain for ignoring his warning. Soon they would discover that God had spared all of them only because of Paul.

Consider Paul’s four ministries of encouragement to the passengers and crew.

He shared God’s Word with them (vv. 22–26). A messenger from the Lord had visited Paul and told him that the ship and cargo would be lost, but that all the passengers would be spared and cast on an island. Once again, the Lord gave him a special word of encouragement at the right time (Acts 18:9–10; 23:11). Today, we are not likely to have visions, but we do have the promises in His Word to encourage us (Isa. 41:10; 43:1–5; Rom. 15:4). It was for Paul’s sake that God did this, and it was Paul’s faith that God honored. What a testimony he was to the people on that storm-tossed ship!

He warned them (vv. 27–32). During the two weeks they had been at sea, the ship had been driven over five hundred miles off course and was now adrift in the Adrian Sea. (It is now called the Ionian Sea and must not be confused with the Adriatic Sea.) As the crew took soundings, they discovered that the water was getting shallower (from 120 feet to 90 feet), indicating that land was near. From the roar of the waves, it appeared that the ship was headed for the rocks.

In order to keep the prow headed toward shore, some of the crew dropped four anchors from the stern. But others of the crew tried to escape from the ship in the dinghy that had been brought on board (Acts 27:16). This was not only an act of selfishness and revolt on their part, but it was also an act of unbelief. Paul had told everybody God’s promise that He would keep all those safe who sailed with him on the voyage (Acts 27:24). For the men to abandon ship was to take their lives in their own hands and threaten the lives of others. Whether the soldiers acted wisely in cutting the boat free, it is difficult to determine, but in an emergency, you take emergency measures.

He set a good example before them (vv. 33–38). What a difference it makes when a person has faith in God! Instead of vainly wishing for a change (Acts 27:29) or selfishly trying to escape (Acts 27:30), Paul got ready for the demands that would come at daybreak. It is not difficult to understand why everyone had fasted those two weeks, but now it was time to eat. Caring for one’s health is an important part of the Christian life, and even an apostle must not abuse his body.

Paul took the bread and openly prayed and gave thanks to God. (This is a good example for us to follow when we are eating in public places.) His example encouraged the others to join him, and before long, everybody felt better. There are times when one dedicated believer can change the whole atmosphere of a situation simply by trusting God and making that faith visible.

He rescued them (vv. 39–44). When it was day, the pilot saw where they were and made every effort to get the ship to shore. But it was all futile; the ship was grounded and the waves began to beat the stern to pieces. The only thing the passengers could do was jump into the water and make for land.

The soldiers, of course, were concerned about their prisoners, for if a prisoner escaped, the soldier was held accountable and could be killed. Once again, it was Paul whose presence saved their lives. Just as the Lord promised, all of them made it safely to shore, and not one was lost. I have a feeling that Paul had been sharing the gospel with his fellow passengers and that some of them had trusted in the Lord as a result of this experience. Luke does not give us the details, but would you expect Paul to do otherwise?

Before leaving this exciting section of Acts, we should note some practical lessons that it teaches us. First of all, storms often come when we disobey the will of God. (Jonah is a good example of this truth.) However, it was not Paul who was at fault, but the centurion in charge of the ship. We sometimes suffer because of the unbelief of others.

Second, storms have a way of revealing character. Some of the sailors selfishly tried to escape; others could only hope for the best; but Paul trusted God and obeyed His will.

Third, even the worst storms cannot hide the face of God or hinder the purposes of God. Paul received the word of assurance that they needed, and God overruled so that His servant arrived safely in Rome.

Finally, storms can give us opportunities to serve others and bear witness to Jesus Christ. Paul was the most valuable man on that ship! He knew how to pray, he had faith in God, and he was in touch with the Almighty.

Paul the Helper (28:1–10)

God had brought them to the Isle of Malta (which means “refuge”), where the native people welcomed all 276 of them and did their best to make them comfortable. To the Greeks, anybody who did not speak Greek was a “barbarian.” These people proved to be kind and sympathetic. The storm abated, but the weather was cold, so the natives built a fire.

After all he had done for the passengers, Paul could well have requested a throne and insisted that everybody serve him! Instead, he did his share of the work and helped gather fuel for the fire. No task is too small for the servant of God who has “the mind of Christ” (Phil. 2:1–13).

One rainy day, a man accompanied by two women arrived at Northfield, hoping to enroll his daughter in

D. L. Moody’s school for young women. The three needed help in getting their luggage from the railway depot to the hotel, so the visitor “drafted” a rather common-looking man with a horse and wagon, assuming he was a local cabby. The “cabby” said he was waiting for students, but the visitor ordered him to take them to the hotel. The visitor was shocked when the “cabby” did not charge him, and was even more shocked to discover that the “cabby” was D. L. Moody himself! Moody was a leader because he knew how to be a servant.

The episode of the viper reminds us of Paul’s experience in Lystra (Acts 14:6–18). First, the people thought that Justice, one of their goddesses, had caught up with this notorious prisoner who was supposed to drown in the sea but had somehow escaped. (If only they knew!) When Paul failed to swell up and die, they decided that he must be a god himself! Such are the reasonings of people who judge by appearances.

Was the viper a weapon of Satan to get Paul out of the way? The storm did not drown him, but a hidden trap might catch him. As Christians, we must constantly be alert, for either the serpent or the lion will attack us (2 Cor. 11:3; 1 Peter 5:8). We should also keep in mind that we are being watched, and we must use every opportunity to magnify Christ.

Paul and the party remained on Malta for three months, and, thanks to Paul, they were treated graciously and sent on their way with generous gifts. Since they had lost everything in the shipwreck, the passengers were grateful to have their needs supplied. Luke says nothing about evangelism on the island, but we must believe that Paul shared the gospel with anybody who would listen. His miraculous deliverance from the sea and from the viper, and his power to heal, would certainly arouse the interest of the people, and Paul would want to give the glory to the Lord (Matt. 5:16).

Paul the Preacher (28:11–31)

Whether all 276 people boarded the Alexandrian ship, or just Julius and his guard and prisoners, we do not know; nor do we know why Luke took such care to identify the ship. In Greek mythology, “Castor and Pollux” were the names of the twin sons of Zeus and were revered as the protectors of men on the sea. Many Roman ships bore their image as a plea for safety. It was eighty miles to Syracuse, another seventy to Rhegium, and about 180 to Puteoli, the port of Naples. This time the “south wind” was exactly what they needed in order to make the voyage quickly and safely.

In Puteoli, Paul and his friends, along with Julius and the other prisoners and guards, were urged by the believers to stay and rest for a week, and Julius gave his consent. The centurion knew that Paul had saved their lives, and perhaps he was even getting interested in what these Christians had to offer.

Word had gotten to Rome that Paul was coming; how, we do not know. Perhaps Aristarchus did not go with Paul and Luke on the grain ship, but made his

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way instead overland to Rome where he met Paul's friends. (At least twenty-six are named in Rom. 16.) Or, perhaps a delegation from Caesarea headed for Rome as soon as Paul appealed to Caesar.

Julius and his party took the famous Appian Way and traveled 125 miles from Puteoli to Rome. The first group of Christians met Paul at the Forum of Appius, about forty-three miles from Rome, and the second group met him at the Three Taverns, ten miles nearer to the city. (Some saints will go farther than others!) Paul was greatly encouraged when he met them, as well he might be. Now he could fellowship with the saints and they could be a blessing to one another.

Paul's greatest concern was his witness to the Jews in Rome. They had received no special word about Paul, but they did know that the "Christian sect" was being spoken against in many places (Acts 28:21–22). When you read Paul's letter to the Romans, you get the impression that the Jews in Rome had misunderstood some of his teachings (Rom. 3:8; 14:1ff.). The apostle made it clear that his appeal to Caesar must not be interpreted as an indictment against his nation. Actually, he was a prisoner *on behalf* of his nation and "the hope of Israel."

On the day appointed, Paul spent "from morning till evening" explaining the Scriptures and revealing Christ in the law and the prophets. He had "dialogued" this way with the Jews in one synagogue after another, and now he was sharing the Word with the leaders of many synagogues in Rome.

The result? Some were persuaded and some were not. When the Jewish leaders left Paul's house, they were still arguing among themselves! But Paul had faithfully given his witness to the Jews in Rome, and now he would turn to the Gentiles.

Paul quoted the words of Isaiah to these men (Isa. 6:9–10), words that described their tragic spiritual condition. Jesus had used this passage in connection with His parables of the kingdom (Matt. 13:13–15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10). The apostle John in his gospel applied them to Israel (John 12:39–40), and Paul quoted them in his Roman epistle (Rom. 11:7–8). It is one thing to *listen* and quite something else to *hear*, and there is a great difference between *seeing* and *perceiving*. If anybody should have possessed spiritual understanding, it was these Jewish leaders, but their hearts were dull and hard. Too often those who enjoy the most spiritual privileges are not ready when they must make spiritual decisions.

But their unbelief did not put an end to Paul's ministry of the gospel! He announced that the gospel some of the Jews had rejected would be proclaimed to the Gentiles, "and they will hear it!" This is one of the major themes of Acts, how the gospel moved from the Jews to the Gentiles and from Jerusalem to Rome. Without the book of Acts, we would turn in the New Testament from the gospel of John to Romans and ask, "How did the gospel ever get from the Jews in Jerusalem to the Gentiles in Rome?"

Paul kept "open house" and received anybody who wanted to discuss the things of the kingdom of God. He was chained to a guard who was relieved every six hours, but who was forced to listen as Paul preached and taught and prayed. No wonder some of them were saved (Phil. 1:12–14; 4:22)!

During these two years in Rome, Paul wrote Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon. He expected to be released (Phil. 1:23–27; 2:24; Philem. 22), and most students agree that he was. During this time, he had Timothy with him (Phil. 1:1; 2:19; Col. 1:1), as well as John Mark, Luke, Aristarchus, Epaphras, Justus, and Demas (Col. 4:10–14; Philem. 24). He also met Philemon's runaway slave Onesimus and led him to faith in Christ (Philem. 10–21). Epaphroditus brought a gift to him from the Philippian church and almost died ministering to Paul (Phil. 2:25–30; 4:18). Tychicus was Paul's "mailman" who delivered Ephesians (Eph. 6:21), Colossians, and Philemon (Col. 4:7–9).

Dr. Luke ended his book before Paul's case had been heard, so he could not give us the results of the trial. We have every reason to believe that Paul was indeed released and that he resumed his ministry, probably traveling as far as Spain (Rom. 15:24, 28). During this period (AD 63–66/67), he wrote letters to Timothy and Titus. He left Titus in Crete (Titus 1:5), Trophimus sick in Miletus (2 Tim. 4:20), and Timothy in Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3). He planned to meet some of his helpers at Nicopolis (Titus 3:12–13) after he had visited some of the churches he had established. Wherever he went, he sought to bring Jews and Gentiles to faith in Jesus Christ.

He was arrested again, probably about the year 67, and this time his situation was changed drastically. He did not live in a house, but was chained in a prison and treated like a criminal (2 Tim. 1:16; 2:9). Winter was coming, and he asked Timothy to bring him his cloak (2 Tim. 4:13). But the saddest thing about this second imprisonment was his being forsaken by the believers in Rome (2 Tim. 4:16–17). The great apostle to the Gentiles was abandoned by the very people he came to assist.

Even Demas forsook him, and only Luke was with him (2 Tim. 4:10–11). The family of Onesiphorus ministered to his needs (2 Tim. 1:16–18), but he longed for Timothy and Mark to come to be at his side (2 Tim. 1:4; 4:9, 21). Paul knew that the end was coming (2 Tim. 4:6–8). Tradition tells us that he was beheaded at Rome in AD 67/68.

Luke did not write his book simply to record ancient history. He wrote to encourage the church in every age to be faithful to the Lord and carry the gospel to the ends of the earth. "What was begun with so much heroism ought to be continued with ardent zeal," said Charles Spurgeon, "since we are assured that the same Lord is mighty still to carry on His heavenly designs."

"Lo, I am with you always!"