



Acts - Book Three

CHAPTERS 13-28

The Church Scattered

"to the end of the EARTH"

WHAT HAPPENED AND WHY!

John Allan Lavender

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The Church Extended - Part 1

Acts 13:1-12

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Key Truth: Those whom God sends he sends with power.

Attribute: God is commissioner.

Slowly, but surely, the Great Commission Jesus gave to his disciples was being fulfilled: “You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth”(Acts 1:11).

The first stage – Acts 1-7 – dealt with The Church Established. Most of the action occurred “in Jerusalem.” The primary figure was Peter.

The second stage – Acts 8-12 – dealt with The Church Scattered throughout “Judea and Samaria.” There were several key personalities in that section: Stephen, Phillip, Barnabas and a number of unnamed people whom God chose to use in the scattering process.

The third stage – chapters 13-28 – deals with The Church Extended “to the end of the earth.” The key person is Paul, and this third stage began in a curiously simple, matter-of-fact way.

“Now, in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers (we’ll skip the names for a moment, moving down to verse two) while they (that is, the church) were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. So being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus (Acts 13:1-4).”

No one standing on the harbor that afternoon in 47 A.D. could possibly have comprehended the significance of a small cluster of Christians waving farewell to Barnabas and Saul as the ship on which they were sailing moved out of the harbor of Seleucia. But next to the first Easter morning and the day of Pentecost, rarely has history seen an event so consequential as that which is so simply and succinctly recorded in these four verses. In a sense, the church grew up. It moved from adolescence to young adulthood.

Why Antioch?

Inevitably we are led to wonder why it all began in Antioch. Why not Jerusalem where so many activities affecting the church had occurred early on? Well, the Jerusalem church was hampered by certain limitations. First, it was located in the heartland of Judaism and was constantly subjected to oppression and opposition. Second, the Jerusalem church had a vision problem. It had difficulty seeing the larger picture of what God was doing in the world. Third, had the church remained centered in Jerusalem it may have been thought to be a sect, an annoying, but inconsequential part of Judaism. The church in Antioch shared none of these limitations. In addition, it qualified as the kind of church God uses.

The Kind of Church God Uses Acts 13:1-3

Acts 2:42,43 outlines the kind of church God uses. “And (the church) devoted themselves to (1) the apostles’ teaching, (2) and fellowship, (3) to the breaking of bread and the prayers, and (4) (awe)came upon every soul and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles.” The church God uses is a church based on instruction, fellowship, worship and expression. The church in Antioch met those qualifications. In addition, it was opened to all the ministry gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Instruction Acts 13:1a

First, they were a teaching church. Their ministry included sound instruction. “Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers” (Acts 13:1). *Prophets* in the New Testament era where itinerant preachers whose primary task was *proclaiming* the Truth. Theirs was a ministry of exhortation and consolation. It was the prophets’ job to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.

Teachers had the task of *explaining* the Truth. Theirs was a ministry of instruction and application as they took the still young body of Christ into the deeper meaning of the Truth and helped people, like John (also called Mark), to get involved in ministry. Antioch was a well-taught church.

Fellowship Acts 13:1b

Second, they met the fellowship criterion. And, my, what beautiful, God-honoring, open-hearted

fellowship it was. The church God uses is open to minister to *all* of his children regardless of their race, color, or social standing. Look at the people listed in verse 1 as a sample of the folks who were members of the Antioch church.

There was Barnabas, “the son of encouragement.” He was a man from Cyprus who gave until it hurt, and then kept on giving until it stopped hurting.

There was Simeon, a black man, from Nigeria. Many scholars believe he was Simon the Cyrene, the man who bore the cross of Jesus when our Lord fell on the way to Calvary. How beautiful that the man who bore Christ’s cross also had the burden for world missions.

There was Lucius of Cyrene. He also came from Africa, but had a Gentile or Latin name.

Another leader in the Antioch church was Manaen, a member of the court of Herod the Tetrarch. The King James Version says he had been “brought up with Herod.” He was a contemporary of Herod. Maybe a playmate, but certainly a close associate.

And then, of course, there was Saul. Now look at the mix here. People of all races, backgrounds, languages, heritage, economic, political and social standing shared fellowship together as part of the family of God. The church in Antioch understood *that* was to be characteristic of the church God uses and put it into practice.

Worship Acts 13:2a

Third, they were a worshipping church. “While they were *worshipping* the Lord” (Acts 13:2a). “They” does not refer to the prophets and teachers. “They” refers to the *people*. And “they” were *not* worshipping their leaders! “They were worshipping the *Lord*.” Worship means telling God what we like about him. Worship is expressing to God our appreciation of him. And these people were caught up in blessing the Lord. In not forgetting his benefits (Psalm 103:2). They were rejoicing in all he had been, all he was, and all he had promised to be to them. They were a worshipping church.

Expression Acts 13:2b

Fourth, they were a church involved in healthy expressions of their faith.

They were a fasting church. “While they were worshiping the Lord *and fasting . . .*”(Acts 13:2b). This suggests there is a link between fasting and worship. These folks were so involved in just *enjoying* the Lord their physical needs became unimportant for a little while. At that point in time, at least, they would rather pray than eat! They would rather enjoy the Lord in the Spirit, than feed their flesh.

They were a seeking church. “The *Holy Spirit* said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul *for the work to which I have called them*’” (Acts 13:2c). They were open to being guided by the Spirit, and they had a sense of vision. They recognized there was a world out there that needed the Good News.

Their vision was not limited to the needs at hand. Needs which were immediate and obvious. A church can be very much alive to the needs of its community, and our church is. We are known throughout the Golden Empire as a church which is aware of the needs of this community and has creative ministries to meet those needs. But a church which only sees the needs at hand falls short of being the kind of church God uses.

There were many reasons why some in the Antioch church could say, “Look, there are 500,000 pagans right here in Antioch. Why do we need to send missionaries to Cyprus, and Europe, and the rest of the world? We have a huge task right here. Let’s take care of it *first*.” But praise God they didn’t. They were seeking God’s will for their church, their vision encompassed the earth, and when the Holy Spirit spoke, they obeyed.

They were a praying church. “Then, after fasting *and praying . . .*” (Acts 13:3a). It’s obvious from what occurred that they understood praying is not just *talking* to God, it is also *listening* to God. It is a two-way street. A means of vital, life- enriching communication.

They were a participating church. “Then, after fasting and praying, *they laid hands on them*” (verse 3b). Not to confer power or position. Not to make them apostles or ordained ministers.

Barnabas and Saul had already been commissioned by the Lord, himself, who had set them apart for ministry. Rather, the Antioch church, by laying hands on these two whom God had picked out, were a people who not only blessed them, but became *involved* in their ministry. By their actions they were saying, “Barnabas and Saul, you go, we’ll stay. You work, we’ll pray. You witness, we’ll pay. We want to *be* in ministry *with* you. We, too, want to touch the world for Christ.” They were, and they did!

They were a giving church. “*They sent them off*” (Acts 13:3c). That’s an unfortunate translation of the text. The word translated “sent off” is used 13 additional times in the book of Acts and in each and every case it is translated: “let go.” Luke is saying the church blessed them and “*let go*” of them. Why is that an important distinction? Well, whom did the Spirit call out? Their *pastor* and his *key assistant*! Barnabas and Saul were two of the most qualified men among them! The church was asked to give their *best* to the Lord’s service and they did so. God honored them for that, and “in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians” (Acts 11:26). They were a giving church.

A missionary tells the story of a woman in Africa who gave birth to twins. One was a beautiful, healthy baby. The other was badly deformed. One day the missionary met this young mother on the path which led to a nearby river filled with crocodiles. “Where are you going?” the missionary asked. “To give an offering to my god.” Crocodile worship was part of the religion of that village and she was not carrying the deformed baby, but the healthy one. Aghast, the missionary said, “Don’t do that.” But the woman continued on her way toward the river. “If you must sacrifice something,” argued the missionary, “why this beautiful, healthy baby? Why not the deformed child who will never develop normally?” With a scathing look on her face, the heathen woman turned on the Christian missionary and said, “I don’t know what your God demands, but *my* god demands the best!” Well, what *does* our God demand? If not the best, what? When the Lord called Barnabas and Saul to witness “to the end of the earth,” he asked the Antioch church to give its *best*. To their credit, they did!

The church God uses is open to just plain *praising* him. Just plain enjoying intimacy *with* him by *loving* him with all their heart (which fulfills the first great commandment), and just plain ministering *to* him by loving their neighbor as themselves (which fulfills the second great

commandment). *That's* the kind of church God uses, and *that's* the kind of church I want *our* church to be.

Are we that kind of church? Are we open to the ministry of *all* God's children? Are we open to just plain praising and enjoying our dear Lord? Are we open to ministries which stretch our influence "to the end of the earth"? Do *you* want us to be that kind of church? Please say "yes." Wonderful! Then we *will* be, because the kind of church God uses is a church where life is, and life begets life.

One Sunday morning a pastor friend of mine was giving the children's sermon. In one hand he held up a beautiful, symmetrical, multi-colored agate. In the other a dull, gray, asymmetrical little acorn. "Which would you pick if given the chance?" he asked the children. Most of the boys chose the agate. It was the apple of any boy's eye. "Well," my friend continued, "plant them both in good ground with adequate water and sunshine and the agate will just lie there. But the acorn will sprout and grow and someday become a mighty oak tree. Why? Because it has life in it." And a church may be beautiful. It may be awe-inspiring. It may be well equipped. And my expectation is that we will be all of these things. But there better be *life* in us, the life of the dear Lord Jesus who *is* "the way, the truth *and* the *life*," or we will deteriorate, die and someone will say a benediction over us.

A Spirit-directed Ministry Acts 13:4-8

Ever so quickly, look at the challenging, exciting, Spirit-directed ministry God gives the kind of church he can use. "So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia; and from there they sailed to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogue of the Jews. And they had John (Mark) to assist them. When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet, named Bar-Jesus (meaning son of salvation). He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God" (Acts 13:4-8).

When you read Sergius Paulus was "a man of intelligence," you can't help but wonder what in the world he was doing with a magician in his court. Well, he was typical of a lot of people you

and I know. Someone overheard a conversation between two women at a luncheon. One of them said, “I didn’t know you believed in astrology.” To which the other woman replied, “Oh, sure! I believe in everything a little bit.” A lot of people are like that. They believe in everything a little bit. Maybe Sergius Paulus was that kind of man, and when he heard about this new thing called the Gospel, he wanted to hear about that, too. We’ll come back to him in a moment.

Notice, please, they were “sent out *by the Holy Spirit*” (Acts 13:4). The church “let go” of them. *That* was the church’s part. It *released* them. The Holy Spirit *selected* them and “*sent* (them).” *That* was the Spirit’s part. And that’s how it always is. It is a mutual ministry, you see. It takes both the Spirit and the Spirit’s people.

“They sailed to *Cyprus*” (Acts 13:4). Think about the commonsense nature of that. When God involves us in ministry he usually begins by leading us in ways which are comfortable, natural, and compatible with our preparation and potential. In this case the Spirit sent them to Cyprus, where Barnabas grew up. He was going home where his comfort level would be high. In addition to that, there were Cypriot believers who had heard the Gospel elsewhere and had returned to Cyprus. This meant Barnabas and Saul could be sure they would have some Christian brothers and sisters to greet them when they landed at Salamis.

“They proclaimed the word of God in the synagogue of the Jews” (Acts 13: 5). The local synagogue was a natural place to begin their ministry because synagogue worship involved a “Q” and “A” session with a rabbi, if one were present. He would speak, the people would question him, and he would answer. This gave Saul a great opportunity to present the Gospel “to the Jews first” But he could also witness to “the God-fearers,” the non-Jews who had been drawn to the concept of one God taught by Judaism. They, too, would understand the Messianic hope. So the synagogue was a natural place for Barnabas and Saul to begin.

But, and notice, *still* “being sent by the Holy Spirit,” (verse 4) they traversed the entire island of Cyprus from Salamis on the East, to Paphos on the West. When they got to Paphos they walked into a lion’s den! This was where the great temple of Aphrodite was located. It was a hotbed of heathenism. An atmosphere antagonistic to everything holy and righteous and pure. A

stronghold of Satan. Having gotten their feet wet in the more comfortable surroundings of Salamis, the Spirit of God *then* directed them into deeper water, and in Paphos they had a head-on confrontation with evil in the person of “Elymas (a) magician (who) withstood them” (Acts 13:8).

Elymas should have known better. He was a Jew. He had been raised on the Old Testament teachings against the occult. His Hebrew heritage included the Messianic hope, and I’m certain he had heard the electrifying news of the resurrection of Jesus. Maybe that’s why he called himself Bar-Jesus (son of Jesus). He presented himself as a prophet, which he was not, and he should have known better. Instead, he became an active, argumentative, antagonist who attempted to thwart this Spirit-directed ministry.

A Spirit-protected Ministry Acts 13:9 -10

But, not only does God give a church with the qualities he can use a *Spirit-directed* ministry, it is also a *Spirit-protected* ministry. Our key truth says: *Those whom God sends, he sends with power.*

“Saul, who is also called Paul, *filled with the Holy Spirit*, looked intently at him and said, ‘You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?’” (Acts 13: 9, 10).

It was at this point that Saul “became” Paul. How did that happen? Well, born a Jew in a Gentile environment he had a Jewish name, Saul, and a Gentile name, Paul. When he was ministering to Jews he used his Jewish name. When he was ministering to Gentiles, which he did more and more, he used his Gentile name, and over time, I think it just stuck.

At any rate, he was a beautifully equipped man. More than that, he was a Spirit-filled man. That’s key to understanding how he dealt with Elymas. *Paul* did not indict this man. Paul was not interested in protecting himself and his reputation. *The Holy Spirit* indicted this man *through* Paul, for the sake of *Sergius Paulus*! The salvation of a key man was at stake. A man whom God could use. And the Holy Spirit would not allow Elymas to stand in the way by making “crooked the straight paths of the Lord” (Acts 13:10).

It's a dangerous thing to stand in the way of another person's soul. Make sure Satan doesn't use you, even inadvertently, by what you do or don't do to impede the ministry of the Holy Spirit to people in need of salvation.

Also please notice that "Saul who is also called Paul *looked* at Elymas" (Acts 13:9). Paul didn't talk behind his back. He looked the man in the eye and said in effect, you are *not* a son of Jesus, you are the son of the devil! You are *not* a prophet, you are the enemy of everything righteous. You are full of deceit and villainy. You are completely given over to that which is demonic. Stop making crooked, complex and confusing the simple plan of salvation!

How to do Spiritual Warfare

Paul gives us an example of effective spiritual warfare. I can't spend a lot of time on this today, but let me give you seven New Testament references which will help you do as Paul did: fight effective spiritual warfare.

Luke 10:19 "Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you." As a Christian, you have Christ's authority.

2 Corinthians 10:3-5 "For though we live in the world, we are not carrying on a worldly war, for the weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have Divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ." You and I do effective spiritual warfare by letting the mind of Christ think *through* us, and by exercising the Divine power available *to* us.

Ephesians 2:4-6 "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." You can fight Satan effectively because you do so from "the heavenly places." Or to use military terminology, from "the high ground."

1 John 4:4 "Greater is he who is in you than he that is in the world." We have much, much

more going for us than the enemy does.

Ephesians 5:18 “Be filled with (or controlled by) the Holy Spirit.” not your flesh.

Ephesians 6:10-13 “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of the present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.” Then follows a list of the armament with which we fight.

Ephesians 6:14-17 “Stand therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace; above all taking the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”

That’s how to fight effective spiritual warfare. *That’s* how Paul did it. He exercised his authority in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, and the enemy was defeated. “And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you shall be blind and unable to see the sun for a time. Immediately mist and darkness fell upon (Elymas) and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand” (Acts 15:11).

Elymas: A Type of Israel

Elymas represents more than meets the eye. He is not only representative of himself as an individual, he is also representative of Israel as a nation. Israel had twice been offered her King and his kingdom. The first time through Jesus “meek and mild” *before* his resurrection. The second time through Jesus “mighty to save” *after* his resurrection. Israel rejected her King and his kingdom both times.

I believe the reason the Holy Spirit saw fit to have Luke include this little incident, out of the many that might have been recorded from this missionary journey, is because Elymas is a type of

Israel. Having rejected their Messiah, Israel was made spiritually blind *for a time* – “the time of the Gentiles” – during which Israel is suffering *nationally* from spiritual blindness.

Elymas also represents himself individually. He *personally* rejected the Messiah. He *personally* turned away from *his* King. He *personally* spurned the savior. His *physical* blindness reflected his *spiritual* blindness. He reaped as he had sown.

A Spirit-blessed Ministry Acts 13:12

Finally, the ministry God gives the church he can use is not only Spirit-*directed* and Spirit-*protected*, it is a Spirit-*blessed* ministry. “Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord” (Acts 13:12).

Notice, Sergius Paulus wasn’t astonished at the *miracle* of sudden blindness. He was astonished “*at the teaching of the Lord.*” And, friend, it *is* awesome. Think of it! God is *love*. The object of God’s love is *you*. God, who is love, was in Christ reconciling you to *himself* so the Holy Spirit can be *in* you to guide and bless you. *Now! Today!* When you *need* his guidance and blessing. *That’s* mind-boggling! It really is *astonishing!*

Sergius Paulus was “*astonished* at the teaching of the Lord” and “*he believed.*” Paul and Barnabas had their first convert!

The Church Extended - Part 2

Acts 13:13-52

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Key Truth: To the proclamation of the gospel there is always a response.

Attribute: God is truth.

During their brief stay on the island of Cyprus, Barnabas and Paul had their first convert. His name was Sergius Paulus, and he was a key figure whom God would later use in a mighty way. Our two intrepid missionaries then left that lovely little island and sailed some 140 miles across the Mediterranean Sea to the coast of Asia Minor.

“Now Paul and his company set sail from Paphos, and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John left them and returned to Jerusalem; but they passed on from Perga and came to Antioch of Pisid’ia. And on the sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. After the reading of the law and the prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them, saying, ‘Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it’” (Acts 13:13-15).

Acts 13:13a Paul and his Company

Several things caught my attention in those few verses. Among them, the lovely little phrase in verse 13, “Paul and his company.” There is an interesting exchange in the order of their names. Previously it had been Barnabas and Paul. From now on it will be Paul and Barnabas. But the thing that really caught my attention and is a great encouragement to me are the three words, “and his company.” The “company” included Barnabas, of course, and John Mark. I believe it included others.

I’m thinking right now of those whom the writer of Hebrews describes as “a great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1). The saints of all the ages. Those who now have a glimpse of what God has been doing, is doing, and will be doing in history. First, through the house of Israel. Later, through his Son. And now, by extending the ministry of the body of Christ “to the ends of the earth.” I believe that “great cloud of witnesses” were part of “his company.” I believe they were intensely involved in praying for the ministry Paul was carrying on. I also believe the Lord Jesus himself was present in the person of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had said, “Go, and I will be

doing with you.” How did he put it? Oh, yes! “Go make disciples . . . and I will be with you always” (Matthew 28:20).

This little phrase, “and his company” also means you and I are not alone in the ministry to which God has called *us*. It’s not “John Lavender and company.” It’s “God and company.” That includes you and me, and it means we are not alone in doing that to which God has called us. As we learned last week, a *Spirit-directed* ministry will be a *Spirit-protected* ministry. It will be a ministry under constant assault by the adversary, but we are not alone! We are surrounded by “a great cloud of witnesses” who are in this ministry with us. Excuse me, but hallelujah!

Acts 13:13b John Mark

There is also concern about John Mark. The Bible doesn’t tell us why he left the team, we only know he did. Paul was particularly critical of John Mark for doing so, which resulted in tension between him and Barnabas.

Years later, when Paul needed someone to be with him as a care giver, it was John Mark whom Paul specifically asked for! That tells us something about both men. Not only was John Mark teachable, Paul was teachable!

I also find it interesting that John Mark was used by the Holy Spirit to write one of the gospels. Most scholars believe the gospel according to Mark is the oldest of the four gospels. They also see it as the most helpful source of information regarding the earthly life of Jesus.

As a young man John Mark had his weaknesses. Don’t we all! But given time, John Mark matured into one of God’s mighty men. That encourages me. Does it you?

Acts 13:14 Perga

There is also the problem of so short a stay in Perga. Some expositors feel that having crossed the Mediterranean and arriving at Perga, Paul and Barnabas should have stayed for awhile. For some reason they left and made the difficult journey over mountainous terrain to the Roman province of southern Galatia.

There are a couple of possibilities as to why this was a short stay. Not the least of these is that malaria was endemic to the coastal region of the Mediterranean. Ephesus, one of the magnificent ruins of Biblical times, was once a huge metropolis. It was wiped out by malaria as were other communities located on the Mediterranean coast.

We also know from Paul's letter to the Galatians, chapter 4, verses 13-14, he first came to Galatia because he was sick at the time. Put together with Paul's repeated request that the Lord remove this "thorn in (his) side," this bit of information suggests the possibility that in Perga, Paul got malaria, or had a recurrent attack of malaria, and left the coastal region for the tableland of Asia Minor, 3600 feet above sea level, where health conditions were somewhat better.

For whatever reason, after arriving in Perga, Paul and Barnabas crossed a treacherous range of mountains infested with thieves and robber bands -- one of the toughest mountain roads in that region -- until they came to Antioch of Pisid'ia, which was a strategic place in Asia Minor. Antioch of Pisid'ia was a cosmopolitan city, a major trade center and an important crossroad in the intricate system of Roman roads.

Acts 13:14-15 Synagogue Worship

They went immediately to the local synagogue which proved to be the perfect springboard from which to launch a presentation of the gospel.

A Jewish synagogue was a teaching center, not a place of sacrifice like the Temple in Jerusalem. A typical order of worship began by reciting the Shema, or Hebrew creed, found in Deuteronomy: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord you God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the door posts of your house and on your gates" (Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

A synagogue service began with an affirmation that the Lord God, Jehovah, is one God. Then

there was a period of prayers and blessings. This was followed by a reading from the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, and a portion of the Prophets, generally used to illustrate what had been read from the Law. The prophets included Joshua, Judges, 1st and 2nd Samuel, 1st and 2nd Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the 12 minor prophets. After the scripture reading, an invitation would be given for someone, generally a rabbi, to share a word of hope that the promise of a Messiah would be fulfilled. This was followed by an exhortation that in the meantime they remain faithful to the Lord. With that order of worship in the synagogue, you can imagine what happened when Paul was invited to speak. He seized the opportunity to preach the good news that the Messiah had already come in the person of Christ.

Acts 13:16-41 Paul's First Sermon

Paul's first recorded sermon is an important passage of scripture. As you might expect, it was a sermon with three points.

Point Number One: Acts 13:16-25 A Summary of Ancient Events

The first part of Paul's first sermon is a classic example of the art of reduction. In less than two minutes he covered two thousand years of Israeli history. The reason Paul could do that with such brevity is because he had a biblically literate audience. They understood the Old Testament scriptures. The Shema had instructed them to teach these things to their children -- to pass the truths of Hebrew scripture from one generation to the next..

He began by letting them know he was aware of whom he was talking to. Unlike the typical rabbi who would sit, Paul stood and motioned for attention. "Men of Israel [that is, Jews] and you that fear God, [Gentiles who believed in one God] listen. The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with uplifted arm [with mighty force] he led them out of it" (Acts 13:16-17).

In two verses Paul covered everything from Genesis 12 to Exodus 12. Then in one verse he covered everything from Exodus 13 through Deuteronomy 34. "And for about forty years he bore with them in the wilderness" (Acts 13:18). There is beautiful imagery in the little phrase "bore with them." God did not just "put up with them," as the NIV has it. The Hebrew meaning is deeper than that. It means: he carried them about. He nurtured them. It's a picture

of a daddy rocking a restless baby in the middle of the night. Or of a mother nursing a troubled child. Israel deserted him. They misunderstood him. They rebelled against him. But God did not desert, misunderstand or turn against them.

“When he had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance, for about four hundred and fifty years” (Acts 13:19). In one sentence Paul covered all the events recorded in the book of Joshua, followed by a sentence which encapsulated the book of Judges and the first seven chapters of the book of 1st Samuel, the prophet (Acts 13:20).

“Then they asked for a king; and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. And when he had removed him, he raised up David to be their king; of whom he testified and said, ‘I have found in David the son of Jesse, a man after my own heart, who will do my will’” (Acts 13:21-22). Those two sentences covered everything from 1st Samuel 8 through 1st Kings 2, from the beginning of the United Kingdom to the death of David. “When he had removed him, he raised up David to be their king; of whom he testified and said, ‘I have found in David, the son of Jesse, a man after my own heart, who will do all my will.’ Of this man’s prosperity God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised” (Acts 13:22,23).

Acts 13:23-25 David to Jesus

In fewer than 60 words Paul then finished the balance of the Old Testament and moved onto the birth of Jesus and the ministry of John the Baptist. Talk about reduction! Paul took 2,000 years of Hebrew history and reduced it to a statement which takes less than two minutes to read.

Acts 13: 17-22 A Divine Plan

Paul made it clear that all this was part of a divine plan. In and through everything Paul has just related, God was working out the salvation of the world. We haven’t time to go back through it again today, but when you have a moment, read the verses 17-22. You will discover the pronouns *God* or *he* or *my* are used twelve times. “God chose, he led, he bore, he destroyed, he gave, he gave, he gave, he removed, he raised up, he testified, my heart, my will.” These were the acts of God about saving the world. Truly, history is His story!

Point Number Two: Acts 13:26 -34 The Story of Jesus

In the second part of Paul's great sermon he told his audience the story of Jesus. In verse 26, he again paid special attention to his audience. He not only acknowledged some of them were Jews and some were God-fearing Gentiles, but he included what I call the "so-what" element of a sermon -- the significance of his teaching to *them*. "To us has been sent the message of this salvation. For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize him nor understand the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled these by condemning him. Though they could charge him with nothing deserving death, yet they asked Pilate to have him killed. And when they had fulfilled all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree, and laid him in a tomb"(Acts 13:26-29).

Through ignorance, disbelief, or more pointedly, through dullness of mind from having heard the message so many times, God's people killed their king! In doing so, they unintentionally participated in the fulfillment of the prophecies they had heard read to them over and over and over again every Sabbath. *That's scary!*

The "So What" Element for Us

Which suggests a warning God would have me lay before you today. It is possible to hear the story of Jesus so often, and become so familiar with it, we become dull of hearing. Dull of responding. Dull of caring that we are the recipients of the greatest news the world has ever known: the love of God for lost sinners! It is possible, by our very familiarity with the gospel, to become participants in the prophecies of scripture which speak of a church which is neither hot nor cold. A church God spews out of his mouth (Revelation 3:14-16).

God forbid that should happen to us. That we should neglect so great salvation. That like the people described in verse 28, we play a part in crucifying Christ again through our neglect. Our disobedience. Our lack of sustained commitment. God has called us to the tremendous task of carrying the gospel "to the ends of the earth." To do that we need to renew our commitment daily, hourly, moment by moment – in a sustained way – lest we lose sight of our true priorities and purpose.

Acts 13:30 But God

We come now to one of those little phrases which lift our hearts to the heavens: "*But God*"

(Acts 13:30). Praise the Lord for those two words. They appear often in scripture to give us hope when it looks like hope is gone. William Barclay tells of a little girl who during a very bad wind storm clasped her daddy's hand and said, "Daddy, God must have lost grip of his wind tonight." A lovely child-like way of putting it. But the resurrection is proof God never loses his grip on his world.

"*But God* raised him up from the dead; and for many days he appeared to those who came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people. And we bring you the good news that what God *promised* to the fathers, this he has *fulfilled* to us their children by raising Jesus; as also it is written in the second Psalm, 'Thou art my son, today I have begotten thee.' And as for the fact that he raised him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, he spoke in this way, 'I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David.' Therefore he also says in another Psalm, (notice Paul's use of scripture to support what he's saying) 'Thou wilt not let thy holy One see corruption.' For David, after he had served the counsel of God in his own generation, fell asleep, and was laid with his fathers, and saw corruption; but (Jesus) whom God raised up saw no corruption" (Acts 13:30-37). People put Jesus in a grave, "*but God*" raised him up.

Acts 13:33 Raising up Jesus

There are two more tremendous phrases which are key to our understanding of what Paul is saying. One focuses on the incarnation, and the other emphasizes the resurrection. In verse 33 there is the little phrase, "by raising Jesus" (Acts 13:33a). As the context will show, *this* "raising," or singling out of Jesus, does *not* refer to the resurrection, but to the incarnation. "Thou art *my Son*, today I have begotten thee" (Acts 13:33b). It makes a point Paul later enlarged upon in his second letter to the church in Corinth: "God was *in* Christ reconciling the world unto himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19). Jesus was Emanuel, God *with* us (Matthew 1:23), and "by raising (or lifting up of) Jesus" through the *incarnation*, God fulfilled his promise of a *Messiah*.

Acts 13:34-37 From the Dead

Then, as we read in verse 34, through the resurrection of Christ's *body* God fulfilled his promise of a *Savior*. "And as for the fact that he raised him *from the dead*, no more to return to

corruption . . .” (Acts 13:34a). *This* raising, or *bodily* resurrection of Jesus, means God accepted the death of Christ on the cross as full and final payment for our sin. Jesus is both Messiah *and* Savior. He is Messiah to *set* people free. He is Savior to *keep* people free.

Point Number Three: Acts 13:38-41 There are Blessings to be Received or Lost

The third point in Paul’s sermon is a summary of blessings awaiting those who receive the Savior, and the loss of those blessings to those who reject the Savior. This is pivotal. The *goal* toward which Paul has been moving from his opening line is caught up in six words: “Let it be known to you . . .” (Acts 13:38).

Paul seems to be saying: This is not an exercise in philosophical jousting. This is not a time-filler. This is God’s specific word to *you!* *This* is the “so-what” element in everything I have to say. “*Let it be known to you* therefore, brethren, that through (Jesus) forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, *and* by him everyone that believes is freed from everything from which you could *not* be freed by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:38-39).

Talk about hitting the target with both barrels. Wow! Forgiveness of sin *and* freedom from everything the law demands. It’s not possible for any human to both forgive *and* justify someone. We can say, “You are guilty, but I forgive you.” But we can’t say, “You are *not* guilty, *but* I forgive you.” No human can both forgive *and* justify. Only God can do that. Only God can say, “Through Jesus Christ I forgive you, *and* through Jesus Christ I justify you.” The demands of the law are met for everyone who believes in Jesus. When you are in Christ, you can say, “I am forgiven.” *And*, when you are in Christ, you can say, “I am justified. It’s just-*as-if*- I’d never sinned. It’s just-*as-if*-I’d fulfilled the law to the letter.” Folks, that was, and is, incredible!

You and I have never been under the law in the way those Old Testament people were. We have never been burdened by demands that could never be met. But you and I *have* been under the law of conscience and God knows, as do you and I, the plaguing, relentless demands of the “oughts” and the “ought-nots,” the “shoulds” and the “should-nots” of a beleaguered conscience.

Paul put the gospel in direct contrast to the law. He said law and conscience can’t save anyone,

but Jesus can save everyone. Jesus not only made forgiveness possible, he made justification possible. You can look in the mirror and say, “In Jesus, I am just.” Because when God looks at you, he doesn’t see you, he sees *Jesus!* You are complete in Jesus. And folks, that’s good news.

Acts 13:40-41 A Warning

Then he issued this warning, “Beware, therefore, lest there come upon you what is said in the prophets: ‘Behold, you scoffers, and wonder, and perish; for I do a deed in your days, a deed you will never believe if one declares it to you.’ As they went out, the people begged that these things might be told them the next Sabbath” (Acts 13:40-42). Every offer of salvation can be accepted *or* it can be rejected. Quoting from Habakkuk 1:5 Paul told the people of his time what is true of people in our time: Do not neglect the good news. Hear and heed the message. Believe and receive the Savior.

Acts 13:42-52 A Summary

Finally, in verses 42 through 52, we have a summary of subsequent events which include various reactions to the Savior. It is from this section that we got our key truth for today: *To the proclamation of the gospel there is always a response.*

Acts 13:42-44 A Positive Response

“As they went out, the people begged that these things might be told them the next Sabbath.” They had never heard anything like this and they were excited. “And when the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas who spoke to them and urged them to continue in the grace of God” (Acts 13:43). Notice the compassion, concern and personal involvement of Paul and Barnabas in the lives of the people to whom they were ministering. They took time to *talk* with them, and they *encouraged* them by reminding them of God’s amazing grace.

“The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered together to hear the word of God” (Acts 13:44). How I wish there were that kind of holy contagion in us. How I wish we were that excited about the good news of Christ. How I wish all of us were free of the deadly dullness of mind, emotion and will to which many of us are subject. Some of us have heard the message so many times it no longer thrills us that “God was in Christ reconciling (us) unto himself.” How

sad! But if we ever *do* get excited about the gospel, our contagion will spread and along with our friends and neighbors, we too, will gather together to hear the good news: Jesus saves! Jesus keeps! Jesus satisfies!

Acts 13:45-47 A Negative Response

“But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with jealousy, and contradicted what was spoken by Paul, and reviled him” (Acts 13:45). The old-timers were threatened by the newcomers. “Hey, you’re sitting in my pew. I’ve sat in that pew every Sabbath for the past twenty years!” Or, one of the newcomers may have turned around and said, “It’s good to have you in synagogue today.” And one of the old-timers may have responded, “I’ve been coming here every Sabbath for 20 years.” That happened in our church awhile back. I asked people to stand up, turn around and shake hands. A newcomer said, “It’s good to see you in church.” And some not-so-sweet old sister said in a spiteful way, “I’ve been a member here for 30 years, thank you.” God help us!

Fearful of losing power, some of the Jews became angry. They not only attacked the messengers, Paul and Barnabas, they also attacked the message.

Acts 13:46-47 A Tough Love Response.

And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, “It was necessary that the word of God be spoken *first* to you. Since you thrust it from you, and judge yourself unworthy of eternal life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, ‘I have set you to be a light for the Gentile, that you may bring salvation to the uttermost parts of the earth’” (Acts 13:46-47)

This is the big idea Israel had missed all along. She had never really understood that God had selected her and blessed her to *be* a blessing to *the whole world*. Israel looked upon her special place in the love and attention of God like some people treat a new Christmas toy. They want you to look at it and admire it, but not touch it. The Israelites saw God’s working in their life as an end in itself, rather as a means *to* the end of their being a light *to the whole world*.

How about you? Has it ever occurred to you that God didn’t save you just so you can go to

heaven? Did it ever occur to you that God didn't just extend his love to you in Christ for your sake alone? In the words of that old chorus, you have been saved "to tell others." Jesus said, "You are the light of the world." Go shine for me. "You are the salt of the earth." Go be a pungent, powerful, purifying presence among the people whose lives you touch. Salvation is *never* an end in itself. It is always a means *to* the end of helping the saved to save others.

Acts 13:48-49, 52 The Joyful Response of the Saved

"And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of God; and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed. And the word of the Lord spread throughout all the region." Don't get hung up on the word "ordained." It doesn't have anything to do with a doctrine of predestination. It simply means salvation involves God's side and our side. God votes "yes." Satan votes "no." We also have a vote. If we vote "yes," God's purpose for us is fulfilled. Satan loses two to one. "And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 13:52).

Acts 13:50-51 The Angry Response of the Unsaved

I wish we could end on that happy note, but we cannot ignore verses 50 and 51. "But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, and stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. But (Paul and Barnabas) shook off the dust from their feet against them, and went to Iconium."

Women were greatly attracted to Judaism. In a heathen world where women were often demeaned and subjected to physical abuse, the Jewish ethic elevated women and instructed that they be treated with civility. That was very appealing, and many women were drawn to Jehovah.

Sadly, however, sometimes these grateful, loyal, anxious-to-please women were subjected to spiritual abuse. They were manipulated by some Jewish leaders who took advantage of their loyalty. They, in turn, incited their influential husbands to rebel against Paul and Barnabas until finally these two gifted servants of God shook the dust off their feet, an ancient way of saying, "Okay, folks, you're on your own. You chose to do your own thing. Now suffer the consequences."

To the proclamation of the gospel there is always a response. Joy or jealousy. Belief or blasphemy. Heaven or hell. It is either good news to those who receive it, or it is bad news to those who reject it. Where are you today? Let me tell you where you are. You are in what William James called "Life's Living Option." Let me illustrate.

A man has cancer. A doctor explains that without surgery he will die. He is in Life's Living Option. He has a choice to make. He can decide for the surgery and live, or he can decide against the surgery and die. But while he's making up his mind, he is in one of the alternatives. He has cancer.

A man's car is stalled on a railroad track and a train is coming. The man is in Life's Living Option. He has a choice to make. He can stay in the car and be killed, or he can get out of the car and live. But while he's making up his mind, he is in one of the alternatives. He is in the car.

You have heard the Gospel this morning and you are in Life's Living Options. You have a choice to make. You can receive it and live. You can reject it and die. But while you're making up your mind, you are in one of the alternatives. You are without Christ.

That's where you are today. You are in Life's Living Option. For Christ's sake for the sake of those who love you and for your own sake I plead with you: receive the Savior now!

The Church Extended - Part 3

Acts 14:1-28

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Key Truth: Satan's dirty tricks won't work on Christians who presume God's presence and keep on keeping on.
God is energizer.

As the crow flies, Iconium was roughly 60 miles southeast of Pisidia. But to get there Paul and Barnabas had to cross a high, twisting, treacherous mountain pass before descending to the city of Iconium located on a lush, green plateau fed by the Pisidean Mountain streams. Because the terrain was so difficult, scholars compute the walking distance between Antioch and Iconium at about 100 miles.

The Team's Method of Operation

Acts 14:1 tells us two things about their ministry style once they got to Iconium: their M.O. and a little s-o. Paul and Barnabas' method of operation was one they had followed elsewhere. As soon as they hit town they headed for the local Jewish Synagogue. Paul and Barnabas had discovered the Synagogue was a natural setting in which to present the gospel. The attendees, consisting of Jews and God-fearing Gentiles, had a working knowledge of the Old Testament scriptures and were aware of the prophecies of a coming Messiah. So the M. O. they routinely followed was to head for the local Synagogue and be ready to respond if invited to speak.

The Team's Manner of Teaching

As for that little s-o, verse one continues: "(Paul and Barnabas) **so** (s-o) spoke that a great company believed, both of Jews and Greeks." They spoke with such power and authority, such Spirit-energized conviction and enthusiasm, people could not resist the Good News that the *promise* of a long-awaited Messiah had been *fulfilled* in the person of Jesus. "And a great company believed."

Satan's Dirty Tricks

Before we look at what happened next, think with me about the key truths we've talked about in recent weeks. Satan's plan of aggressive resistance to the gospel was to poison the minds of the people. He did this through a series of dirty tricks, designed to challenge their integrity and credibility.

Dirty Trick Number One (Acts 14:2)

“But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren” (Acts 14:2). Satan’s first dirty trick was to get the people to *ignore* the apostles. Paul and Barnabas’ response – with the good Lord’s assistance – was incredible. “So (there’s that little word again) they *remained* for a long time, *speaking boldly* for the Lord who bore witness to the word of His grace, granting *signs and wonders* to be done by their hands” (Acts 14:2).

“They Remained a Long Time” (14:3a).

Despite the challenge to their credibility and integrity, they stuck it out. They faced their critics. They knew, as our key truth for two weeks ago declared: *Those whom God sends forth he sends with power*. The Lord never gives you a job to do without also giving you the equipment with which to do it. Paul and Barnabas knew that. They also knew, as last week’s key truth made plain: *to the proclamation of the gospel there is always a response*. Sometimes it is positive. Sometimes it is negative. But there is *always* a response. Paul and Barnabas were encouraged by the positive response of those who believed, and were not discouraged by the negative response of those who did not believe.

“They spoke boldly for the Lord” (14:3b).

They didn’t waste time defending themselves. Paul and Barnabas just preached the simple gospel and God blessed their ministry in his name with “signs and wonders.”

“Signs and Wonders” (14:3c).

God responded aggressively to the *first* of Satan’s dirty tricks. The ministry of Paul and Barnabas was blessed with “signs and wonders” (Acts 14:3). *Signs* are miracles which contain a hidden message the spiritually astute are able to recognize. *Wonders* are miracles designed to catch the attention of the casual observer. And the Lord gave them both. Through *wonders* ordinary folk were attracted and through *signs* the spiritually perceptive were assured. In this case, the message was: The *promise* of a messiah has been *fulfilled* in the person of Jesus Christ. Believing Jews and God-fearing Gentiles saw the signs and got the message.

Because “a great company believed” when the gospel was presented, Satan, the adversary of all things good and Godly, got busy stirring up as much trouble possible. Today’s key truth builds

on those of the previous two weeks: *Satan's dirty tricks won't work on Christians who presume God's presence and keep on keeping on.*

Paul and his company presented the gospel in Pisidia (Acts 13:14) and got a *positive* response. "The people begged that these things might be told them the next Sabbath" (Acts 13:42). They also got a *negative* response when, incited by Jews, the citizens of Pisidia "drove them out of their district" (Acts 13:50). They moved on to Iconium and again got a *positive* response: "a great company believed" (Acts 14:1). But they also got a *negative* response: "The *unbelieving* Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren" (Acts 14:2). To the gospel there is *always* a response.

Dirty Trick Number Two (Acts 14:4)

At this point, our text addresses the *second* of Satan's dirty tricks. "But the people in the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles" (Acts 14:4). This time Satan's technique was to get people *arguing* over Paul and Barnabas. To direct attention away from the message, to the messenger. It's a dirty trick Satan still uses today. And consider the subtlety of it. The moment people take their eyes off of Jesus who *is* perfect, and focus on the person presenting Jesus who is *not* perfect, the *people* as well as the *presenter* are in jeopardy.

The serious nature of Satan's *second* dirty trick is that by getting people arguing amongst themselves a crowd can easily become a mob. That's what happened in Iconium. "When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to molest (Paul and Barnabas) and to stone them, they learned of it" (Acts 14:6), and took off. Their response was timely and logical. *Earlier* they had stood their ground. *Now* they got out of there! As followers of Jesus we need the spiritual maturity and wisdom to know when to do which. As Kenny Rogers, one of my favorite "theologians" explains, "You got to know when to hold 'em, and know when to fold 'em."

An Illustration

I am often asked whether one should stay with his or her mate. One woman called to ask that very question because her husband was not only spiritually carnal, he was becoming increasingly emotionally unstable. She was a bit apprehensive about what might take place. My counsel

was: “Stay and pray. Talk to God about him and *stop* talking to him about God! Let God’s love be seen through your actions and attitudes. Follow the counsel of Peter in the use of The Principle of Submission as Strategy” (1 Peter 3:1- 4).

In my book *Marriage At Its Best* we deal with ten biblical principles for a Christian marriage, one of which is The Principle of *Mutual* Submission. That’s God *ideal*. “Be subject to *one another* and have reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21). But in a situation where a Christian is married to a non-Christian, or where a Christian is married to a carnal Christian, submission may *not* be mutual. In that case, submission becomes a voluntary act the Christian undertakes for the sake of his or her non-Christian or carnal Christian mate. It is called The Principle of Submission as Strategy. The Spirit-filled Christian puts himself or herself in a servant role so the mate being served may be touched for Christ. “Likewise you wives, be submissive to your husbands, so some, though they do not obey the word, may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, when they see your reverent and chaste behavior. Let not yours be the outward adorning with braiding of hair, decoration of gold, and wearing of robes, but let it be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight, is very precious” (! Peter 3:1-4).

God counsel to Christian husbands is the same: “Husbands love your wives *as* Christ loved the church and he gave himself up (sacrificed himself) for her” (Ephesians 5:25). If a Christian husband is concerned for his non-Christian or carnal Christian wife, he is to *voluntarily* accept the role of servant so, in the name and Spirit of Christ, he sacrificially ministers to her by meeting her needs.

Back to my story: I told that woman to stay and pray. To let God’s love be seen through her actions and attitudes. To follow The Principle of Submission as Strategy. She did so for several months. One night she telephoned me and it was clear she was in a state of panic. “I don’t know what to do,” she said. “I’ve followed the principles of scripture as best I know how, but tonight my husband attacked me physically. I’m not battered, but I’m frightened for the sake of our children. *Now* what do I do, Pastor?” I said, “Get out of there, right now!” I helped her make arrangements for a safe place to go. At that point, the better part of wisdom was to cut and run. In doing ministry *we* need the spiritual perception to know when to do which. When to stand our

ground. When to face our critics and their criticism. And equally important: when to split. Paul and Barnabas knew that and took off for Lystra and Derbe.

Dirty Trick Number Three (Acts 14:6)

The *third* of Satan's dirty tricks was to escalate the level of attack in an effort to *frighten* Paul and Barnabas into silence. To use fear to shut them up. This is a technique he has used with great effectiveness on many of God's children. How many times have we found ourselves silent before the godless gang and the Christless clique out of fear of what they might say or do? Paul later reflects back upon this incident in his words of counsel to his young protegee, Timothy. "Remember, Timothy, God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but a spirit of power, love and of a *sound mind*" (2 Timothy 1:7). It wasn't out of fear that Paul and Barnabas fled. They exercised the "sound mind principle" which suggested: "Clear out. Give things a chance to cool down. Another, better time will come to minister in this place." And, as we are going to see, that's exactly what happened.

"They Preached the Gospel" (Acts 14:7)

". . . and (in Lystra) they preached the Gospel" (Acts 14:7.) While they made a strategic retreat Paul and Barnabas never lost sight of their reason for being. They didn't quit the battle. "They preached the gospel." *That's* what the Holy Spirit set them apart to do. *That's* what the church in Antioch commissioned them to do. *That's* what their fellow followers of Jesus were supporting them to do. *That's* what they did! They didn't lose sight of their reason for being. Nor must we. As we plan and build the Bakersfield Christian Life Center, we must not lose sight of our purpose which is to win the lost and disciple them. The buildings will merely be a more effective means of winning more people to Jesus.

Dirty Trick Number Four (Acts 14:8-14)

At Lystra, Paul and Barnabas faced Satan's fourth dirty trick. It came in a most subtle, insidious, beguiling form. He tried to get people to *worship* the apostles! If he couldn't get them to *ignore* Paul and Barnabas (dirty trick #1), and if he couldn't accomplish his purpose by having people *argue* over them (dirty trick #2), and if he couldn't *frighten* Paul and Barnabas into silence (dirty trick #3), his technique was to appeal to their ego and get people to *worship* them (dirty trick #4).

“Now at Lystra there was a man sitting, who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul speaking, and Paul, looking fervently at him, and seeing that he had faith to be made well, said in a loud voice, ‘Stand upright on your feet!’ And he sprang up and walked. When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, ‘The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!’ Barnabas, they called Zeus, and Paul, because he was the chief speaker, they called Hermes. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was in front of the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the people” (Acts 14:8-14).

There are a lot of exciting things going on in this passage! In verse 8 Paul and Barnabas were faced with a hopeless case: a man who was born paralyzed and had never walked. In verse 9 we see the man’s openness and Paul’s alertness. The man’s eagerness to respond and Paul’s sensitivity to the guidance of the Spirit. In verse 10 we see the man’s obedience to the apostle’s spiritual authority. Anointed by the Holy Spirit, Paul said, “Get up!” And the man got up! In the Greek it says he “sprang up.” It’s in the Aorist tense which means at *a particular time and place* “the man sprang up and walked.” The word *walked* is in the Imperfect tense which implies continuous action. As Luke reflected upon what had happened, he reported that at a given point in time the paralyzed man sprang up and *went on walking*. He was healed.

What a beautiful illustration of the way the Spirit of God deals with the people today. All of us were born dead in trespasses and sins. We were unable to respond, even if we wanted to. But some of us heard the gospel, and something inside us *wanted* to respond. We did, and we were gloriously saved. Perhaps, for the first time in your life, something inside you is saying “This message for *me*.” If so, in the name of Jesus I say to you: stand up and walk! Claim your inheritance in Christ. Accept the healing of a broken spirit through Jesus name, and *keep on walking*.

The crowds were so impressed by what they saw, they reverted to their mother tongue. They understood what Paul had said to them because he spoke Greek, the universal language. But when they saw this fellow whom they had known all their lives jumping up and down, running around and praising the Lord, they got so excited they began speaking in Lyconian. “The gods have come!” They were thinking of *their* gods: Zeus and Hermes, the key spokesman for Zeus.

Paul was a wiry, fiery fellow and Barnabas was a tall, stately, white-haired gentleman. The looked at Barnabas and said, “There’s Zeus!” They looked at Paul and said, “There’s Hermes!” If either of the apostles had been able to understand what these folks were babbling in Lyconian they would have had a fit. But they didn’t understand what they were *saying* until they saw what the people were *doing*: they were getting ready to make a *sacrifice* to them!

Satan’s dirty trick number four became as clear as day to Paul and Barnabas: if I can’t stop by these two by getting folks to *ignore* them, or *argue* over them, or *frighten* them, I’ll appeal to their ego and to get people to *worship* them. Fortunately, Satan is not all-knowing. There are limitations on what Satan knows. That’s part of our protection against his oppression. Satan thought Paul and Barnabas would find this adulation irresistible, but what he did not understand is the invulnerability of people who make themselves vulnerable to the Holy Spirit!

I confess there was a time when, as a younger pastor, I would preach my sermon, rush to the door and count the number of people who told me it was good. I was so insecure I needed that affirmation. I remember sitting down one day with a doctor and saying, “I wish I could get over my need to rush to the door and have people tell me what a great sermon it was.” His response changed my life: “If you ever reach that level go to the door anyway. Remember, if you don’t need to hear it, they need to say it! Accept what they say and don’t take yourself so seriously.” That’s what I try to do today. If God speaks to you through me and you chose to tell me so, I quietly praise the Lord and thank you.

The *flesh* needs adulation. It wants affirmation. A *Spirit-filled* person does not. Watchman Nee has a wonderful little book entitled *The Latent Power of the Soul*. In it he describes people as God *intended* them to be and what the consequences of the fall have had upon God’s intention. He points out that even in their fallen state people are Something Special. Through the latent powers of the *soul* – their mind, emotion and will – tremendous things can be accomplished. Watchman Nee this issues this warning: Be on guard, for *many things done in the name of the Holy Spirit are nothing more than demonstrations of the latent power of the soul!*

One of the most frightening comments I ever heard made about a fellow preacher was made by someone who said, “He’s really deep on the surface, but underneath he’s terribly shallow.”

Through “the latent power of the soul” there was a magnetism and dynamism about that man when he preached. He seemed so spiritual, but his private life was terribly carnal. That’s why we need to keep our eyes on Jesus and *not* on the people who sometimes speak for Jesus.

Well, as he always does, Satan underestimated the true nature of a Spirit-filled life. As our key truth says: *Satan’s dirty tricks won’t work on Christians who presume God’s presence and keep on keepin’ on.* When Paul and Barnabas realized what the people were *saying* by observing what the people were *doing*, they were not enthralled, they were appalled! “But when the apostles Paul and Barnabas heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out among the multitudes crying ‘Men, why are you doing this? We, also, are men, of like nature with you’” That is to say, we share your humanity. Praise God they didn’t share their perversity! “We are of like nature with you, and bring you good news” (Acts 14:15). What follows is Paul’s second sermon.

Paul’s Second Sermon

Last week we read his first recorded sermon which was directed to Jews and God-fearing Gentiles. His second recorded sermon is directed to a pagan audience. Notice the difference between what he said in *last* week’s text and what he says in *this* week’s text, and the application he makes.

In his *first* sermon to Jews and God-fearing gentiles, Paul emphasized *revealed* religion. That is, what God *revealed* about Himself in the Old Testament scriptures. His point was that *now*, because the *promise* of scripture has been *fulfilled* in the person of Jesus Christ: There is forgiveness of sin for you. There is freedom from the law for you. There is the possibility of a personal relationship with God for you. *If* you receive his gracious gift of salvation in Christ.

In this, his *second* sermon, Paul was talking to a totally different audience. There is no reference to the Jewish community in Lystra. Or to the synagogue as their place of meeting. This pagan audience did not know about God’s revelation of Himself in the Old Testament *scriptures* so Paul met them where they were. He spoke of God’s revelation of Himself in *creation!* What theologians call *natural* religion as contrasted to *revealed* religion.

Picking it up at the middle of verse 15: “And (we) bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways; yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness” (Acts 14:15, 16).

His appeal is to the glory of God as revealed in *creation* and the faithfulness of God who took care of their temporal needs by giving them seed times and harvest. Woven through everything is the “so-what?” element of his sermon: *turn from these idols you have made!* These dead pieces of stone and wood did not make the marvelous *creation* you see: the earth, the sky, the sea. Turn from these dead things to the *living* God who *did* make them. Remember God’s mercy in *not* judging past generations upon the basis of their limited understanding, but also remember the need to respond to the witness you *now* have: his living presence in the person of Jesus.

Verse 18 makes it clear these folks were slow on the uptake. They *still* didn’t get it, and had to be restrained from worshiping Paul and Barnabas. But, praise God, some *did* believe and a small body of believers was established in Lystra.

Dirty Trick Number Five (Acts 14:19)

To show you the length to which Satan will go to throw a monkey wrench in God’s plan, verse 19 details: dirty trick number five. “But Jews came (to Lystra) from Antioch and Iconium . . .” (Acts 14:19). Lets review the geography again. To participate in Satan’s fifth dirty trick, these Jewish zealots traveled somewhere between a minimum of 20 miles, if they came from Iconium, to 140 miles if they came from Antioch, over a treacherous mountain pass to Lystra. Their sole purpose was to stir up trouble for Paul and Barnabas in a pagan town where there was no Jewish synagogue and which posed no threat to them. But they were so filled with hate and rebellion against the gospel they went to those lengths to put an end to it.

As I said last week, the church God uses will not only be Spirit-*directed* and Spirit-*protected*, it will also be actively oppressed and viscerously attacked. “And the Jews came there from Antioch and Iconium; and having persuaded the people, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city,

supposing that he was dead” (Acts 14:19). Notice the fickleness of these folks. A little while ago they were ready to worship Paul. *Now* they stand by and watch him stoned.

My father didn’t have much education as the world measures things, but he had lots of folk wisdom and a bunch of little sayings he passed on to me. One of them was: “John, never get conceited because a pat on the back is just 16 inches from a kick in the pants.” That’s a bit of folk wisdom every preacher ought to take seriously because of the fickleness of folks.

The Sixty-Four Thousand Dollar Question

Now the question is: Was Paul really dead? It doesn’t say so in those exact words, but the context and at least one other piece of evidence, suggest he was.

The *contextual evidence* is based on two things. First: the action of the Jews. They believed he *was* dead. It was against Jewish law to leave a dead body in a city over night so they dragged him out of Lystra, even though it was a pagan city. Second: the *non*-action of the disciples. If Paul was just badly wounded Luke would have told us about their ministering to him by binding up his wounds. Instead, Barnabas and the others stood around, probably crying, bemoaning the fact that Paul had been struck down in the middle of a very productive ministry. So the *context* seems to indicate, to me at least, that Paul was absent from the body.

But there’s another bit of Biblical evidence *outside* the context which is interesting to me. It’s my view, along with several skilled New Testament scholars, that Paul had this experience in mind when later on he wrote: “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven, whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter”(2 Corinthians 12:2-4). While these Jews were dragging his body out of town and the disciples were planning a funeral, Paul was “in the third Heaven.” There the loving Father showed him some of the provisions he has made for his children: and he heard things “which man cannot utter.” Things beyond description. With that reassuring glimpse of things to come, I believe the Lord said, “OK Paul, its back to business. There’s more for you to do.” And in Acts 14:20 we are told that as the disciples watched, Paul sat up, stood up and *walked* back into town unafraid of death because he *now* knew what God has prepared for those who are his own.

I don't insist that you accept my interpretation. When we come to a passage of scripture like this which is vague, we better be cautious about saying, "I'm right and everybody else is wrong." You are free to believe, as many do, that he just *appeared* to be dead. That he had only been brutally battered into unconsciousness. But we *can* agree that his recovery was supernatural, because for him to get up and go on as he did could only have happened in response to a wonderful touch from God.

A Problem -free Respite

In Derbe, "They preached the gospel to that city and had many disciples" (Acts 14:21). Derbe was the only place they went where they didn't have a problem. A beautiful reminder of God's tender, loving care. Later, Paul was led to write, "There is no temptation taken you but such as is common to man. God is faithful, and he will not allow you to be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide a way of escape that you may be able to endure it" (1 Corinthians 10:13-16).

The Lord knew Paul had about all the oppression he could handle, and he led Paul to Derbe where there was no dissension. No oppression. No difficulty. Just a loving, warm-hearted response. He gave Paul exactly what Paul needed, exactly when he needed it: a time to heal a wounded spirit.

I praise God for a similar experience in my own life. While in New Zealand several years ago, I committed myself to speak from 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. on Monday, 9:00 a.m. to 12 noon on Tuesday in one location, the travel Tuesday afternoon to a second town where I spoke from 9:00 am to 9:00 p.m. on Wednesday, and 9:00 a.m. to noon Thursday. Thursday afternoon I traveled to a third place before repeating the same speaking schedule on Friday, and Saturday, after which I traveled to a fourth city to preach Sunday morning and Sunday night. On Monday I spoke from 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. and 9:00 a.m. to noon on Tuesday in a fifth city. By noon on that second Tuesday I was so exhausted I couldn't sleep. My nerves were frayed. I came as close to having a nervous breakdown as I ever want to come. Just when I needed it the conference leader said, "That's it! We're sending you to the Hermitage." Lucille and I went up to that beautiful Hotel at the foot of Mt. Cook. No television. No radio. Nothing but the peace and beauty of God's creation. We walked and talked. I took pictures of the wild flowers. We

climbed a glacier, made snowballs and had a snow fight. We laughed and loved and after 3 days I was rested and ready for the last 2 weeks during which I preached twelve times in twelve cities.

In our upstairs hallway is a throw rug the people of New Zealand gave me of Mt. Cook and the Hermitage woven into it. Each time I go upstairs I'm reminded of the Lord's tender loving care. He never puts more on us than we can bear, and he gives us just what we need, just when we need it.

The Comforted Become Comforters.

“When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch” (Acts 14:21). Paul and Barnabas could have taken the short way home. They were only 160 miles from Tarsus where Paul was reared. Instead they took the long way home. They took the route of risk where there were “dangers, toils and snares.”

They went back to Lystra. They went back to Iconium. They went back to Antioch. They went back to the places where they had been so shabbily treated. Why? “To strengthen the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, saying that through many tribulations, we must enter the kingdom of God. And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they believed” (Acts 14:22-23).

The *comforted* became *comforters*. In 2 Corinthians 1:3,4, Paul says, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” Paul practiced what he preached. He and Barnabas went back to comfort and encourage their younger brothers and sisters in Christ. Sometimes God's best involves tribulation. It's not bad that we suffer. What's bad is that we suffer without benefitting from it! Without learning the lessons tribulation can teach.

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders or pastors for each church. Then with “prayer and fasting” they turned these fledgling flocks over to the care and keeping of the Lord, made their way over

to the port town of Attalia where they sailed home to Antioch. According to various scholars they were gone between 18 to 36 months and traveled 1400 miles. “When they arrived (in Antioch), they gathered the church together and declared all that God had done with them, and how He had opened a door of faith to the gentiles. And they remained no little time with the disciples” (Acts 14:27).

This wasn't a meeting of the church elite because the whole body had been involved in their commissioning. The whole body had been involved in their ministry. The whole body had supported them with prayers and offerings. And, the whole body heard the report of what God had done. He was Energizer, Paul and Barnabas were his hands, his feet and his mouth.

They stayed there for “no little time.” This is a clue to one of the ministries I believe God wants us to have at the Christian Life Center. Just north of the new campus will be 20 acres of condominiums. I'm praying God will make it possible for our church to own one or two of them so at all times there will be one or more missionaries in residence. Men and women from all over the world who have been serving Jesus. They will come for a couple of weeks, or months, or maybe a year. They will stay here as our guests and will move among us. They will teach our Sunday School classes and meet with our groups. They will stand before our congregation and let us know what it's really like out there on the battlefield, to keep *our* zeal alive and to never let us forget *why* we are here.

“So What?”

Well, we're through, but let me finish with the “so-what?” element of my sermon: how all of this relates to you and me.

Our key truth says: *Satan's dirty tricks won't work on Christians who presume God's presence and keep on keepin' on.* Satan kept escalating the pressure on Paul and Barnabas. He couldn't stop them by getting people to *ignore* them, or *argue* over them, or *threaten* them, or even *worship* them, so he got people to try to *kill* them. He kept escalating the pressure, but Paul and Barnabas kept presuming God's presence.

During our staff retreat we debated whether or not to use this word “presume” because some

people have a superficial understanding of it's meaning. But to presume is *not* "to take lightly." It *is* to take very, very seriously the promise of God who said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." I want you to know: God is the *only* one you can presume on. His promises are the *only* promises you can count on. And his help is the *only* help you can be sure will come: exactly *as* you need it, exactly *when* you need it.

Finally, through this whole chapter no direct reference is made to the Holy Spirit. Or to prayer. Or to Divine intervention. All that is implied. It is something they *presumed*. And based upon that grand presumption, they hung in there. They refused to quit. They kept on keepin' on.

I believe God wants us to learn to hang in there. To believe his promises. To *presume* his presence in our lives. To keep on keepin' on. Because against *that* kind of trust and obedience, the devil's tricks don't stand a chance!

The Church Extended - Part 4

Acts 15:1-35

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Key Truth: God has no standard brand of conversion, holiness or expression of faith.

Attribute: God is peacemaker.

We have one of the most exciting sections in all of scripture to deal with today. It is the record of *how* the New Testament church, facing a deeply emotional and potentially divisive issue, *dealt* with that issue in a spirit of love, openness and honesty with one another. As a result, the body of Christ was drawn together and became a stronger, better, wiser expression of God's presence in the world. Truly, as our attribute of God for today says, *God is peacemaker*. If we open our hearts to his voice and his leading, we have his peace.

When we leave Acts 14 and move into chapter 15, the first thing we stumble on is another of Satan's dirty tricks. Last week's key truth made it clear that: *Satan's dirty tricks won't work on Christians who presume God's presence and keep on keeping on.*

We, you and I, must keep on keeping on because our *adversary* keeps on keeping on. He never lets up. This was brought to my attention this morning about 3 a.m. I found myself in a kind of semi consciousness--not really awake, not really asleep--but aware of Satanic oppression in the area of my subconscious mind. The awareness was almost physical. I could feel his presence in my bedroom and became aware of fears I thought I had dealt with long ago. Consciously I had. But Satan very cleverly moved from my conscious mind to my subconscious mind.

The tool he used was a spirit of fear related to our building program. It took the shape of the fear of failure which would be an embarrassment to the Lord. I thought I had dealt with my fear of failure back in 1954 when I took the risk of becoming a pastor, being real with my flock and trusting them to accept my humanity.

Prior to that, as an evangelist, I never stayed in one place long enough for people to learn how little I knew and how shallow I was. Going to a church and staying there was scary. But I surrendered my fear of failure; God gave me a pastor's heart and the rest is history.

Now, suddenly, my fear of failure was back. As I looked at it further, I realized it was rooted in a lack of faith in God. I was putting my trust in *people* to perform the miracle we're expecting rather than in him. Each time someone let me down, or failed to perform at what I thought was the level of his or her capacity, I was shaken. Not consciously, but subconsciously.

When I awoke and found myself under oppression I said, "Lord, I know this fear is not from you. I didn't even know I had it. Thank you for letting me see what's been going on in my subconscious mind, and in the name of Jesus I'll deal with it right now!" I began to do spiritual warfare like I taught you to do a few weeks ago. I claimed promise after promise, changing the pronouns to apply to me personally.

1 John 4:4--"Greater is He that is in [me] than he that is in the world."

2 Corinthians 10:3-5--"For though [I] live in the world, [I] do not fight a worldly war and [my] weapons are not worldly weapons. [My] weapons have Divine power to destroy strong holds. [I] demolish arguments and every perverse obstacle to the knowledge of God, and [I] bring every thought into captivity to Christ." By trusting people for the miracle rather than leaving it in the hands of God, I had exposed myself to needless anxiety.

I was drawn to Isaiah 26:3--"Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on *thee*, because he trusts in *thee*." I remember praying: "Lord, the miracle will only happen if *you* make it happen. It was *you* who made the axe float. It was *you* who made a cup of meal and a vial of oil to meet the needs of a widow and her son and one of your servants. It was *you* who parted the waters of the Red Sea. It was *you* who raised Jesus from the dead. And it's *your* miracle-working power I must trust in."

I went back to sleep, and when I awakened around 6:30, I had a new awareness of my need to be constantly on guard because Satan was attacking me in areas which I thought I had dealt with once and for all. We must keep on keeping on because our adversary, the devil, keeps on keeping on. Now that isn't part of my sermon. You get that for free, and I hope it helps you to keep on keeping on.

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Last week, we saw Satan employ five different tactics to destroy God's work in God's men. First, he tried to get the people to ignore Paul and Barnabas. Second, when *that* didn't work, he tried to get the people to argue over them. Third, when *that* didn't work, he tried to frighten Paul and Barnabas into silence. Fourth, when *that* didn't work, he tried the subtle tactic of getting the people to worship them. Fifth, when *that* didn't work, Satan got violent and tried to get the people to kill them.

When *that* didn't work, our text for today records how Satan, who had laid low for awhile, reemerged and employed a sixth dirty trick: he attempted to get brother fighting brother. To fully appreciate the potency of this tactic, it's of paramount importance that you remember that *all the players* in the drama we will watch unfold today were *Christians*.

Acts 15 divides into three sections. The first five verses give us one situation. The last six verses give us a second situation. The intermediate verses--Acts 15: 6-29--give us a solution.

Acts 15:1-5 The Situation

In the last verse of chapter 14 we are told, "[Paul and Barnabas] remained no little time [in Antioch]." A lovely way of saying they stayed a very *long* time during which a number of things happened, not all of which are recorded in the book of Acts. For a more complete record we need to turn to Galatians 2. When we piece all the data together, the situation looked something like this:

First, there was a great response to the gospel by the Gentiles. When Jesus, the light of the world, was held up to these people, who had walked in darkness, they turned to the light in tremendous numbers. Thousands of them were born again.

Second, there was openhearted enjoyment of their new found freedom in Jesus. The downward tug of paganism which had fed their lower nature was broken. They were free to respond to the upward lift of the Spirit which fed their higher needs.

Third, right in the middle of it all, Peter arrived on the scene. His visit isn't mentioned in Acts 15, but is referred to in Galatians 2:12, "Cephas, that is Peter, came to Antioch." This is the first

time we've heard of Peter for quite awhile. The last time we saw him was following his miraculous escape from jail on the eve of his execution, after which he dropped out of sight (Acts 12:17). Suddenly, he reappeared in Antioch. Apparently he had heard of a great revival among Gentiles, and he came to see firsthand what was happening. He loved what he saw. Based on his own experience with Cornelius the Gentile (Acts 10) he shared sweet, openhearted fellowship with his new Gentile brothers and sisters in Christ.

Fourth, deep concern developed among some in the mother church at Jerusalem over this wholesale conversion and admission of Gentiles into the church. When you think about it, it was a reasonable concern due, in part, to their history. The Jews had been a unique people from the very beginning when God made a covenant with Abraham. They had been the primary channel through which God had done his work in the world. Some Jews wondered if it was fair for Gentiles to get in on what God was doing without "going through the chairs," so to speak, like Jews had done. They were thinking *rationally* based on their history.

They also had their own reading of the scripture. The Lord had made it clear to them that Gentiles *were* going to be saved, but their impression was that it was going to happen by the Gentiles coming into Judaism. *That* was how they read scriptures like Isaiah 60:3, "Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your rising." Based on their limited view of what God was doing in the world, they took that to mean any outsiders who were saved would be so by coming into Judaism.

Then, too, there was their concern that "the tail not wag the dog." They wanted to make sure this mass of Gentiles didn't take over. It didn't take an Einstein, or a son of an Einstein, to do a population tabulation and realize it wouldn't be long before there would be more Gentiles in the church than there were Jews. They saw Christianity as a fulfillment of Judaism, and wondered if it was fair for these "Johnny-come-lately" Gentile Christians to suddenly be in positions of power and authority in the church.

Fifth, a delegation from Judea arrived to study the situation. Without authority to do so, as we learn later, they took matters into their own hands, and decided to straighten these people out. Apparently their efforts were not limited to Antioch, but extended throughout all Galatia where

Paul had established churches. As a consequence, a conflict developed between Christian brothers. “But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brethren, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’ Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debated with them” (Acts 15:1, 2a).

The delegation from Judea claimed that to become a Christian one must first become a Jew. Paul and Barnabas responded, “Not so! By *grace* you are saved through faith *plus nothing*.” Now remember, all involved were Christians. They were all terribly sincere. They were all quite confident they had the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. This was an internal attack by Satan against the body of Christ, and after the delegation arrived a clash developed between Peter and Paul.

Galatians 2:12 makes it clear that Peter acted one way *before* the Judaizers arrived: “For *before* certain men came from James, he ate with the Gentiles” (Galatians 2:12a). *After* they arrived his attitude changed: “When *they* came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party” (Galatians 2:12b, 13). Paul knew this was a denial of the gospel of salvation by grace through faith plus nothing, and Galatians 2:14 records how he rebuked Peter publicly.

Sixth, apparently Peter accepted Paul’s point of view, because a decision was made to face the issue at its source: Jerusalem. This brings us to our text for today: “Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question” (Acts 15:2b).

A Joyful Trip Home

On their way home to Jerusalem Paul and Barnabas took the opportunity to tell the various churches through Phoenicia and Samaria what God was doing among the Gentiles. What a happy journey that must have been. Two hundred miles from Antioch to Caesarea along the seacoast and another sixty miles on up to Jerusalem. Two hundred sixty miles of being nothing but messengers of joy. How that must have given them a lift and prepared them for a clear-cut, out-in-the-open discussion of, and solution to, the two issues facing the church. First, *how* one is saved, and second, how one *relates* to his Christian brothers and sisters *after* he is saved.

Regarding the *salvation* issue, the question was: “Must a Gentile become a Jew in order to become a Christian? Or was simple faith in Jesus Christ enough?”

Regarding the *body-life* issue, the question was: “Must Gentiles live by the law of Moses to have fellowship with their Jewish Christian brothers and sisters? Or is there some other basis on which they can share *koinonia* together?”

If you read this correctly and ponder the depth of emotion and the key nature of these two issues, you realize the church was facing the most significant challenge of its young life. Maybe, just maybe, it was facing the greatest challenge it would *ever* face, because *how* this issue was resolved would, to a large extent, determine how God would continue to do his work in the world.

The Solution

Acts 15: 6-29 gives us the solution. It’s a model for us to follow in resolving key issues and one *this* body has tried to follow, even though we didn’t realize it. It’s neat, sometimes, to discover there’s a name for what you’ve been doing. That you’ve been following God’s principles, even though you didn’t *know* you were following them.

First, they began by getting the body together in an attitude of openness to God’s leading in the matter and, in a spirit of mutual love and respect, to debate the issues. “The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter” (Acts 15:6). This means they did not come with their minds made up. They had concerns. They had convictions. But more important than what *they* thought, was what *God knew!*

If we come together to deal with an issue with our minds made up, we’re “dead on arrival.” But if we come together to deal with an issue and, along with our concerns and convictions, bring a deep desire to know what *God* thinks, what *God* wills, what *God* wants us to do, I believe *any* issue can be resolved in unity.

Go Where God’s Going

Acts 15:7 tells us that after there had been much debate, and a free, open, honest exchange of

views, Peter was led to speak. And this is what he said: God has already declared his position on this issue. Let's see where *God* is going, and go with *him*!

Recalling the experiences discussed in chapters 10 and 11 when he ministered to Cornelius and shared fellowship with him, Peter said, "Brethren, you know that in the early days, God made choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God who knows the heart bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us; and he made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their hearts by faith" (Acts 15:7b).

Peter said, Look! It was *God's* idea to reach the Gentiles in the first place (verse 7). It was *God's* idea to give them the gift of the Holy Spirit (verse 8). It was *God's* idea to not make any distinction between Jew and Gentile, but to treat sinners all alike (verse 9). And, my, how *we* need to emphasize once again the gospel of "no distinction"!

In Romans 3:22-23 the apostle Paul was led to write: "For there is *no distinction*; since *all* have sinned and *all* fall short of the glory of God."

I don't care who you are: rich or poor, black or white, schooled or unschooled, socially accepted or socially overlooked, *whoever* you are, *God* says, you are a sinner! *That's* the way you were born. "*All* have sinned and come short of the glory of God," and *all* need a Savior. There is no distinction.

In Romans 10:12, Paul writes "There is *no distinction*: the same Lord is Lord of *all* and bestows his riches upon *all* who call upon him." *All* are sinners. *All* of us need a Savior. The same Savior is available to *all* of us sinners. I don't care who you are, my friend, Jesus died for *you*. And if you open your heart to him, *you, too*, will be saved, *you, too*, will enjoy the riches of his grace.

By emphasizing the Gospel of *no distinction* as recorded in Acts 15:9 Peter said: God has been at work. God made no distinction. Why grieve God by trying to turn back the clock? Verse 10: "therefore why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which

neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?" You are trying to put your Gentile brothers in bondage to rules and regulations neither you, nor I, nor *any* of our brothers and sisters were able to keep.

He sums it all up in verse 11, and this is the last time we hear from Peter. Later he'll write his epistle, but in the rest of the New Testament there is no further reference to Peter. *But what a lovely swan song it is!* "But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus just as they will" (Acts 15:11). There is absolute certainty. "But we believe that we *shall* be saved . . ." No ifs, ands or buts about it. There is certainty based on a blessed simplicity: "*through the grace of the Lord Jesus.*"

That simplicity was, and continues to be, a stumbling stone to some. Harry Ironside, former pastor of the great Moody Memorial Church in Chicago, tells of a man who was introduced to the simple message of salvation by grace. It seemed too easy for him, so he tried to add something of his own to make peace with God. He joined the church and was baptized. He observed all the rules and the rituals of the church. He joined the choir and got involved in organizations. He helped here. He helped there. Trying to find peace with God. But there was no peace.

One night he was reading Luke 8 and came to the story of the sowers. In verse 11 and 12 his eyes fell on this incredible statement: "The seed is the word of God. The ones along the path are those who have heard. Then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, that they may not *believe* and be saved." The man slammed his Bible shut and said, "Well, what do you know? Even the devil has sense enough to know a man will be saved if he only *believes!*" In that moment the deed was done. He accepted salvation by faith in the pure grace of the Lord Jesus.

Peter's swan song was one of absolute *certainty*, based on a blessed *simplicity*, with unconfined *universality*. "We believe that we *shall be saved* through the grace of the Lord Jesus just as *they will*" (Acts 15:11). We might have expected Peter to say, "We believe *they will* be saved just as *we will*." That sounded more like Peter. But he was so gripped by the unconfined universality of God's amazing grace, he turned it around and said, "God is saving [us *Jews*] in

exactly the same way as he is saving [*Gentiles*]. There is no distinction. *That's* the direction God is going, let's go with him!"

First, they got their act together in a spirit of openness to where God was leading and decided to follow him. *Second*, they discerned how God was working in the world and decided to work with him. "And all the assembly kept silence, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles" (Acts 15:12). To their credit, Paul and Barnabas did not get into the debate, and there was a complete lack of defensiveness on their part. All they did was tell what God had done. In that regard, they were experts. Nobody could argue with that.

Third, they got courageous. They followed the possibly unpopular, but strong, leadership of James, their leader. Who was he? He was a brother of Jesus who did not believe Jesus was the Messiah until *after* the resurrection when he was converted. Later he became pastor of the Jerusalem church.

James was a strict conservative and was concerned about keeping the law, as well as following the Lord. It was he who sent the delegation up to Antioch to check out the rumors that Jews were fellowshipping en masse with Gentiles, a very un-Jewish thing to do.

If the Judaizers had expected James to take *their* side in the debate, they were in for a surprise. Verse 14 records how James affirmed Symeon, that is Peter, and in verses 15-18, he showed how Peter's earlier report was a fulfillment of scripture. In a rather free quotation of Amos 9:11-12 (see Acts 15:17-18), James pointed out that God's intention to save Gentiles, as well as Jews, was not *new*. God made *that* known long ago.

In verses 19-21, James suggests a course of action which is, in effect, a compromise, "Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the pollution of idols and from unchastity and from what is strangled and from blood. For from early generations Moses has had in every city those who preach him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues."

Regarding issue number one--*how* one is saved--James said, Paul is right. Let's not trouble the Gentiles who turn to God with a bunch of prerequisites to their becoming full-fledged members of the body. It's clear they are being saved by grace just as we are. They do not have to first become Jews in order to become Christians.

On the second issue--how one *relates* to his Christian brothers and sisters *after* he's saved--James says Peter is right. Let's urge voluntary abstention on the part of Gentiles from a few things which are terribly offensive to the Jews. When Peter was with the Gentiles who were enjoying their freedom in Christ, he enjoyed his freedom along *with* them. But when the Judaizers arrived, Peter sensed they might be hurt and hindered by what he was doing, *so he stopped* it.

The issue was a spirit of sensitivity on Peter's part as to where his brothers and sisters in Christ were coming from. Not to just validate his own Christianity, but to help maintain a spirit of unity in the bond of peace. And Peter did this, not because of *law*, but because of *love*!

Later Paul will say the same thing. In Romans 14:1 ff and 1 Corinthians 8:1 ff, Paul will point out that many things are legal which mature Christians choose not to do out of concern for a weaker brother or sister. I always thought a "weaker brother" was one who wasn't as strong as I. Now I realize that, in the context of the times, "weaker" refers to the minority. At first, the majority of Christians were Jews, but Jewish Christians were rapidly becoming a minority in the body. So the principle James puts forward is this: out of concern for a sincere *minority* and their hangups, let the majority *voluntarily* abstain from certain things.

Christians have a double freedom. We are free to. We are also free not to. As we grow in the exercise of our freedom in Christ, let's not make the mistake of labeling as "legalism" the decision of Spirit-filled Christians who choose to exercise their freedom *not* to do something, out of concern for their brothers and sisters. They are acting in love, not legality. They are exercising their freedom *not* to, for the sake of unity within the body.

Acts 15:22-29 Get Consensus and Implement It

Finally, the leaders got consensus and implemented it by communicating what pleased the Holy

Spirit and them to propose. Verse 22: “Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, *with the whole church*” to send a letter of instruction to Antioch. It’s a beautiful letter.

We haven’t time to go over it in detail, but let me read the salutation in verse 23. “The *brethren*, both the apostles and the elders, to the *brethren* who are of the Gentiles in Antioch.” The *brethren* address you as *brethren!* What a tender note of acceptance and unity.

Verse 28: “For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things.” And the necessary things are *not* necessary for *salvation*, but to make possible a free experience of fellowship within the body without offending anyone.

Acts 15:30-35 The Situation Revisited

When, in verses 30-35, we return to Antioch, the situation has changed. Where there had been discord, there is peace. Where there had been a sense of alienation, there is a sense of belonging. Where there had been a kind of spiritual depression, there is a state of spiritual elation. Differences which *could* have divided were overcome by decisions which united.

The whole story of chapter 15 is summarized in our key truth: *God has no standard brand of conversion, holiness or expression of faith.* God is a God of infinite variety. He has never made two people, two snowflakes, two eyeballs, two fingerprints alike. And no two conversions are alike. No two experiences of holiness are alike. No two expressions of faith are alike. There is no standard brand anything with God. When the New Testament church got hold of that wonderful truth they were free to be what God wanted them to be.

The very last verse of our text, Acts 15:35, records how, in the beginning, there had been few in positions of leadership, now there were many. The disciple/discipler process, without which the church could not win the world, was working. The effectiveness of the church was growing.

Satan’s attack from within was met in a way which allowed God’s love to be seen through the actions and attitudes of his people. As a result the church was stronger than ever before. More and more people wanted to get in on what God was doing. More and more were excited about God as *peacemaker*. And the stage was set for the next great step in extending the gospel: “to

the end of the earth.”

So What?

What would God have you do in response to what you have heard? *“It pleases the Holy Spirit and me”* to say to you: make a list of everyone whom you may have offended through insensitivity to where they were coming from, or through insistence that God only works in one way, *your* way. There may be several names on your list, so over it and select the *one* person from whom you most need to ask forgiveness. Seek the mind of Christ as to the precise thing for which you are to seek their forgiveness. Then *today*, not tomorrow or the day after, but *today* pick up the phone, call that brother or sister. Tell them God has shown you exactly why you need seek their forgiveness and ask them: Will you forgive me for (be precise)? That puts the ball in their court. If *they* choose *not* to forgive you, *you* will have done what God requires of you, and you’ll be blest for that. If they *do* forgive you, believe me, *both* of you will be blest beyond belief. If there is any unfinished business in this body, let’s get it finished today.

“It pleases the Holy Spirit and me” to exhort you to do that.

The Church Extended - Part 5

Acts 15:36-16:12

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Key Truth: Our diversity need not disrupt our unity in Christ

Attribute: God is diverse.

We have an unusually interesting passage of scripture to deal with today and from it we have taken our key truth: *Our diversity need not disrupt our unity in Christ*. Actually, there are two key truths in this passage. When we were studying the book of Philippians some time ago we emphasized the wonderful revelation that: *The stops as well as the steps of God's people are ordered by the Lord*. It's a wonderful truth which threads its way through our text alongside today's key truth: *Our diversity need not disrupt our unity in Christ*.

Complications--Acts 15:36-38

“And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Come, let us return and visit the brethren in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are’” (Acts 15:36). Paul and Barnabas each had what I call a pastor's heart. They knew, as every God-guided pastor knows: Christians do not emerge topsy-like, as full-blown, spiritually mature members of the body of Christ. Growth must follow birth. Every parent knows a baby does not achieve maturity at the moment of his or her birth even though, at the moment of birth that baby has all the potential for maturity and growth it will ever have.

You may remember my sharing with you the first time Jodi saw her hand. She was about six months old. We were in New Jersey conducting a state-wide evangelistic crusade. One afternoon she was sitting on the floor of our hotel room, propped up with pillows. She was looking around when she saw this thing. She moved it around. She started to laugh and giggle. She was fascinated with this new discovery. Her coordination wasn't so good and suddenly it was gone. A sad cloud filled her face. So I grabbed her hand, pulled it back where she could see it, and Jodi squealed with delight. She had discovered her hand.

She had it from the moment of her birth. Her ability to use it was in the infant stage, and since then she's trained that hand to do many wonderful things. But the potential to do those

wonderful things was there at the moment of her birth. If she was going to develop into a wonderful singer, like her mother, that talent was in her from the moment of her birth. She just had to develop it, which she did! If she was going to become wise and handsome like her father . . . well, you can push any illustration too far!

Parents know you don't bring a baby into the world and let it go. It requires lots of tender loving care to reach its full potential. As a result, every successful parent is a prisoner of love. From the moment that baby comes into the world until the Lord calls it home, its parents are prisoners of love. Every married couple knows, or will know if they read my book, *Marriage At Its Best*, that having a preacher say "I pronounce you man and wife" is no guarantee of success. The marriage ceremony is not an end in itself. It is a means to the end of their developing and becoming one flesh. And every God-guided pastor knows he or she cannot settle for evangelism without discipleship. Evangelism without discipleship does not produce healthy Christians.

Well, Paul and Barnabas each had a pastor's heart. They were eager to return to the places where they had started churches to learn what God had been doing in the lives of those whom they had earlier led to the Lord.

Verses 37 through the first half of 39 reveal the latent potential of conflict which lurks within the so-called best of Christians. "And Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphilia and had not gone with them to the work. There arose a sharp contention so that they separated from each other; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of the Lord."

Here we have another of the dirty tricks Satan uses to destroy God's work and God's workers. He got these two good friend fussing with each other in an effort to not only destroy *their* ministry, but to deny John Mark the opportunity to develop all he was meant to be.

In a moment we will see how God used this evil for good. But first I want you to see how Satan attacked Paul and Barnabas in an area of strength which also proved to be an area of

vulnerability.

From our study of these men we know both of them had the motivational gift of exhortation. As a consequence they got along well and could work effectively in ministry. But because they both had the *same* gift, they were also vulnerable to the potential conflict which exists between exhorters.

We have a cassette album on Spiritual Gifts, and the listening guide spells out a dozen or so characteristics of people with the gift of exhortation. For instance, they delight in individual or group encounters which produce growth. They need visual response to affirm the ministry they are performing. For instance, I love teaching people who smile or nod when they agree, or sometimes shake their head when they disagree! They're listening! That means a lot to me because my spiritual gift is exhortation.

Exhorters love to be associated with people who respond to action steps designed to produce growth. And exhorters are frustrated when people don't respond to suggested steps of action. When filled with the Spirit, that is, when they are under the domination and control and direction of the Holy Spirit, exhorters express wisdom, discernment, faith, discretion, self-control, creativity and enthusiasm. Conversely, when in a carnal state, exhorters express natural inclinations, a judgmental attitude, are presumptuous, sometimes gullible, and instead of being creative and enthusiastic will underachieve, even be apathetic.

How did this work in the case of Paul and Silas? The text is quite clear. Paul expressed an exhorter's need for visual affirmation of his ministry. He could not get over the sight of John Mark's back as he walked off from them in Pamphilia. Barnabas, with an urgent desire to see John Mark grow, seemed to Paul shallow and weak on discipline. So we find them fussing with each other. Paul expressed his natural inclination to "Let's get the show on the road." Barnabas expressed a Spirit-filled desire to see John Mark grow. Paul showed a judgmental attitude. Barnabas showed a spirit of discernment. Even though they had the same spiritual gift, Paul and Barnabas were diverse and expressed their gift differently.

This is also illustrated in verses 37 and 38 where, in both verses, we find the verb "to take." In

English the verb looks the same. But in Greek it's interestingly different. In verse 37, where Barnabas wants to "to take" Mark, the verb is in the aorist tense. It describes a given decision at a given point in time which would give the boy a second chance.

In verse 38 the verb "to take" is in the present tense. Paul was saying, look , *right now*, I don't want to go through my days with a sense of uncertainty about having a young man alongside me who may, or may not, prove to be reliable.

The complications we see in this section of our text result from Satan's misuse of a beautiful gift of God: their spiritual gift of exhortation. And because they were both exhorters, they were uniquely vulnerable to Satan's dirty trick.

Contention--Acts 15:39-41

As a result of all this, "There arose a sharp contention, so that they separated from each other" (Acts 15:39). That is to say, there was an animated, full-of-feeling conversation.

The word "contention" is very interesting. It is built out of two words, *para* meaning "beside, in a very intensive way," and *doxis* which means "sharp." It describes a "stone on steel action." A sharpening, stimulating, stirring-up process. As used here in Acts 15:39 it suggests a negative result. But provocation can also help us and motivate us. It can "stir us up" to do good works depending on how we respond to it.

We have a tendency to "fill in the blanks" when we don't have all the facts, and what Luke gives us here is a kind of "shorthand history." While most interpreters put a negative meaning on this event, I'm not sure that's an accurate reading of this text. Based on all the evidence, I think that while they went through an animated, full-of-feeling conversation, these two Godly men finally agreed to disagree. Because Barnabas said, "I'll take Mark and go to Cyprus," and Paul said, "I'll take Silas and go north."

One reason I'm hesitant to come down too hard on these fellows is because I can see the Genesis 50:20 principle of God using evil for good at work here. Instead of *one* missionary team, we now have two. Instead of *two* men developing their leadership ministries, we now

have four. There's Paul and Barnabas. There is also Silas and John Mark. Silas was given an opportunity to develop his spiritual gift of prophesy. John Mark was given an opportunity to develop his spiritual gift, which I think may have been service.

Also, instead of a strictly pastoral ministry to churches already in existence, an expanding ministry of evangelism and discipleship developed. Barnabas was able to concentrate on Cyprus, and the work there became a strong center of Christian growth and development. Because Paul does not have to bother his mind about Cyprus, *he* was free to go "through Syria and Cilicia" (Acts 15:41). This was where he spent ten silent years before Barnabas came up from Antioch to bring him back as an assistant. Apparently Paul started churches in Syria and Cilicia, and he ministered there until, as we shall see, he established a foothold for the gospel in Europe.

Instead of John Mark being under pressure to prove himself to Paul, he was given the support and love of Barnabas under whom he began to blossom and develop his spiritual gift of service. Later, John Mark wrote the first of the four gospels, the gospel of Mark, and what was the theme of his gospel? Jesus, the perfect servant. He also developed into one whom Paul later looked to for strength and solace. In 2 Timothy 4:7 Paul says, please send Mark to be with me, because he consoles me. This young man, who had gotten off to an unfortunate start, was able to grow into a mighty man of God because of the encouragement and support he received from Barnabas. I have a Sunday school teacher who, whenever she sees me, says, "I praise the Lord because when I begin to doubt the grace of God, I think of you." I take that as a compliment.

Instead of this becoming a serious, deep-cutting, permanent division, everyone involved acted in a Spirit-filled way, and Mark became one whom Paul specifically asked for. In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul speaks of Barnabas as being an apostle *with* him. Though they parted at one time and went their different ways, there came a time when, once again, they ministered *together*, possibly in Corinth.

Because the people involved fought effective spiritual warfare, and because of God's never-ending commitment of using evil for good, when Satan tried to divide the work and workers in God's Kingdom with another of his dirty tricks, once again he failed. Truly as our key truth

declares, *Our diversity need not disrupt our unity in Christ.*

Confirmation--Acts 16:1-2

Moving into chapter 16, the first five verses provide a beautiful confirmation of the fact that God was, indeed, using evil for good. “And he came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish mother who was a believer, but his father was a Greek” (Acts 16:1-2).

Because Paul didn't go to Cyprus, he was able to move along the coast up to Syria and Cilicia, visit his home town of Tarsus, and then take the shortcut up to the great Galatian plateau 3,000 feet above sea level. Paul had originally gone from Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and onto Derbe. This time he went from Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch.

At Lystra, where Paul had been stoned and left for dead, he found Timothy. This is another illustration of God's commitment to using evil for good. Apparently, among those disciples who stood outside Lystra and mourned the apparent death of their beloved Paul, was Timothy. He witnessed Paul's healing or supernatural resuscitation. Combined with the touch of God upon his own life, this witness of the touch of God upon Paul's life left Timothy a changed young man. He was never the same.

Acts 16:2-3 reveal the fact that he was well spoken of. That is to say, behind his words were actions. Verse 3 provides Timothy's unusual qualifications for ministry. He was young, with great natural talents, and Paul would later call him “my son.” Paul led Timothy to the Lord, and had the joy of parenting him into spiritual maturity.

In addition to Paul's influence, Timothy had the wonderful heritage of a Godly mother and grandmother who taught him the Old Testament scriptures, so he had a clear grasp of God's game plan. He could see how Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies and provisions.

Then, too, his calling to ministry was proved by actual ministry in his home church. He served where he lived and was blessed for that. The Bible says, “A prophet has no honor in his own

country” (John 4:44). To his credit Timothy grew in favor with God and man in the toughest of places, his home town of Lystra which, as Paul found out, was not kind to Christians.

Circumcision--Acts 16:3-6; 1 Corinthians 9:19-22

In verse 3 we come to “the circumcision issue.” This involved an action Paul took which has been widely misunderstood, and for which he has come into no end of criticism. “Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews that were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek” (Acts 16:3).

Expositors have differing views of this action. Many of them are exceedingly tough on Paul. They point out that because he did this as an accommodation, he provided the Judaizers with a bit of evidence to support their claim that Paul preached circumcision, which he did not. Furthermore, it was one of those “no-win” situations. Timothy’s mother was Jewish and his father was Greek. Everybody knew that, and the Jews had this hangup about people who were Jewish who were being welcomed into the church without being obedient to the provisions of the law. Paul was in a tough, no-win situation. Sort of like a toy I saw in a toy store several years ago. I tried to play with it without success. “What is this?” I asked the manager of the department. He said, “This is a toy designed to help our children adapt to the present world. Anyway they put it together, it’s wrong.”

That was the situation Paul was in. Anyway he did it, was wrong. Well, for what it’s worth, I think Paul did the right thing. In 1 Corinthians 9:19-22 he explains the principle that guided his ministry: “For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law, I became as one under the law--though not being myself under the law--that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law (the Gentiles) I became as one outside the law--not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ--that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to men, that I might by all means save some.”

That was his strategy. It was also a matter of expediency. The key issue of how Gentiles are saved had been settled at the Jerusalem council as we learned last week. They decided Gentiles

did not have to become Jews to become Christians. So the key issue had been settled. This was a *specific case* of a young man who was clearly born again, and everybody knew it. He was ministering in the churches where he lived. So his circumcision had nothing whatsoever to do with his *becoming* a Christian. He already was one.

I think Paul told Timothy something like this: Why make your ministry to Jews more difficult than it has to be? Let's go through this simple surgical procedure, even though from an exterior point of view it really means nothing. True circumcision is a matter of the heart, not external but internal. But let's go through this, Timothy, so when you're with the Gentiles you can use your Greek background to reach them. And when you're with Jews, there will be nothing to offend them. And that way you can reach both Jews *and* Gentiles.

That's what they did, and judging from Acts 16:4-5, it worked. "As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions (the decrees, the official declarations) which had come down from the apostles and elders who were at Jerusalem."

There were two issues. First, how a Gentile is *saved*: he doesn't have to become a Jew before he can become a Christian. Second, how a Gentile *behaves* around Jews. He expresses his freedom in Christ by exercising his responsibility to, and concern for, his Jewish brother, and from time to time, voluntarily abstains from things he knows could be an offense to the Jews.

Several years ago we had Barry McGuire sing and witness here. Barry had been the lead male player in the musical "Hair." He was heavily involved in drugs and sexual promiscuity. He had written music deliberately designed to undermine the morals of the kids who listened to it. When he came to Christ he had to give up music. *All kinds of music!* That seems silly to us. We can't understand why anybody would have to give up music. But for Barry McGuire, music was so deeply and sadly linked with his past there was a period of time when he could not play, sing, or listen to music of *any sort*.

In time God gave Barry back his song. I remember him standing here, a big bear of a man, tapping his foot. I thought he was going to shake the church down, singing, "It's a happy day, and I praise God for the weather. . . ." Man! What joy he exuded when God gave him back his

song. But it wasn't always that way. And during the time he was discovering his new freedom in Christ, I think any brother or sister who was sensitive to where he was coming from would have voluntarily abstained from the enjoyment of music for the sake of this "weaker" brother.

Those were the two decrees: You don't have to become a Jew to become a Christian, but because you *are* a Gentile, and because you will be with the Jews who have certain hangups, when you are with them exercise the principle of freedom with responsibility. For their sake, adjust your behavior.

Paul and Timothy followed that principle. "So [or as a consequence] the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily" (Acts 16:5). Inwardly they were solidified in the faith of the Lord Jesus Christ and his saving grace. Outwardly they increased in number. A beautiful illustration of God using evil for good.

Consternation--Acts 16:6-8

Sadly, confirmation was followed by "And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And when they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas."

I have given this section of text the memory hook of "Consternation." It was a period of real perplexity for Paul. Everywhere he went, he ran into closing doors. God kept saying no, no, no.

Over in the west there was the tremendous city of Ephesus where Paul would love to have gone to preach, but God said, "no." Down in the south was malaria country. Paul was susceptible to that disease. As a consequence God said, "no." They had just come from the east, so the only path left was to the north. But, when they tried to go that way the Lord, said, "no." Everywhere Paul turned, the door was shut. But shutting doors one after another, the Holy Spirit kept Paul from going in the wrong direction. After God said a resounding "no" to all of *Paul's* plans, the Spirit turned him in the only direction left: the *northwest*.

Acts 16:8 tells us he made his way to Troas. What happened in Troas? He met Luke, the

beloved Physician. Now, remember, Paul had a thorn in the flesh. Whatever “that thorn” was, apparently it required continuing treatment by a physician. Luke was able to provide that! But more exciting than that is the fact that most Bible scholars believe Luke was from Macedonia. When God said “no” by closing all the doors in all the other directions, He opened the window to Europe by putting Paul in touch with a man from Macedonia who, while he was nursing him back to health, was able to lay upon the sensitive heart of God’s man a burden for a part of the world Paul had not thought of, but had been in God’s mind all along.

Conclusion--Acts 16:11b-12

Out of consternation came a wonderful conclusion. “And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: A man of Macedonia was standing beseeching him and saying, ‘Com[e] over to Macedonia and help us.’ And when he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. Setting sail therefore from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace.”

I don’t want to play down the vision, but I do want to remind you that we know enough about dreams to know that our conscious experience throughout the day becomes the stuff our subconscious mind uses at night to give us insight and understanding through dreams. Perhaps Paul’s daily exposure to Luke, his doctor, was the stuff God used to speak to him through the night in a dream. At any rate, verse 10 says Paul concluded “God had called [him] to preach the gospel [to Europe].”

One of the most inspiring moments of my life occurred while traveling across Turkey, the modern name for the area we’re talking about. Turkey is not only a magnificent country, it is one San Joaquin Valley after another. Potentially, Turkey is one of the richest agricultural areas on earth, and clearly one of the richest archeological areas in the world. A beautiful, beautiful country. When we came to Troas, I remember sitting on a stone wall, which had been standing when Saint Paul was there, and I looked across the Aegean Sea and realized *this* was where it all started for you and me. Because if Paul had resisted the will of God and had failed to follow God’s guidance to Troas, and then on to Europe, you and I may never have had the chance to know the Lord. I remember bowing my head, and using that old rock wall as an altar, I praised God for the obedience and faith and sensitivity of Paul.

Verse 11 gives us a wonderful closing thought: “Setting sail therefore from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis,” which was the port of Europe. That phrase, “a direct voyage” is a nautical term that means, “sailing before the wind.” The voyage only took two days because the wind was with them. Later, on their return voyage, it took five days because the wind was against them.

Sometimes when we’re doing God’s work the wind is with us, and sometimes it’s against us. In each case God is using that circumstance for good. On this *particular* occasion God’s man was sailing with the wind. Zipping past the treacherous cross currents surrounding the island of Samothrace. Arriving safely and swiftly at Neapolis where he established a toehold for the gospel in Europe. Later, Europe became a launching pad for sending the Gospel to America, and from America “to the end of the earth”(Acts 1:8). Wow!

Truly, when God’s people get in God’s will and out of God’s way things really happen. Praise God for the clarity of our key truth: *Our diversity need not disrupt our unity in Christ*. And, I might add, both the efficiency and effectiveness of our ministry in the name of Jesus.

The Church Extended – Part 6

Acts 16:13-34

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Key Truth: There is power in praise

Attribute: God is praiseworthy

We have a beautiful story in front of us today. It is a story about people. All kinds of people. Rich people, poor people, old people, young people, middle-aged people, good people, bad people, male people, female people. All kinds of people, and how the gospel affects those people. It's also a story about power. All kinds of power. God's power, Satan's power, civil power, manpower, spiritual power. And, it's a story about praise. All kinds of praise. By all kinds of people. In all kinds of situations.

A Story About People: Lydia

You remember from our study last week that while Paul was in Troas he received a vision of the need to carry the Gospel to Europe when, in a dream, he heard a man from Macedonia say, "Come over and help us." Acts 16:11ff tells us they set sail immediately and "made a direct voyage to Samothrace," a beautiful island in the Aegean Sea rising 5,000 feet above sea level. The following day they traveled to Neopolis, which is modern Coballa, and from there to Philippi, which is the leading city on Macedonia and a Roman colony.

We pick the story up at verse 12b: "And we remained in this city some days. On the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together" (Acts 16:12b-13). Notice the change in Paul's modus operandi. In the past he had always headed to the nearest synagogue because he wanted to have a hearing there. Because there would be people familiar with the Old Testament prophecies regarding the coming Messiah, he would have a natural audience to use as a springboard to the community.

Philippi was a Roman colony and apparently there were few Jews there. We know for certain there were fewer than ten Jewish men because, according to the provisions of Judaism, where

there were at least ten Jewish men in a community there was to be a synagogue. Since there was no synagogue in Philippi, it's clear there were fewer than ten Jewish men there. So Paul took his growing ministry team of Silas, Timothy and Luke about a mile and a half outside of town to a little river where they had heard about a group of women gathered there to pray. They sat down and began to chat with them. This is an interesting change in Paul's ministry style. Usually he was an energetic, assertive speaker who *stood* to preach. In this more informal setting, he sat down and in a casual way began to share the gospel with these women.

A powerful principle to guide us in our ministry emerges: the inability to do all we would *like* to do is no excuse not to do all we *can*. We would all *like* to have the best possible setting in which to present the Gospel. We would all *like* to have the necessary resources with which to do an aesthetically attractive and intellectually effective job. But in the absence of the right atmosphere, and right tools, and right setting, we need to do what Paul and his team did. They made the best of the situation in which they found themselves.

So out by the riverside they sat down to share the gospel with whom? *Women!* Paul not only worked with *what* he had, Paul also worked with *whom* he had. Despite what some of his critics say, Paul was not a misogynist. A woman hater. Nor did he put women down. He honored them and ministered to them with the same care and concern with which he ministered to men.

Verse 14 identifies one of these people to whom they spoke. "One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God." Even though there was no Jewish synagogue in Philippi, coming as she did from Thyatira, Lydia had heard the marvelous message of Judaism: there is *one* God whom *both men and women* are free to worship. She was drawn to that one God and was learning to worship him. "The Lord opened her heart to give heed to what was said by Paul. And when she was baptized, with her household, she besought us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.' and she prevailed upon us" (Acts 16:12:b-13).

Lydia represents what we might call the "up-and-outers." The well-to-do. The prominent people in a community. If she were living today she would be a leading member of, maybe the

president of, the Professional Women's Club. She was middle-aged. Probably a widow, for while there is no reference here to a husband, there *is* reference to "her household," which may have included sons and daughters.

A Story of Power: Lydia

As we've said, Lydia was a God-fearer. Even though she was well-to-do, well thought of, and religious, she still needed Jesus. The *power* of the Holy Spirit had been at work in her life to convince and convert her because scripture says she had "an open heart." She had enough of this world's goods, and enough of this world's glory, to know they do not satisfy the deepest needs of the human heart. She was aware of the Messianic hope, and when Paul told her that in the person of Jesus Christ, God had come to declare himself in human flesh, her heart rejoiced at this good news and she accepted Jesus as her Savior.

Her openness to the gospel created an atmosphere in which it was comfortable for the people who worked for her, and lived with her, to also respond to the gospel. That says a lot about the kind of "boss lady" Lydia was. And when the baptismal service was over, she invited Paul and his team to come to her home.

A Story of Praise: Lydia

Though it isn't stated here, I'm sure there was a great deal of praise. Praise on the part of those touched by the gospel. And praise on the part of Paul for this marvelous provision. With "room and board" provided, it wasn't necessary for him and his team to work at their trades to keep body and soul together. Their basic needs were being met and they were free to preach the gospel.

The Story About People: A Slave Girl

We know from the text that Paul and his team stayed in Philippi several weeks. On a subsequent Sabbath, while they were heading out of town to the riverside for a time of worship and praise, they encountered another of the people whom the Holy Spirit singles out in this story about people, power and praise: a poor, vulnerable, demon-directed slave girl whom greedy men were using for their personal profit. "As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by

soothsaying. She followed Paul and us, crying, ‘These men are servants of the most high God who proclaim to you the way of salvation’ and this she did for many days. Paul was annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, ‘I charge you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.’ And it came out *that very hour*” (Acts 16:16-18).

If Lydia was an “up-and-outer”: well-to-do, middle-aged, and religious, the slave girl was “a down-and-outer”: young, poor, vulnerable and pagan--the kind of troubled woman who often becomes a toy and tool in the hands of godless men. The phrase “her masters” indicates these were not only cynical and selfish men, they were sinister and sinful men who were making money off this girl dominated by “a spirit of divination.” She brought “much gain” to them “by telling fortunes” (Acts 16:16).

Luke, the author of the book of Acts, was a physician and was able to diagnose her problem as spirit-possession. She was involved in the occult and provided Satan with an opportunity to employ another of his dirty tricks to shut down God’s work and shut up God’s workers. In recent weeks we’ve talked about a variety of dirty tricks Satan used. They fall into two classifications. Overt and covert. Earlier Satan was clearly an adversary. This time, he came disguised as an apparent advocate.

Sometimes the enemy works from the outside. In other cases he works from the inside. Sometimes his modus operandi is persecution. At other times it is patronization. Of these two forms of trickery, the latter is the most difficult to discern and defend against. In essence, Satan said if you can’t beat them, join them. Tell the people what they want to hear, get them indebted to me and soon they’ll be serving me.

It’s also interesting to note that controlled by “a spirit of divination” this poor slave girl declared the truth. What she said was true. “ These men are servants of the most high God who proclaim to you the way of salvation” (Acts 16:17). That was true. But it is possible to say the right thing in the wrong way. That was what happened here. In a kind of shrill, sing-songy, unnerving voice, she shrieked these words day after day after day.

A Story About Power: A Slave Girl

Finally, Paul grew weary of hearing this unsolicited testimonial from Satan, and decided to deal with the distraction. Our text says, “He was annoyed” (Acts 16:18a). Another translation says he was “grieved.” By putting those two translations together we really get the sense of his feeling. He was “annoyed” because, as an exhorter, he was dependent upon the reaction of his audience. He wanted to see it in their eyes and on their faces. (As an exhorter myself, when you nod and smile and say, “Amen” or “Praise the Lord,” you bless me. If you drop off to sleep, you don’t.) So Paul was “annoyed” because it triggered his exhorter’s need for the right kind of response.

He was also “grieved.” I believe he was expressing that part of the fruit of the Spirit called “goodness.” “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and *goodness*.” Goodness is not *doing* good, goodness is *loving* good to the point of hating evil because of what it does to God’s children. A Spirit-filled Christian will not only *do* good, he or she will *love* good to the point of hating that which brings havoc and hurt to the people of God. And I believe Paul was expressing the fruit of the Spirit called goodness, he turned on that “spirit of divination.” He said, “to the spirit” (notice he didn’t talk to the girl, but to the evil spirit *in* her) “I charge you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her” (Acts 16:18a), and she was instantaneously delivered. “It came out *that very hour*” Acts 16:18b). Indeed this is a story about power.

A Story About Praise: A Slave Girl

While there is no specific reference to praise in our text, I’m confident this is also a story about praise, at least on the part of the *people* who were trying to hear Paul preach, for their response must have been, “Praise the Lord, she’s still.”

A Story About People: The Crowd

You’d think, that after such a crushing defeat, Satan would roll over and play dead. But that’s not how he plays the game. Moving on to verse 19: “When her owners saw their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the rulers; and when they had brought them to the magistrates they said, ‘These men are Jews and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs which it is not lawful for us Romans to accept or practice.’ The crowd joined in attacking Paul and Silas; and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. And when they had inflicted many blows

upon them, they threw them into prison, charging the jailer to keep them safely.” Here again, we have a story about people: a whole menagerie of sin-sick people. The slave owners, the politicians, the civil servants, the magistrates, and the local citizens.

A Story About Power: The Opposition

But this is also a story about power because they were all involved in an out-and-out, clear-cut demonstration of raw power:

In verse 19, it was physical abuse power. “(The slave owners) seized Paul and Silas and dragged them before the rulers . . .”.

In verse 20, it was name-calling power. “These men are *Jews*.” It was an inflammatory phrase designed to triggered the anti-Semitic feelings in the Gentiles present.

In verse 22a, it was mob power. “The crowd joined in attacking (Paul).”

In verse 22b, it was an abuse of civil power. “The magistrates tore the garments off them and gave order to beat them with rods.”

A Story About Praise – Romans 8:28

For a while, it looked like the progress of God’s men and mission was stalled. But praise the Lord, Paul was about to have a personal experience with the Genesis 50:20 principle, “You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.”

A Story About People: The Philippian Jailer

It’s here we’re introduced to the third of the main figures in our story of people, power and praise: the Philippian jailer. If Lydia was an “up-and-outer,” and the slave girl was a “down-and-outer,” the Philippian jailer was an “out-and-outer.” By that I mean he did whatever he did with all of his heart. Verse 24: “Having received this charge, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.”

A Story About Power: A Philippian Jailer

This was a brutal form of punishment. The stocks consisted of a big plank into which holes had been cut at two-foot intervals. Then the plank was split and hinged. The prisoner’s feet were put in these holes and the upper half of the plank was locked down so the prisoner was immobile. Depending on whether or not his wife had fixed him a good dinner, the jailer could

put their feet two feet apart or four feet apart or six feet apart!

A Story About Praise: The Philippian Jailer

This looks like another of those hopeless situations in which “wrong is on the throne and right is on the scaffold.” Well, there *is* a certain dimension to life which is bewildering to us because God’s logic is illogical from our point of view. There are times when what God allows simply does not make sense. This was one of them. But it turned out to be a marvelous opportunity in which God’s people could practice and experience the power of praise. “But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them” (Acts 16:25).

The Anatomy of Praise

Here we have a lovely description of the anatomy of praise.

First of all, *Praise is Directional*. Praise is prayer directed to *God*. It isn’t talking *about* God in the abstract sense. It is talking *to* God and telling him what it is that we enjoy about him. What it is we love and appreciate about him. Paul and Silas were praying “*to God*”. They were “singing hymns *to God*.” I don’t know about you, but I tend to agree with the fellow who said, “If I had been one of those guys in that prison, my song would have been ‘Rescue the perishing, care for the dying.’” But Paul and Silas sang hymns of *praise*. My favorite hymn is “It’s Well with My Soul.” The second verse expresses what I think Paul and Silas prayed.

“Though Satan should buffet,
though trials should come,
let this blest assurance control,
that God has observed my helpless estate,
and hath said, ‘It is well with my soul.’”

When God’s people are committed to a lifestyle of praise, as Paul and Silas were, then whether it’s in sunshine or in shadow, God gives them a song. They sang. Oh, how they sang! And the prisoners heard them. Can’t you imagine the effect that music and those prayers must have had upon their fellow prisoners? Somebody has said, “Christians either betray Christ, or they portray Christ.” Paul and Silas obviously portrayed Christ through their prayer and their praise.

Can't you imagine the other prisoners saying, "What kind of men are these? How can they possibly lie there in their own blood, on those torn and bleeding backs, and not only pray, but sing! And thank God for their prison cell!" But that's the nature of praise you see.

Secondly, *Praise is Intentional*. It is a choice we make, not a feeling we have. It is living in the center of God's will despite one's feelings.

I heard a cute story yesterday about a monastery where the monks take a vow of silence. Every ten years they are allowed to say two words. After one monk had been in the monastery for ten years he was invited to say what he had on his mind. His two words were: "Bad food." The abbot said, "You're certainly right, and we'll see if we can't do something about that. Thank you." Ten years pass and he was invited to say what was on his mind. His two words were: "Roof leaks." The abbot said, "Yes, we know and we'll try to fix it. Thank you." Another 10 years went by and the monk was asked if he had anything to say. He answered, "I quit." The next day the abbot wrote a report to his superior. "In many ways this is regrettable, but on the other hand it's a blessing. Every time he opened his mouth he was complaining."

1 Thessalonians 5:18 says, "In everything give thanks for *this* (learning to praise God **in** everything) is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus." That was a principle Paul practiced. He discovered the power of praise. He learned praise is positive thinking of the highest order because it is centered in the sovereignty of God. In the deep, deep, deep conviction that: *God is!* That God is the God of history and therefore life has meaning in and of itself. That when one gets with God, life has meaning because his or her little slice of life is a part of what *God is doing*. That means one's presence has meaning. Therefore, we can praise him in the here and now. Regardless of the circumstance in which we find ourselves. This frees us from longing for the past, or looking to the future. It equips us to live victoriously and joyously *in the present*. First, praise is directional. It is expressed *to God*. Second, praise is intentional. It is something we choose to do.

Third, *Praise is both Personal and Communal*. I hope you will practice praise in the privacy of your home so when we gather together in God's house our communal praise will be open, free and easy.

I grew up in an old fashioned, uptight Baptist church. Every time somebody says, “Raise your hand to praise the Lord” I get arthritis in my shoulders. But I’m loosening up a bit. Some time back I got a letter regarding someone I love with a pastor’s heart, and how in a certain crisis she learned to trust and praise God. I dropped the letter, lifted my hands overhead and went around the house saying, “Praise the Lord. Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise him. Praise him.” I wouldn’t dare do that in public. Oops! I just did I? Well, if you and I can get comfortable in personal praise, perhaps we will also learn to enjoy communal praise.

There’s power in praise because it gives God an opportunity to use evil for good. That’s His commitment, from the very beginning, to use evil for good. But He has chosen not to violate the royalty of human will. When, in a given situation, we curse him, when we rebel against him, when we alienate ourselves from him, we place ourselves in a self-imposed dungeon which shuts off his power to use evil for good. We’re lost. We’re defeated. We’re overwhelmed. A few days ago, a friend of mine said, “How are you doing?” I replied, “Under the circumstances, okay.” My friend said, “Under the circumstances? You’re a child of God, John. You’re not supposed to live *under* the circumstances, you’re supposed to live *above* them.” Touche!

There is power in praise. Power to live above the circumstances of life, and enjoy victory and healing *in the now!*

God’s Power at Work

This was by all odds the most successful sacred concert ever held. Someone said, “It was so successful it brought the house down.” “And suddenly there was great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and every one’s fetters were unfastened. When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried with a loud voice, ‘Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.’ And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, and brought them out and said, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’” (Acts 16:26-31).

Everything about this situation has the sound and feel of God’s power at work to produce a miracle for the benefit of his beleaguered saints. I’ve said it before, let us say it again, “A

miracle is a natural or supernatural event accompanied by precise timing to give glory to God.” Here was a natural event (an earthquake), accompanied by precise timing (in the midst of their songs of praise) to bring glory to God. The doors were opened, the fetters were off and the prisoners were free.

When the jailer saw this, knowing that as a Roman jailer he would have to bear the penalty of the prisoners who escaped, he was about to kill himself. Paul said, “Stop, do not harm yourself. We’re all here.” Notice he didn’t say, “We’re *both* here.” He said, “We’re *all* here.” As much as those other prisoners wanted to get out of that jail, they also had a desire for a face-to-face confrontation with two men who knew God in such a personal way they could praise him in jail! When the jailer said, “What must I do to be saved?” I am confident the prisoners stood on tiptoe to hear the answer, and I believe many of them received the Savior that very night.

There have been many attempts to explain the plan of salvation, but none are more succinct and understandable than the simple statement in verse 31: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” I’m told that earlier in the history of our nation, among the tests given to someone applying for chaplainry in the Armed Services, was to explain to a dying man how he could be sure he was saved. The interrogator would say, “I’m a wounded soldier. I have three minutes to live. I’m afraid to die, because I’m not sure I’m right with God. Tell me in three minutes how I can know for sure I’m saved.”

The Plan of Salvation in Three minutes – or Less!

Well, let me see if I can do it. Three things are required for you to know you have peace with God. The first step is to be aware of your need. If you have no need, then for you there is no Savior. But the mere fact you are unsure of your relationship with God suggests to me you have need. Right? Right! You’ve taken the first step.

The second step is to realize Jesus Christ came to satisfy your need. He not only died on the cross for the whole wide world, he died for you. Do you believe Jesus Christ died for you and could save you if you asked him to? Good! You’ve taken the second step.

Third, you must put action to your conviction and ask Jesus to be your Savior. Are you

prepared to do that now? Then pray this simple prayer: “Dear God, I know that I have sinned and need a savior. I believe Jesus can save me, and I now ask him to be my savior. Help me to do what Jesus would do, so I can lead others to Jesus, too. Amen.”

You’ve just taken the third step. How do you know you’re saved? *Because God said so.* “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). How long did that take? A minute and ten seconds!

Perhaps you are here this morning and are depressed and discouraged. Maybe even despairing. Satan has you incarcerated in a dungeon that is dank and dark and difficult to bear. You may be on the edge of trying to run away from life through reckless prodigal living. Or some other self-destructive mechanism. I say to you, “In the name of Jesus Christ, do yourself no harm.” There is hope for you. Jesus died for you. Move off the throne of your life and invite him there to be your Lord and Savior. There can be healing for you and an experiencing of eternal and abundant life in him. “In the name of Jesus Christ do yourself no harm.”

What Must I Do To Grow?

Paul answered the big question simply and succinctly. Verse 32 says, “They spoke the word of the Lord to him and all that were in his house. And [the jailer] took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds, and he was baptized at once, with all his family.” Paul’s purpose was the same as our purpose: Win the lost *and disciple them*. It’s not enough to get people saved. Once they *are* saved, we must get them in a spiritual growth program designed to help them develop into the kind of healthy, happy persons they are meant to be.

Paul and Silas conducted a midnight Bible study on spiritual basics that night. The jailer and his family not only learned *how* to be saved, but how to *grow* into spiritual maturity. Everyone in the household heard. Everyone believed. Everyone received. Everyone confessed Jesus as Lord and, as a consequence, *everyone was baptized*.

Christianity has a personal dimension, but it is not a solo flight. Nobody can make your decision for Jesus for you. You have to do that yourself. Beyond that, there is a sense in which each of us must become a presenter of the gospel to those who live within the sphere of our

influence. Through the silent sermon of a Godly life we can help influence them for the Savior, too.

The jailer did that for his family. His sons and daughters saw him washing the wounds of his prisoners. No self-respecting Roman jailer would do a thing like that. But something happened to the old man. He was different! They watched him as he ministered to his prisoners. They observed him being baptized, maybe in a large cistern used to gather water for the prison. They saw the joy on their father's face as a result of his new relationship with the living God. And they said, "We want to be Christians, too."

I am sure Paul said, "Do *you* believe on the Lord Jesus Christ?" "Yes, we do." "Are you prepared, with his help, to live a Christian life?" "Yes, we are." "Then I will baptize you as well." We can almost hear him using words he later writes in the sixth chapter of his letter to Romans: "You are buried with Christ in baptism," that is, the old life is gone and because you're dead we're going to bury you. "You are raised to walk in the newness of life," that is, you are born again. You not only have everlasting life, you can experience abundant life in the present.

Verse 34, "Then (the jailer) brought them up into his house, and set food before them; and he rejoiced with all his household that he had believed in God." Indeed, as our key truth says: *There is power in praise*. Power to live above our circumstances. Power to turn tragedy into triumph. Power to be more than conqueror through Christ. With all of my heart I urge you this day: If you do not know the Savior, receive him. And if you *do* know him, make him your Savior and your *Lord*. Then *live* in the power of praise!

The Church Extended - Part 7

Acts 16:35 – 17:15

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Key Truth: The Word comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable.

Attribute: God is comforter.

When we last left Paul and Silas, they had just gone back to jail. *Willingly!* That, in itself, is eye-catching and thought-arresting. Had I been in their shoes I would not have shared their enthusiasm for more jail time. Having been beaten and placed in stocks as they had been, having gone through a mighty earthquake, having experienced the power in praise, having seen the Philippian jailor converted, having been invited into his home, having had my wounds treated and my needs ministered to, and having had an opportunity to at least begin discipling this young Christian, I would not have been ready to go back to jail.

But Paul and Silas *did* go back to jail. *Willingly!* They heard the iron gates slam behind them and they sat there in the darkness for the balance of the night awaiting the deliverance they were confident would come. How could they do that? Because they knew God had a purpose in allowing them to be jailed again.

That's a powerful truth I want you to get hold off: *Sometimes going back is as important as going forward!* In their case God did, indeed, have a purpose in they're going back to jail and they didn't have to wait long to discover what it was.

God Uses Evil for Good Acts 16:35ff

We pick the narrative up at Acts 16:35: "But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police saying, 'Let those men go.' And the jailer reported the words to Paul saying, 'The magistrates have sent word to let you go; now therefore come out and go in peace.' But Paul said to him, 'They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now cast us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out.' The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard (Paul and Silas) were Roman citizens; so they came and apologized to them. Then they took some out and asked them to leave the city. So they went out of the prison, and visited Lydia;

and when they had seen the brethren, they exhorted them and departed” (Acts 16:35-40).

Two things catch my eye in this passage. The courage Paul and Silas, and the confusion of the politicians. Both of these help us understand the importance of our key truth for today: *The Word* (referring to Jesus, the Living Word) *comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable*.

The Courage of Paul and Silas

My humanity would suggest that I get out of town as quickly and quietly as possible. But Paul and Silas chose to confront the political force of their day. What we have here is the “I have become all things to all men that by any means I might win some” principle (1 Corinthians 9:22). The night before Paul had *relinquished* his rights. He had said nothing about being a Roman citizen. He merely submitted to the beating to which he was subjected. But *now* the time had come for him to *assert* his rights. Not to flaunt them, but, in telling away, to let these people feel the fear of God so some of them might be saved.

Paul was willing to “become all things to all men that by any means (he) might win some.” If that meant being silent, he would be silent. If that meant speaking up, he would speak up. And this was a time to speak up. You see, dear ones, there comes a time when you and I need to confront the world. To let the world know, by our boldness, that God is still on the throne of our life despite any evidence to the contrary.

The Source of Their Courage

That kind of courage is released by discovering the power in praise. It was while they were in *bondage*, while they were *incarcerated*, while they were in *prison* with their feet in the stocks, that Paul and Silas turned to praise. It was *not* while all things were going well. It was *not* while the sky was blue and the sun was warm. It was while the night was dark and the jail was dank that they learned to praise the Lord. Through praise they released a power God was able to use, not only to bring about their own deliverance, but to bring about the conversion of a key man in the community, and ultimately to lay the foundations for a strong church in Philippi.

There is a difference between meekness and weakness. The problem with most Christians today is that we don’t know our true strength. By that I mean, we don’t really know our Source.

We don't really know him from whom all power flows. If we *did*, we would be willing to stand meekly before the world *in* that strength, rather than topple before the world in weakness as we often do.

Paul was not trying to protect his personal well-being. His concern was for the body of Christ in Philippi. He was not concerned about his own reputation. Rather, it was important to him that both the people in that church and the citizens in that town know Paul and Silas had not broken the law. The law had been broken by the civil servants! By the magistrates. It was also important to Paul that the townsfolk see this baby church in a new light. To say, in essence, "We shouldn't mess with these folks. They've got connections higher up." If they only knew how *much* higher up they would have appreciated the truth of what they were saying.

The Confusion of the Politicians

It's hard to know what to do when you are confronted with quiet, unruffled, unyielding strength. When you are on shaky ground yourself, or when you know *you* are the one who is off base, it's even more difficult to face that kind of quiet, unruffled strength. That explains the confusion of the politicians. Bottom-line: they knew *they* were the ones who were in trouble!

The magistrates were rattled by the courage of Paul and Silas. They've realized that in beating these two men they were guilty of breaking a law which could cost them their job and they're standing in the community. They were scared. So they gave Paul something he did *not* ask for: a public apology. But it was not an *apology* Paul wanted. He was seeking a public *acknowledgment* that it was they, the magistrates, not he and Silas who had broken the law. Why? So the *church* in Philippi would have a good name in that city. But the politicians apologized anyway.

Our text says Paul and Silas went to visit Lydia, who lived in Philippi. In verse 40 we are told "They *exhorted* the brethren." Your King James version says, "They *comforted* the brethren." I prefer that translation because the root word is "*paraclete*," the word from which we get one of the names of the Holy Spirit: "The Encourager."

The young Christians were encouraged by the release of Paul and Silas. They were encouraged

by the living evidence of God's protection of Paul, his "ambassador in chains" (Ephesians 6:20). They were encouraged by the news of the conversion of the Philippian jailer. They were encouraged by the evidence of the power in praise. And they were encouraged by the public admission of guilt on the part of the magistrates. It meant they would have a good name before their fellow Philippians.

No wonder Paul was able to later write in his letter to the Roman's: "But *we* know (you and I who walk in the Spirit) that God uses everything for good (in the lives of) those who love him." It didn't *seem* good that they had been accused, beaten, and then put *back* in prison after an earthquake had set them free. And none of those things *were* good! But in and through it all God was working for a greater good, so when it was all over the people of God in Philippi could stand with their heads up and their hearts high knowing they were now in a position to represent Jesus to their neighbors from a position of strength, not weakness.

That was important to Paul. He dearly loved the Philippian church. It was they who, on two different locations, sent him material help when no other church did. No wonder Paul had such a warm place in his heart for these believers. No wonder he was able to say of them with such spontaneity, "I thank my God for every remembrance of you" (Philippians 1:3). Every time he thought of the Philippian Christians he remembered the sweet, sweet Spirit that turned a place of bondage into a place a blessing, because it was in Philippi that he and Silas discovered the power in praise.

Paul's Customary Strategy Acts 17:1

As we move on to chapter 17, we're told that after a time of rest and renewal in the home of Lydia Paul and Silas moved on to Thessalonica. "Now, when they had passed through Amphipolis and Appolonia they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews" (Acts 17:1). Amphipolis was about 33 miles southwest of Philippi, Appolonia another 30 miles along the Ignatian way, and Thessalonica, the second-largest city in Macedonia, an additional 37 miles making it a 100 mile trek in all.

As was typical of Paul, he went immediately to the synagogue. His *modus operandi* for

reaching his world for Christ was to go to the capital cities, the main towns, and the trade centers, present the gospel there and then let the natural flow of life along the commercial trade routes spread the gospel to the surrounding areas. That's what he did on this occasion.

From "We" to "They" Acts 17:2ff

It's interesting to note to change of pronoun from "we" to "they." In the Acts 16:10 we were introduced to the first of several "we" passages when Luke, the writer of Acts, injected himself into the story. In chapter 17 he pulls himself out of the story. Most bible scholars interpret that to mean Luke, who was a citizen of Philippi, had been the "man from Macedonia" (Acts 16:9b) who urged Paul to come and minister there. Having helped plant a new church in Philippi Luke may have decided to stay in his hometown awhile to pastor this new church. At any rate, he no longer speaks of "we," but switches to the pronoun "they" to tell how "they," that is, Paul and Silas, arrived at Thessalonica and began to minister in the synagogue.

Explaining the Cross Acts 17:2-9

"And Paul went in, as was his custom, and for three weeks he argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.' And some of them were persuaded, and joined Paul and Silas; as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked fellows of the rabble, they gathered a crowd, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the people. And when they could not find them, they drag Jason and some of the brethren before the city authorities, crying, 'These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them; and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another King, Jesus.' And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard this. And when they had taking security from Jason and the rest, they let them go" (Acts 17:2-9).

Paul began his ministry by "explaining and proving it was necessary for Christ to suffer" (Acts 17:3) The word translated "explaining" in the Revised Version, and "opening" in the King James Version, is a word which only appears twice in the entire New Testament. The other place is in Luke 24:27 where, following his resurrection, Jesus met two of the disciples on the

way to Emmaus and “*opening* (the scriptures) to them,” that is, beginning in Genesis and continuing on through the law and the prophets, Jesus *explained* how these scriptures all spoke of him and of the necessity of his death.

So, in beginning his ministry in Thessalonica, Paul repeated the process Jesus used in beginning *his* ministry following the resurrection. He showed from Scripture that it was necessary for Christ to die. That is, he explained the cross.

The cross is inexplicable to those who don’t understand the basic thrust of Scripture. The cross does not make sense to the “man on the street.” Sovereignty and suffering do not go together in the mind of the average man. And the Jews could not comprehend a Messiah who would be killed. A Messiah who wore a regal robe like David, they could understand *that*. A Messiah who would sit on a throne like David, they could understand *that*. But a Messiah who came in a servants garb and was killed on a cross, they could *not* comprehend *that*. So Paul began by explaining the necessity of the cross. And I want to take a few moments to do the same this morning.

The Cross is Central in Human History

There are three great focal points in time: the creation, the crucifixion, and the coming again of our redeemer. The central one of these, the crucifixion, forms the darkest blot on the pages of human history. It is not only the culmination of the revelation of the love of God for man, it is also the culmination of the revelation of the hatred of man for God. And right there, in the center of human history, stands the cross. The darkest blot on the pages of human history.

The Cross is Central in Divine History

But not only is the cross central in human history, it is also central in Divine history. The heart of Christianity is the Bible. The heart of the Bible is the cross. At the heart of the cross is the heart of God himself. So when you survey that wonders cross, you begin to see the sense of what God has been doing: God has been at work to make sure that what was promised in the beginning, *will be* in the end!

Someone has said, “The cross stands between two eternities, and it alone explains them both.

The cross stands between heaven and hell, and it alone explains them both. The cross stands between the Old Testament and the New Testament, and it alone explains them both. The cross stands between the incarnation of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus, and it alone explains them both. The cross stands between the Promised Seed of Genesis and the Reigning One of Revelation, and it alone explains them both. The cross stands between sin, sorrow and death on one hand, and salvation, joy and life on the other, and it alone explains them all.” The cross, I say, is central in Divine History, in the record of what God is doing here on earth.

The Cross is Central in Your and My History

Not only is the cross central in human history and Divine history, the cross is also central in your and my history. In your and my ability to comprehend the lifestyle to which we *have* been called. To be saved and become sons and daughters of God? Of course! Hallelujah! To be saved and become citizens of eternity? Of course! Praise the Lord! But to be saved, die to yourself and assume a servant role? *That's* something else again. We didn't “sign-up” for *that*. But the cross stands there to point us to the lifestyle to which we have been called: God's better way. The way of the cross does not make sense to the human mind, but the way of the cross is the *only* way the Christian life can be lived, for it is a life of humility and service.

When Bishop Festus Kivengere from Uganda was here a few weeks ago I had the privilege of hearing him speak at a luncheon. Following his message he responded to questions. When it was my turn I asked, “How is it possible to keep a revival alive for 40 years?” Despite oppression, difficulty and opposition Uganda has been in a state of spiritual revival for four decades. As a consequence, out of 12 million Ugandans, 8 million are Christians. Bishop Kivengere answered, “The revival continues so long as the people of God succeed in humility. The revival will end the instant the people of God fail in humility.” He referred to a text beloved by us all. Matthew 11:28 in which Jesus says, “Come to me all ye who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Bishop Kivengere pointed out that the invitation is an indication that we, like the disciples to whom Jesus spoke these words, are away from him from time to time. If you examine that verse in its context you will see the invitation is not addressed to the crowd, it is addressed to the beloved of the Lord. His disciples. His followers. So Christ's invitation is an indication that sometimes *we*, his disciples, his followers, the beloved of the Lord, are away from him. And he says, “Come to me.”

While we are away from him all kinds of bad things can happen. Not the least of these is tension at home. As I said in my book, *Marriage At Its Best*, (available through Online Books at www.winsome.org) Satan is making an all-out attack on the church today. He is attempting to divided it, not into big chunks through denominational division as he has done in the past, but to break it into little pieces by tearing down the individuals cells, or homes, out of which the body is made. It is a devastating assault and we need to be on guard lest *our* home be victimized by it.

I must confess that in those times when I am away from him, a rift often develops between Lucille and me. I start feeling sorry for myself. I wallow around in the slough of self-pity, and the Lord says, "Come to me." I come to him expecting him to say, "You poor fellow. Bless your heart. How do you do it? Married to the same woman for 33 years! How commendable of you." But what happens? I look into his blessed face. I see his nail-scarred hands. I remember the cross upon which he died *for me*, and the only thing I can say is, "Oh, Lord, what is sinner I am. What a fool I am. What a proud, arrogant, self-centered rebel I am. How could I have been so insensitive to her needs? How could I have wanted to be served, when I am called to a life of servant-hood, *especially* to her? What should I do, Lord?" "Go tell her what you just told me." So I muster up courage to say, "Honey, I'm sorry. I've been proud and arrogant and self-centered. I've been full of self-pity. I've wanted you to serve me, when God called me to lovingly serve you. Will you forgive me?" She says, "Of course." And what happens? Revival. *Revival happens!* Plus a wonderful sense of what it means to be *at rest!*

I say the cross is not only central in human and Divine history, it is also central in our understanding of the life to which we have been called: a life of servant-hood. A laying down of *our* life for the benefit and blessing of *others*. I know that's tough and there are times when I get tired of doing it. I'd rather do my own thing. But praise the Lord, he won't let me. He keeps calling, "Come to me. Come to me. Come to me and I will give you *rest*." The cross stands as evidence of God's better way. The way of the cross. The *only* way, incidentally, in which a restful life works out in the end.

An Accusation/Commendation Acts 17:6-9

Verse 6 records one of the most astounding complements ever given coming, as it does, in the

form of an accusation. “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also.”

Our key truth says: *The Word (Jesus) comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable*. In our study of Acts 16, we saw Paul and Silas, Christ’s “ambassadors in chains” comforting the afflicted. I praise God for the ministry of consolation. After spending seven years as an evangelist, when I was called to my first church I asked God to give me a pastors heart. God answered that prayer and it was a joy to discover I serve you best when I make myself vulnerable to you. When I share my defeats, as well as my victories. My weaknesses, as well as my strengths. My bad times, as well as my good times. It’s a privilege to sit across from you in my study, or in your homes, and be able to empathize with you when you share your hurts and your needs. God has given me a pastors heart and I have the privilege of a comforting the afflicted.

But if that’s *all* I do, I am failing you. A pastor’s task also involves afflicting the comfortable. Calling you to accountability. Reminding you that you have been saved to serve. And if I disturb you today, even a little bit, if I unnerve you today, even a little bit, if I make you even a wee bit uncomfortable it’s because I love you, and God loves you. For empowered by the Holy Spirit, you are to be to the *your* world what Jesus *would* be if he were where you are! “What Would Jesus Do?” is still the most important question any of us can ask in each of life’s situations.

Another of Satan’s Dirty Tricks

Satan was not about to let Paul and Silas go unchallenged. So he pulled another of his dirty tricks. This time it was an out right lie. The *charge* was true. Paul and Silas had *indeed* turned the world upside down. But it was *not* because they were political revolutionaries! They were *not* preaching a another earthly king. They were preaching Jesus, the King of kings! But the lie was effective. So under the cover of darkness Paul and Silas, with the help of some friends, slipped out of Thessalonica and made their way to Beroe’a, a quiet little town in a lush agricultural valley about 60 miles away.

A Key to Your Spiritual Growth Acts 17:10-15

“Now *these* Jews (in Beroe’a) were more noble than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with all the eagerness, examining the scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Many of them therefore believed.”

They *listened* to Paul, yes. But more than that, they got *involved* in Bible study. They began examining the scriptures to see if what Paul was telling them was true. The more they looked, the more excited they became. They were discovering the truth of the gospel . . . *personally!* As a consequence the church in Beroe’a has been immortalized by thousands of Beroe’an Bible Classes all over the world. They listened! But more than that, *they searched the scriptures personally* “to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11). If it hasn’t already occurred to you, let me point out that *that* is one of the keys to your own spiritual growth. To the extent you spend time *personally* “examining the scriptures daily to see if these things (are) so” you will grow. To the extent you don’t, you won’t!

“*But* when the Jews in Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul in Beroe’a also, they came there too, stirring up and inciting the crowds” (Acts 17:13). Today we would say the Jewish leaders sent in a “Hit Squad” or “Spin Control Team.” The truth is: Satan won’t rest and neither can we. We can never relax our *vigilance*. But praise the Lord, we can always *be* relaxed, even in the midst of spiritual warfare, if we “come to (Jesus)” in whose presence there is serenity and security.

Because of the pressure brought to bear, Paul hustled out of town, piled on a boat and sailed to Athens where his ministry continued. The thought never occurred to him to turn back. Like David Livingstone, the famous missionary, who when asked, “Where are you going next?” replied, “I don’t know. I am just ready to go anywhere, so long as its forward.” God grant that you and I will, in our personal experience, discover the power in praise. And then, along with Paul and Silas, will keep on keeping on. Always pressing forward to our high calling in Christ.

The Church Extended - Part 8

Acts 17:16-34

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Key Truth: We live and move and have our being in a personal God.

Attribute: God is knowable.

Acts 17:16-34 falls into three sections.

Verses 16-21 define The Setting for Paul's famous sermon.

Verses 22-31 detail The Structure of the sermon itself.

Verses 32-34 describe The Sequel to Paul's powerful preaching in the city of Athens.

The Setting - Acts 17:16-21

Paul had been ministering in Beroe'a where opposition reared its ugly head. Common sense and guidance by the Holy Spirit led him to move on to Athens. Silas and Timothy remained in Beroe'a, but shortly after arriving in Athens Paul wrote a letter urging them to join him as soon as possible. He was not on vacation. He was on a business trip. Business for his Master! But while waiting for the other members of his Ministry Team to arrive, Paul did a bit of sightseeing. As a consequence three things happened: Paul's attention was arrested, an attitude was alerted, and a course of action was accelerated.

Paul's Attention was Arrested - Acts 17:16

First of all, as Paul wandered about Athens, his attention was arrested. He was not impressed by things that normally caught the attention of first time tourists in Athens. The magnificent architecture. The beautiful statuary. The splendor which still graced that city hundreds of years after it had passed the crest of its true glory. Even today there are few cities on earth which are more eye catching and breathtaking than Athens. In the fifth century B.C., 500 years before Paul arrived, Athens had been a citadel of freedom. A cradle of democracy. It had been a center of art and literature and language. Greek is among the most magnificent of languages with capacities to communicate with color, feeling and mood few languages possess. Athens had also been an architectural jewel full of magnificence crowned by the mighty Parthenon standing atop the Acropolis some 527 feet above the city streets. Even today, when

I've been privileged to visit Athens, I've been thrilled by the majesty and the quiet dignity of those monuments which, despite the ravishes of war and time and tourists, still are among the most spectacular of structures ever built on the face of the earth.

And that's okay. There's nothing wrong with Christians enjoying beauty, and responding to the aesthetic character of great art, even though it may have its roots in paganism. Today those works of art, those buildings, have no religious consequence to anyone. But in Paul's day they did. And that's what arrested his attention.

"Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the market place every day with those who chanced to be there" (Acts 17:16,17).

The thing that arrested Paul's attention was the fact that everywhere he looked there was evidence of spiritual hunger. The hundreds upon hundreds of idols, shrines and statues were proof that the citizens of Athens suffered from an aching spiritual void. Paul realized the very idols that lined the streets and dominated the city squares, towering above the people, were killing any possibility that their spiritual hunger could be satisfied. Those idols represented dead religion. Religion with form, but no substance. And the sad irony of their religion killing any hope of people really knowing God grieved his sensitive spirit and precipitated an attitude change on his part.

An Attitude was Alerted--Acts 17:16b

"His spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols" (Acts 17:16b).

The Greek word translated "provoked" is the word from which our English word "paroxysm" comes. A paroxysm is a sudden seizure of emotion, an uncontrollable agitation of one's spirit. As he looked at all of this evidence of the hunger in human hearts for God, and realized those idols were killing any possibility the people could ever know God as he really is, filled Paul with agitation. He was deeply troubled. He began to express what he later called "goodness" when, in Galatians 5:22, 23, he described the fruit of the Spirit: "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, *goodness* . . ." The word Paul used: *aga tho sue ney* does not concern itself so much

with one's actions, as with one's emotions. *Goodness* as Paul used it in Galatians 5:22 is not about *doing* good. It is not about *being* good. It is not about *feeling* good. It is about *loving* good to the point of hating evil for what evil has done, and is doing, to God's good earth. *Goodness* loves good and is irate, indignant, filled with white-hot fury at anything and everything that evil does to hurt and subvert that which is good.

Goodness is the attitude alerted when Paul's attention was arrested by this city full of idols. He realized these lifeless images would not only *not* lead people to a personal relationship with the living God, they were serious barriers to the *possibility* of such a relationship. He was provoked by that, as well he should be, and as a consequence an action was accelerated.

An Action was Accelerated--Acts 17:17

Acts 17:17 says Paul "argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the market place every day with those who chanced to be there." He began, as was his custom, in the synagogue where he would find Jews and devout persons, God-fearing people who were aware of the Messianic message of hope.

In addition to that, he went into the marketplace and began preaching there. Among those who listened were representatives of the two major philosophical schools of that day: "The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers" (Acts 17:18).

The Epicureans

Epicurus lived some 300 years B.C. He believed life was the product of chance. The existence of atoms was not scientifically affirmed until the 1800's, and yet 300 years *before* Christ Epicurus taught that the world and everything in it everything is the product of an accidental confluence of *atoms*. A fascinating illustration of the brilliance of Greek thought

Epicurus was a deist, not an atheist. He allowed for the possibility of gods or goddesses. But he did not believe in the possibility of a personal relationship with "whatever gods may be." As he saw it, life is a product of chance, there is no afterlife, pleasure is the *sumum bonum* or greatest good, so to spend one's life in an endless pursuit of pleasure was actually being virtuous.

As you might expect, after 300 years of people being taught that they are a product of chance, that this is all the life there is and that death is the end of it all, Epicurus's idealistic view of pleasure was so degraded Epicureans practiced a lifestyle of "eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow you die." And when Paul arrived in Athens he was appalled by the degradation and despair of these people who were driven by their fleshly lust.

The Stoics

The Stoics were founded by a fellow named Zeno who also lived about 300 years B.C. It's interesting that these two philosophers emerged in the third century before Christ. The *fifth* century B.C. had marked the apex of Athenian life. It was then that the Athenians succeeded in stopping the military successes of the Persian King, Xerxes. With the wealth of his vast empire behind him, Xerxes moved into Greece, and Athens was the last barrier to total victory. But against insurmountable odds, the Athenians defeated him with that great victory, and the citizens of Athens developed an "anything is possible" mind-set.

After they rebuilt their city, they turned their attention to the fields of art and literature, language and architecture. During the fifth century B.C. Athens rose to the pinnacle of its glory. Then, because there was no spiritual foundation undergirding their achievements, over succeeding centuries a sense of emptiness set in. By the third century B.C. Athens was gripped by a mood of despair and defeatism.

Epicurus said the best way to deal with their problems was to focus on the pursuit of pleasure. Zeno, on the other hand, said the best way to deal with their problems was to develop an attitude of total indifference to what happens. Be it pleasurable or painful, *ignore* it. The Stoics were Pantheists. They believed in many gods which were everywhere and in everything. They were also fatalists. They believed people were subject to the vague, impersonal, machinations of this host of deities. If, in despair of ever enjoying a meaningful life one were to take his life, that was okay. As a matter of fact Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, did commit suicide.

As the followers of these two schools of thought listened to Paul preach in the marketplace, the same three things happened to *them* that happened to *him*: their attention was arrested, an attitude was alerted, and an action was accelerated.

The Athenians' Attention was Arrested

“Some also of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers met him. Some said, ‘What would this babblers say?’ Others said, ‘He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities’ – because he preached Jesus and the resurrection” (Acts 17:18).

The word “babblers” is taken from a bit of Athenian slang which meant “seed picker.” It referred to a small scavenger bird that flitted around the marketplace picking up seeds. The Athenians expanded it to describe traveling philosophers who picked up the seed of an idea here and another there, mixed them together and peddled the resulting philosophical mishmash as something new. The Greeks were always looking for “something new” to satisfy the aching void within them.

The Athenians' Attitude was Alerted

They listened to Paul and said, “He’s a babblers.” He’s one of those traveling philosophers passing off ideas he picked up here and there. That arrested their attention, but what really brought them up short was the possibility he was preaching “foreign divinities” (Acts 17:18b). Freedom of religion was granted in Athens, *provided* one did not preach “foreign divinities.” Socrates had been tried and convicted of the charge of preaching “foreign divinities,” and because Paul preached “Jesus and the resurrection” they were concerned he might be guilty of doing the same thing.

Furthermore, the Greek word for resurrection is “anastasis” which *sounds* like the name of a goddess. With so many people milling around the marketplace it was difficult to hear well. In all the hubbub they heard “Jesus,” and they heard “*anastasis*,” and thought he was talking about a new god and goddess. Or maybe two “foreign divinities.” Hence, an attitude was alerted.

First of all, they were filled with contempt. They called him a “babblers.” This led to wariness, a kind of interest tinged with suspicion. Finally, they were consumed with curiosity. “May we know what this new teaching is which you present? For you bring some strange things to our ears; we wish to know therefore what these things mean” (Acts 17:18b).

The Athenians' Action was Accelerated

As a result of this change in attitude an action was accelerated. “They took hold of him and brought him to the Areopagus” (Acts 17:19). The Areopagus was a special place of meeting, a kind of high court located on Mars Hill about 375 feet above the city streets and roughly 150 feet below the Parthenon.

“Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time in nothing except telling and hearing something new” (Acts 17:21). Clearly their accelerated action of “[taking] hold” of Paul, that is, grabbing him by the arm and hustling him up to the Areopagus was not to hear and heed him. Some wanted to interrogate him. Others just wanted him to tickle their ears and titillate their minds with “something new.” They didn’t want to *do* anything about these ideas, they just wanted to *hear* them.

How like many modern sermon-tasters. They don’t really want to *do* anything about the claims of Christ on their lives. They don’t really want to *do* anything about the fact that through Jesus they cease to be creatures of time and become citizens of eternity. They just want to be *told* this. They want to be reassured, be calmed and comforted. “And, if possible, preacher, tell us something new.”

A pastor’s heartache is not people with problems. It’s a joy and privilege to minister to such people. No, people *with* problems are not our heartache. Our heartache is problem people. People who refuse to grow. People who refuse to mature spiritually. People who are satisfied to *know* the gospel, but never allow what they *know* to reach into the area of their will so they actually *do* something about it. Spiritual growth comes when we know, feel, choose and *do*. Satan doesn’t care how much you *know* about “Jesus and the resurrection,” so long as you don’t let what you *know* affect the control center of your life where you choose to *do* something about it.

Well, the stage was set. The attention of Paul and the Athenians was arrested. Their attitudes were alerted, and their actions were accelerated. Suddenly Paul was catapulted on to the Areopagus, the highest, most prestigious court in Athens, where Socrates had stood on trial. Paul was not on *trial*, but he certainly was on tenuous ground and in a tenuous position. He would really be in hot water if the charge could be made to stick that he was indeed preaching

“foreign divinities.”

The Sermon--Acts 17: 22-31

It's at this point that we come to the second main section in our text: the sermon Paul preached in Athens. What a masterpiece it was! Even though we undoubtedly have it in abbreviated form, it is still one of the finest specimens of preaching recorded anywhere. We can't possibly do justice to it in the time allotted. Based on the bit of background I've already given you, and other personal study you can add, may I urge you to *read* this sermon two or three times alone. Then get off by yourself where you won't feel foolish if somebody hears or sees you, and preach it. Out loud! Listen to it. Let your ears hear what your mouth is saying. Listen to the magnificence of the language, the reasoning and Paul's presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul began with a captivating introduction: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious.” We can almost see him standing there on Mars Hill, as I like to believe he did, although some scholars think the Areopagus may have been some place other than Mars Hill, and with one sweeping gesture pick up those hundreds and hundreds of idols, shrines and monuments and saying, “Men of Athens, I perceive that you are very religious.”

Then, because he wanted to win them, not alienate them by accusing them of shallowness, he made an intriguing segue by indicating his interest in, and knowledge of, their way of life: “For as I passed along, and observed the objects of your worship, I found an altar with this inscription, ‘to an unknown God’” (Acts 17:23a).

Then he answers the charge of preaching “foreign divinities.” “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:23b). I'm not preaching a foreign divinity, he said, I'm offering you more light on a God you already believe in. This inspired segue opened the door for Paul to do what he had come to do: preach a sermon on the God who *is* and *can* be known through Jesus Christ.

The attribute of God upon which we are focusing today is: *God is knowable*. He who is transcendent, who is high and lifted up, has become imminent. He has stooped to make himself

known. Our key truth is taken from verse 23: *We live and move and have our being in a personal God.*

Paul proceeded into the heart of his sermon, the theme of which is: *God is knowable.* Can you hear him preach it? Let me paraphrase: The God who is, *can* be known by you. He is the creator of everything. He is the sustainer of everything. He is the Lord of heaven and earth. He is grander than anything made by human hands, including this magnificent Parthenon. And I can almost see him gesturing to that great temple glittering in the sun. This God who *is*, and *can* be known, does not live in shrines made by people. He needs nothing from people, but gives everything to people.

And then in a tremendous statement so rich in meaning we could spend an hour feasting on it, Paul declares God's grand plan of the ages. "And he [the God who *is* and who *can* be known] made from one, every nation [of people] to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us, for 'In him we live and move and have our being;' as even some of your poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring'" (Acts 17:26-28).

This is what life is all about, Paul says. *This* is its meaning. *This* is its purpose. *This* is the direction it's going. *This* is that toward which it has been pointing from the beginning of time and toward which it will *continue* to point until the consummation. The God who *is* and who *can* be known, is the God who made people in whatever shape or color you find them. He placed them here so they may know him. So they may *experience* this living, acting, personal God. Because *this* God, the God who is transcendent, has become *imminent!* "He is *not far* from each of us," Paul says (Acts 17: 27).

And then, to pique their interest, he quoted from two of the great Greek poets. In so doing, the Spirit of God gives us a tiny hint of the tremendous intellectual and educational qualifications of this man whom God personally picked to be a witness to pagans. Anyone familiar with the philosophies of the Epicureans and the Stoics will recognize in this sermon how, without ever mentioning their names in his sermon, Paul, with the care of a surgeon's scalpel, dissected them

bit by bit and showed the shallow superficiality and emptiness of their teachings.

Paul's "So What?" Element

In verses 30 and 31, Paul drives home his point and delivers what I often call the "So What?" element of a sermon. "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead."

In the past, God overlooked their ignorance and their futile efforts to depict him in gold or silver or stone or wood or plaster. And parenthetically, this answers the difficult questions about God's attitude toward the people who lived prior to Jesus and how they will be treated in the Last Judgment. Verse 30 says he overlooked their ignorance. He dealt with them on the basis of their obedience to the light they had.

But, Paul says, *now* that God's greater light has come he calls you to repentance. Paul doesn't mention Jesus in the body of his sermon, but Jesus is *implied* because earlier Paul had spoken of "Jesus and the resurrection" (Acts 17:18). His point: the uniqueness and superiority of Jesus over *any and all of their idols* is proven by the fact that God raised Jesus from the dead!

My "So What?" Element

What has all this to do with you, my unsaved friend? I don't know where you're coming from. I don't know what your background is. Maybe, like the ancient Athenians, this is the first time you've ever heard of Jesus. In the past, God overlooked your ignorance. But *now* that you know God *is* and *can* be known, *now* that you know God has made himself knowable in the person of Jesus, *now* he is calling you to repent because you are culpable. Like all the rest of us, there is sin in your life. A day of judgment is coming. This man, Jesus, whom God raised from the dead is coming again. Not as Savior, as Judge! And my unsaved friend, I urge you to be sure, be *very* sure, you are ready for him when he comes.

Do you still have questions about Jesus? Look at the resurrection. Christianity stands or falls upon the truth of the resurrection. If the resurrection is *not* true, nothing else matters. "[My]

preaching is in vain . . . we [believers] are of all [people] most to be pitied” (1 Corinthians 15:14a,19b). Like the ancient Epicureans we ought to “eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die.” But if the resurrection is *true*, and it *is*, Jesus *really* matters and you must repent of your sin, receive him as your Savior, and rejoice *with* us that we have been saved from sin and changed from creatures of time into citizens of eternity.

The Sequel--Acts 17:32-34

What is the sequel to all this? Did Paul’s preaching reach the Athenians? Some scholars say he did not. That he was depressed and discouraged by the outcome. They call attention to something he said in his first letter to the Corinthians. Corinth was the next place he went. Later he wrote the first of two letters to them and in it he said, “When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:1).

Some suggest Paul learned from his preaching experience in Athens. He concluded that people don’t *really* have intellectual problems, they have *spiritual* problems. That the way to touch people for Jesus en masse is *not* to reach for their heads, but to reach for their hearts. So when he arrived in Corinth, he came in weakness, not in strength. Ministering to them, *not* through the power of plausible *words*, but by focusing on “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2).

Well, it’s entirely possible he *did* learn that lesson. That he *did* evaluate what happened and decided to change his methodology. But I’m not convinced he failed in his ministry to the Athenians. “When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked ” (Acts 17:32a). That is, some ridiculed the idea of a resurrection and life after death, let alone repentance and judgment for sin. It was just too much for those pseudo-sophisticates who were hung up on pleasure, or were captives to the concept of fatalism and “some mocked.”

“Others said, ‘We will hear you again about this’” (Acts 17:32b). “But *some* men joined him and believed, among them Dionysus the Are-op’agite and a woman named Dam’aris and others with them” (Acts 17:34). Some derided, some delayed and some *decided!* One was Dionysus, a member of the council before which Paul had stood. Another was Dam’aris. For a *woman* to

be present in that highbrow “*men’s club*” suggests she was a woman of ill repute, probably a highly-paid courtesan who serviced one of those prominent men. But look at the reach of the gospel. Not only does the good news touch the hearts of the so-called “up and outers,” it also touches the hearts of the so-called “down and outers. And then notice: “others with them.” “Others” indicates more than one, at least two, perhaps more. So we can say with confidence that Paul had at least four converts from that one sermon. Wow! I’d love to have four people get saved every time I preached. What a blessing that would be! But we know Paul was not a failure because God does not measure success by numbers, but by faithfulness. Paul had been faithful to God, and God was faithful to Paul.

What has all this do with you? Well, as I’ve said, *now* that you know God is, and *now* that you know *God is knowable* through Jesus Christ, I call upon you to repent. To recognize your personal culpability as a sinner in need of a savior. To invite Jesus to be *your* savior so you will be saved from sin, ransomed from ruin and delivered from death. With all of my heart, I plead with you today, do not delay as did some of the Athenians because the chance to receive Jesus may never come again.

A number of years ago, 1951 to be exact, Lucille and I were conducting an evangelistic crusade in East Orange, New Jersey. It was part of a six-week long, state-wide effort involving several hundred churches. That night as I preached the simple truth of God’s love revealed in Jesus, a lovely lady in her late forties, or early fifties, came forward to receive Jesus as her Savior. As she left the church she thanked me for helping her know for sure she was saved and added, “I’ll see you tomorrow night.” Lucille and I visited with the pastor for a few minutes when we heard sirens and saw the reflection of red lights flashing through the window of his office. Going outside we saw an ambulance, a couple of police cars, and a very distraught driver leaning against the door of his car. Coming closer we saw the woman who only minutes before had sealed her eternity with God . . . lying dead in the street. Suppose she had *derided* the message of Jesus that night? Suppose she had *delayed* and said, “Give me more time. I want to think it over. Some day I’ll receive him, but not tonight.” Thank God, she didn’t do either of those things. She *decided* for him, and a few minutes later she *met* him. Not as her Judge. As her Savior! Jesus. The friend of sinners.

My friend, listen: the days of your groping for God will be over . . . today . . . if you just reach out to him and make him your own. With all of my heart I plead with you: do not delay, but come to him today. Reach up for the hand of God that reaches down and know that a seeking soul and a seeking Savior are never far apart.

The Church Extended - Part 9

Acts 18:1-22

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Key Truth: When we seek to know and do His will, God affirms and protects us.

Attribute: God is Protector.

We're roughly halfway through the third and concluding section of Acts. Paul's second missionary journey is drawing to a close, and while it will be several months before he returns to his home base in Antioch, our text today, Acts 18, gives us an account of his last major ministry before heading home. It occurred in Corinth.

Outline

Let me give you four cue words to help you grasp the thrust of this passage. They are not only cue words, they are also words which begin with the letter "Q." First, QUIET – verses 1-4. Second, QUARTET – verses 5-11. Third, QUINTESSENCE – a beautiful word which means the perfect example of something, or the essence of something in its purest, most appealing form – verses 12-17. Fourth, QUICK – verses 18-22. Quiet, quartet, quintessence and quick.

Quiet – Acts 18:1-4

“After this he left Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, lately come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them; and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them, and they worked, for by trade they were tent makers. And he argued in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded Jews and Greeks” (Acts 18:1-4).

I've characterized the beginning of Paul's ministry in Corinth as *quiet*. In Athens he followed a plan which took him out of the synagogue, into the market place, and up to the Aeropagus, the high tribunal of Athens, where he attempted to win the Athenians with logic and reasoning. In sharp contrast to *that* approach, Paul's beginning in Corinth was modest and devoid of the grand flights of oratory he employed in his sermon on Mars Hill. In modern parlance we would say he was “laid back.” Instead of being aggressive and outgoing, Paul assumed a more quiet posture.

The Character of Corinth

There are a couple of reasons for this, not the least of them being the character of Corinth itself. The mainland of Greece is shaped like the palm of my hand. The Peloponnesus, like my outstretched fingers, reach into the Mediterranean Sea. Joining the mainland and the Peloponnesus is an isthmus, like my thumb, a narrow neck of land about four miles across. On the west side is the Aegean Sea and the port of Cenchreae, which served ships coming from Asia Minor, Palestine, Africa, Syria, etc. On the east side of this four-mile wide isthmus was the Gulf of Corinth leading out to the Ionian Sea and up to ports in Italy and other parts of Europe.

Today there is the beautiful, extremely impressive Corinthian canal through which ships can sail from the Aegean to the Ionian Sea. But in Paul's day there was no canal. Instead, ships unloaded their cargo at Cenchreae where it was carried overland by rail to the Corinthian Gulf, loaded onto another ship and sent on to its ultimate destination. In the case of the smaller vessels, they were taken out of the water, put on rail cars, shipped overland to the Corinthian Gulf where they were launched again.

Because of its strategic location, Corinth was not only the capital of Acacia and a great trade center, it was a popular liberty port. There were all kinds of diversions to attract the sailors who waited for their ships to either be unloaded or to be carried overland and launched again. Wherever there are lots of attractions, lots of money and lots of leisure, there is also lots of mischief, and Corinth was a city full of mischief. As a matter of fact, it was a hotbed of paganism. Fifteen hundred feet above the sea, on the great Corinthian Acropolis, stood the stately temple of Aphrodite. Wandering through the streets of Corinth were a thousand sacred prostitutes who offered their services free to so-called worshipers of this goddess. To sailors, Corinth was a great liberty port, but in reality it was the Gomorrah of Greece. A city full of indescribable perversion and human degradation.

Paul's State of Mind

In addition to the godless character of Corinth itself, another reason for Paul's laid back style of ministry there, may have been the apostle's state of mind. Think for a moment about all Paul

had been through. In Philippi he had been beaten and thrown into jail. In Thessalonica he had been lied about. In Berea he had been run out of town under cover of the night. In Athens he had been ridiculed. Although Paul was tough he was not an iron stallion devoid of feeling. He was a human being with all the frailties of human flesh, and during the preceding months had been subjected to all kinds of physical and psychological bruising.

Paul Experiences Culture Shock and Spiritual Oppression

Furthermore, after the cruel rejection he received in Athens the narrative suggests he slipped out of town quietly and, because Silas and Timothy had not yet joined him, journeyed alone some 45 miles to Corinth where Paul surely experienced a full-blown case of culture shock. His spirit, which had been sensitized by the Holy Spirit, must have recoiled at the open stench of sin which greeted him in this hotbed of heathenism. In addition to all the other places to which he had been, and all the other evil things to which he had been subjected, in Corinth – in this center of open, blatant, unabashed pagan worship – Paul saw stuff he had never seen before.

All this, plus insights our text will disclose as we move along, suggests Paul was suffering from depression which led him to consider curbing his stay in Corinth and heading home to Antioch. But God, who is protector, ministered to Paul in a number of beautiful ways during this period of apparent oppression. Not the least of these was by guiding him to a lovely couple named Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:2). These two became dear friends and deeply devoted co-workers for Christ. On several occasions Paul mentions them in letters to the churches and church leaders. He speaks of them in tender terms using the nickname “Prissa” which some commentators think was his pet name for Priscilla whom he learned to love in the Lord.

“A native of Pontus”

One clue as to why these two people were so dear to him is a reference to Aquila’s birthplace tucked away in verse 2 which refers to him as “a native of Pontus.” Pontus was situated on the coast of the Black Sea in Asia Minor. Paul had never been there and we have no historical record of *when* Aquila and Priscilla became Christians, but this reference to Pontus indicates *how* Aquila may have come to Christ.

In Acts 2:9 there is a listing of some of the places from which people had come to Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. There were “Parthians and Medes, Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappado’cia and *Pontus*.” Aquila may have been in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, was an eye-witness of those great events, became a Christian and was one of the 3,000 who were baptized that day. Or, he was the product of the personal testimony of someone else who had been in Jerusalem that day, had returned home to his or her native province, had shared the exciting news of Jesus, the Messiah, and Aquila had become a Christian as a result of that witness.

In any case, he had a fascinating set of spiritual roots which went all the way back to Pentecost. He enjoyed intimate, quite possibly *personal* knowledge of that thrilling event. I like to think he *was* there. That he told Paul about “the sound of a mighty rushing wind,” a kind of first-century sonic boom that shook the city and brought the people out of their houses into the streets. That he described how the disciples of Jesus moved among the crowd talking in a dozen or more languages they had never learned.

I like to think Aquila said, “I was *there*, Paul. I hate to admit it, but I was one of those who said, ‘They’re drunk.’ And then I heard one of those untutored Galileans speaking in *my* language, a language he had never learned, and telling the story of Jesus. As I listened more closely, I heard him talk about the life of Jesus, the death of Jesus, the resurrection of Jesus, and how Jesus is the Messiah. The more I heard, the more excited I became and, Paul, it was then that I accepted Jesus as my Savior. I went home to Pontus and shared what I had learned with Priscilla. She became a Christian too, and Jesus has been so dear to us since then. We’d die for him, Paul. In fact, for a while it looked like we might *have* to die for Jesus up in Rome when Claudius kicked up his heels. But whether we live or die, as long as God gives us breath, we’re going to live for Jesus because he means *everything* to us! And now, Paul, what can we do for you?”

If they had known where he was coming from, if they had been aware of what he’d been through, they would have realized that by simply telling him what Jesus meant to them they had given this worn-out, worn-down, bruised and battered preacher the greatest lift possible. Just

hearing their testimony of what God was doing in their lives helped Paul “keep on keeping on” when the temptation to quit and head for home was so strong.

It may not have happened that way, but I like to think it did. And I’m happy the Holy Spirit guided Luke to include this otherwise irrelevant reference to *Pontus* because it’s a lovely bit of evidence in support of our key truth and the attribute of God for today: *When we seek to know and do His will, God affirms and protects us, because God is our protector.*

Quartet – Acts 18:5-11

This brings us to the second cue word: *quartet*, and reminds us of the events recorded in verses 5-11. “When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with preaching, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus” (Acts 18:5). Your King James Version has the little phrase, “Paul was pressed in spirit.” Earlier, better manuscripts like those used in translating the New American Standard Version have the word “word” in place of the word “spirit” and “Paul [began] devoting himself completely to the ‘word.’”

Silas and Timothy are thought to have brought a love gift to Paul in support of his ministry, so Paul had funds to live on and gave himself full time to preaching. Logically that makes sense, and who am I to argue otherwise? When it comes to Biblical scholars I’m the last of the least. But my limited knowledge of Greek explains the word translated “pressed” in the King James Version literally means “held together.”

Acts 18 suggests Paul was severely oppressed at the time. Later, in his first letter to the Corinthians, he referred to his state of mind when he first arrived in Corinth and writes, “I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling” (1 Corinthians 2:3). He was on the edge of it physically and emotionally and maybe, just maybe, the deeper meaning here is that Paul was “held together”--kept from coming apart as a consequence of overstress--by the “word,” both written and Living. That is to say, it was *because* and *just* because of his devotion to the written word: *Scripture*, and the Living word: *Jesus*--both of which nurtured him--that Paul’s ministry in Corinth survived.

My recent bout with the blues was won in exactly the same way. By deepening my personal walk with Jesus, and by intensifying my study of selected passages of scripture, especially the beatitudes, an indigo mood lifted. I know firsthand this kind of spiritual therapy works, and borrowing from all the translations I'd like to suggest that verse 5 might read as follows: When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was being held together by the word, written and Living, testifying to the Jews that the Jesus is the Messiah. I like this reading of the text because it is not only more human – and we have a tendency to make plaster saints out of our Biblical heroes and fail to realize they were made of dust and were subject to being blown about, as we are, by the moods that play upon us – but I think this reading of the text is *also* more in keeping with the context, as we shall see.

Paul's Disclaimer

“And when [the Jews] opposed and reviled him, [Paul] shook out his garments and said to them, ‘Your blood be upon your heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles’” (Acts 18:6). The Jews who heard Paul's disclaimer knew immediately what he was talking about. By pulling off his outer robe and shaking it in their presence, Paul was reminding them of Ezekiel 33:1-6 where the Lord warns: “If my people have a watchman, and he sees an enemy coming and *warns* them, if they do not heed the warning their blood is upon *their* head. But if, on the other hand, he sees a danger coming and does *not* warn them, and they are harmed or their lives are lost, their blood will be upon *his* head” (author's paraphrase).

Paul was saying, *God* has appointed me to be your watchman. There is danger afoot! I have warned you of impending judgment. I have shared the Good News that there is deliverance through your Messiah, Jesus Christ. If you do not *heed* my warning, your blood will *not* be upon *my* head. I am innocent. I have done *my* job, and your blood will be upon *your* head.

Paul's Sense of Loss

Some preachers I've known could say that, shrug it off and walk away unmoved. But not Paul. He was a deeply sensitive man. One cause of depression, as I explain in my book *Beat the Blues*, is a sense of loss. When you think of all Paul had been through physically, emotionally and spiritually to be further impacted by *the loss* of his fellow Jews was a dreadful

discouragement. He loved them so passionately at one point he wrote, “I could wish that myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race.”

At the same time, however, *many things were going well*. “[Paul] argued in the synagogue every Sabbath, and *persuaded Jews and Greeks*” (Acts 18:4). “He went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God; his house was *next door to the synagogue*” (Acts 18:7). I’ll bet the word that Paul was preaching next door to their synagogue was about as happily received by the Jews as a pork roast! “Crispus, *the ruler of the synagogue*, believed in the Lord, together with all his household” (Acts 18:8a), and “*many Corinthians* hearing Paul believed and were baptized” (Acts 18:8b).

All of that is happy news. But one of the things that makes depression so painful is that it causes you to forget every victory you ever won. Every good thing you have ever done. Every sunset you have ever seen. Every bright day you have ever known. All you feel is darkness and despair.

A Quartet of Affirmations

Apparently that’s what Paul was experiencing when in a period of personal turmoil the good Lord gave him a quartet of affirmations. “And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no man shall attack you to harm you; for I have many people in this city’” (Acts 18:9,10).

Affirmation Number One

“Do not be afraid” (Acts 18:9a). In the Greek it is present imperative which means: this is an urgent message related to the *now*. It’s as if the Lord said, “Son, you don’t have to suffer like this. Please stop being afraid.” Later, Paul may have had those words in mind when he wrote to Timothy, his son in the ministry, “God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and love and courage” (2 Timothy 1:7). “Do not be afraid.”

Affirmation Number Two

“Speak and do not be silent” (Acts 18:9b). It’s as if the Lord said, “Son, this city needs your message. I know you think you’ve shared the Good News with Corinth. But there are many

people here who still haven't heard the gospel. There are other people who have *heard* the gospel, but haven't *listened*! They've been too preoccupied with their feelings of frustration, and futility and fatigue from living a life of profligacy. So speak, Paul, and go on speaking."

Affirmation Number Three

"I am with you, and no man shall harm you" (Acts 18:10a). Paul *knew* that intellectually, but he wasn't having an intellectual problem. If you have ever tried to help someone in a state of depression, you know it can't be done intellectually. It's not an intellectual problem. Sometimes the best, maybe the only, thing you can do is just *be* there. That's what helped heal Paul. The Loving Father reminded Paul of something he had forgotten for a moment: "I am *with* you." This powerful affirmation allowed what Paul knew *intellectually* to sift down from his head to his heart and to begin to heal him emotionally. It became, once again, part of his basic soul structure, and his spirit lifted.

Affirmation Number Four

"I have many people in this city" (Acts 18:10b). That was the clincher. It was as if the Lord said, "Don't be discouraged by the rejection of the Jews. I have *other sheep* which are not of this fold. Share the good news with *them*. They may not look like good prospects to *you*. They may seem bored and blasé, indifferent and spaced out but, Paul, they are people whom I love. People for whom Jesus died. I want them to be in eternity with me. Go, share the good news with those in this city who *will* respond if you just remain faithful."

My! What a quartet of affirmations. Acts 18:11 adds this happy P.S – "He stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them." What a PTL *that is!* *God is protector and when we seek to know and to do his will, God affirms and protects us.*

Renewed in body, soul and spirit, Paul moved around Corinth teaching and preaching, witnessing and sharing the story of Jesus with others. *Now* he looked at these seemingly blasé people through a new set of eyes: the eyes of the Loving Father. *Now* when he looked at a satiated sailor he saw in that poor, sin-scorched soul the possibility of a saint. *Now* when he looked at every sad-eyed, sacred prostitute meandering around town he saw the possibility of a soul made new by a loving savior. Like Peggy Lee they had wondered, *Is That All There Is? Is*

that what religion is all about? Is *that* what worshiping God means? The degradation of one's body? Like *mine* which has been so cruelly abused? Is *that* all there is? Now Paul could say with certainty, "No! That is *not* all there is!"

Behind the dull eyes of every weary streetwalker Paul saw the possibility of a new creature made whole in Christ. Every lost sinner became a possible saint. Every man and woman sinking in the quicksand of sin became someone whose feet could be set upon the solid rock of Christ's salvation. And with this new vision of *them*, and of *himself*, Paul went on to some of the greatest months of his entire ministry. "He stayed [in Corinth] a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them" (Acts 18:11). He established one of the strongest of Christian churches in the toughest of places – Corinth! The Gomorrah of Greece. He not only led scores of people who were lost in sin into a loving relationship with Jesus, but while there he also wrote 1st and 2nd Thessalonians and, some believe, the book of Galatians.

Quintessence – Acts 18:12-18

This brings us to our third cue word: *quintessence*. The fair, unprejudiced treatment from which Paul benefitted when he went on trial was *the perfect example*, or quintessence, of judicial behavior. One of the quartet of promises God made to Paul was that while he was in Corinth no attack, however vicious, would *harm* him. He didn't have to wait long to test the truth of that promise. "When Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack upon Paul and brought him before the tribunal saying, 'This man is persuading men to worship God contrary to the law'" (Acts 18:12,13).

Paul was falsely charged with preaching in a manner which violated Roman law. This put Gallio, the judge, in a tough situation because the Jews in Corinth were a powerful, well-organized pressure group. But, to his credit, when they brought Paul before him, Gallio examined the evidence, and despite intense political pressure promptly tossed the case out of court as having no merit. He made a landmark decision which would guide other courts and judges for years to come in their determination of a Christian's right to share his or her faith in a hostile world.

As a result of this, “They all [that is, the Jews] seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to this” (Acts 18:17). Apparently Sosthenes had not been forceful enough in his attack on Paul to please his Jewish critics. But again, God used evil for good. Whether it was because of the brutality of the beating, or the weakness of his case against Paul, or *both*, Sosthenes became a Christian! And in the opening line of his first letter to the Corinthians Paul specifically mentions his name, indicating this letter is not only coming from Paul, but also “from our brother Sosthenes” (1 Corinthians 1:1b). No wonder Paul was able to say later in his letter to Rome, which he wrote in Corinth during his second visit, “We [you and I who are the Lord’s] *we* know that *in everything* God works for good to those who love Him” (Romans 8:28).

Quick – Acts 18:18:22

Our fourth cue word, *quick*, relates to the rapid fire nature of Luke’s report of Paul’s trip home. When he left Corinth Paul went to Cenchreae, two miles to the west, and “cut his hair, for he had a vow” (Acts 18:18b). Apparently Paul had exercised his freedom in Christ by doing something Jewish to express his gratitude for God’s protection. Getting his hair cut marked his release from a Nazarite vow Paul had voluntarily undertaken. It wasn’t something he *had* to do, it was something he *chose* to do,

Then by boat to Ephesus. Earlier Paul was denied the privilege of going there, but this time he was given a warm, positive response and invited to stay. You’ve heard me say it before, but let me say it again: God’s *way* with us, like God’s *will* for us, is best. Earlier, Ephesus wasn’t ready for Paul and Paul wasn’t ready for Ephesus. Earlier, had he been invited to stay, there was no one on his team to leave behind. This time, when he was unable to accept the invitation to linger a while, there were Aquila and Priscilla whom he could leave behind to prepare the way for a future visit.

From Ephesus he sailed down the coast to Caesarea, a Roman port on the Mediterranean Sea; then up to Jerusalem where he enjoyed a short visit with the mother church; then over to Antioch, his home base, where he gave a firsthand report of his second missionary tour. He had preached in some of the greatest cities of Europe and had left behind a sparkling necklace of new churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, Beroe’a, Athens and Corinth. For a while it looked like

Paul was through. Like his ministry was over. Like he had come to the end of his rope. But *God is protector!* And, as our key truth says: *When we seek to know and do his will, God affirms and protects us.*

So What?

What has all this to do with you? Well, if for any number of quite understandable reasons your soul is cast down within you, take heart! You are not alone. Some very bright, gifted, caring people have been where you are.

Depression hit King David. The same man who wrote such inspiring words as: “The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want.” (Psalm 23:1), also wrote such words of anguish as: “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me” (Psalm 42:5).

Depression hit Saint Paul. The same man who wrote such powerful words of positive affirmation as: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”(Philippian 4:13), also wrote regarding his first visit to Corinth: “I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling” (1 Corinthians 2:3).

Depression hit your pastor after the slow drain of a long-lasting, low-grade infection and the need to come to grips *again* with my fear of failure. Depressions comes to all of us. You are not immune. You are not superman. You are not superwoman. You are a creature of clay just as I am, just as Paul and David were. Everyone gets depressed from time to time, and the message of Jesus can be as healing for you today as it was to Paul almost 2,000 years ago: “Do not be afraid. Speak and do not be silent. I am with you. I have many people in this place.”

First of all, “Do not be afraid.” Face the fact that, like all of us, you’re scared sometimes. That you battle with the blues sometimes. That you’re “down on your uppers” sometimes. In other words, give yourself permission to be human. That’s okay. That’s what God made you to be-- human! And God who made mankind out of dust knows that, *like* dust, you are easily blown about by surface things. So let him fill your human spirit with his Holy Spirit, and “do not be afraid.”

Second, “Speak and do not be silent.” Talk to God. Talk to a trusted friend. Talk to a professional counselor. But most important of all, talk to yourself! Open, honest, affirmative self-talk is critical to a healthy state of mind. Start by counting your blessings – out loud! There are profound physiological and psychological realities undergirding the simple assertions of that grand old gospel song: *Count Your Blessings*.

“When upon life’s billows you are tempest tossed,
When you are discouraged thinking all is lost,
Count your many blessings, name them one by one,
And it will surprise you what the Lord has done.”
“Speak and do not be silent.”

Third, “I am with you.” Crawl out of yourself. Get hold of a purpose bigger than you are. Then, having turned your attention outward, turn your attention upward. Remember: *God is protector. When (you) seek to know and do his will, God affirms and protects (you)*.

Fourth: “I have many people in this city.” Focus on the limitless possibilities of a meaningful life which are all around you in the form of people in need. People who *need* to know God loves them. That he *cares* for them. That he longs to *be* for them everything He . . . God . . . *can* be. Wow!

This morning I have a word from God for you: “I have many people in this city. Help them find their way to me. By helping them you will help yourself. Let me give you eyes to see them, ears to hear their cries for help, a heart to feel their desperation and a will to speak quietly through *a life well lived*, as well as through *words of hope and healing*. Do not be afraid. Speak and do not be silent. I am *with* you.”

The Church Extended - Part 10

Acts 18:22 – 19:20

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Key Truth: Knowing Jesus is a growing thing.

Attribute: God is fulfiller.

We're tracing our way through the Bible, getting a firmer grip on the basic story line, the big picture. In our study of Acts, which records those events that followed the life, death, resurrection and ascension of our Savior, we have seen three major movements.

In Acts 1-7 we saw The Church Established and discovered what happened and *how*.

In Acts 8-12 we saw The Church Scattered and discovered what happened and *why*.

In Acts 13-28 we see The Church Extended and discover what happened and *where*.

A Natural Bridge – Acts 18:22,23

Acts 18:22 is not only the verse with which we ended our last teaching, it is also the verse with which we begin this teaching. Taken together, verse 22 and 23 of Acts 18 form a natural bridge between the end of Paul's second missionary journey and the beginning of his third. "When Paul had landed at Caesarea, [a Roman port and the main access route to Jerusalem] he went up and greeted the church."

Those few words can only refer to Jerusalem and the mother church located there, because the church in Jerusalem was the only part of the body of Christ which, at that time, could be recognized with so little data. Early in his ministry Paul learned the importance of being blessed by, and accountable to, the mother church (Acts 9:26-30). So the first thing he did upon completing his second missionary journey was to go up to Jerusalem and greet the church there. Then he went down to Antioch where Paul gave a first-hand report of what God had done during his tours abroad, and this is very important: he gave his report to the people who so prayerfully and carefully had sent him out.

"After spending time [in Antioch] he departed and went from place to place through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples" (Acts 18:23). Paul's *modus operandi* in doing missionary work was to win the lost *and* disciple them. He would not have agreed with

the comment of a contemporary missionary pastor who said no one should hear the gospel twice until everyone has heard the gospel once. That's a powerful statement, and provides tremendous motivational energy to get on with the task of winning the world for Christ. But Paul realized Christians, as well as non-Christians, need to hear the old, old story, and that "those who know it best are hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest."

Paul did not subscribe to the idea that church growth occurs by bringing more people in the front door than the number of those who slip out the back door. He knew that *winning* the lost and *disciplining* them are inextricably bound together. That numerical growth and personal growth are indivisible. That, as our key truth for today states: *Knowing Jesus is a growing thing*. So Paul devoted a great deal of his time and energy to disciplining those whom he, and others, had previously won, and "he went from place to place strengthening all the disciples."

Acts 18:24,25 – From Knowing Jesus Intellectually to Knowing Him Personally

The balance of chapter 18 deals with a chap named Apollos, a fascinating fellow who played a key role in actualizing Christ's prophesy that the church would reach out "to the end of the earth." As a matter of fact, Luke devotes more space to Apollos than to either Silas or Timothy, indicating how important this young man was in helping move The Church Scattered to The Church Extended.

Acts 18:24-26 tell us a bit about him. "Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, well versed in the scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him and expounded to him the way of God more accurately."

Apollos was "a Jew from Alexandria" in Egypt. He could trace his family roots back to the Dispersion which occurred following the fall of Israel when Jews were scattered over the known world. Many of them migrated down to Egypt. That explains why, when Herod threatened the life of Jesus, Mary and Joseph took their young son to Egypt. There was a strong Jewish community there. Some historians estimate that as many as a million Jews were located

in and around Alexandria which was a tremendous city. Along with Antioch and Ephesus, Alexandria was one of three great metropolitan centers of that time. It was a center of commerce, art and education.

Apollos was an “eloquent man.” God doesn’t have many of those in Christian pulpits today. Most of us who have felt his tap on the shoulder and have responded to his call to preach the gospel do not have eloquence as one of our objectives. Our goal is to just communicate, as plainly and as practically as possible, the tremendous truths of the gospel. But every once in a while a preacher comes along with the gift of eloquence. He or she is blessed with a wonderful voice. Great personal presence. Intelligence, education, a sanctified imagination and that mystical quality called charisma. When you hear a preacher like that you are “blessed out of your socks” as you listen to him or her eloquently describe and discuss the truths of scripture.

Apollos was that kind of speaker. He was “well versed in the scriptures.” Probably in the allegorical method which was popular in Alexandria. The Jews in that part of Egypt not only viewed the Old Testament as a statement of God’s activity in history, they were also fascinated by the process of looking *behind* the word, *beyond* the more obvious meaning of a text, to the *deeper* significance of a word or phrase. So Apollos was familiar with the many Old Testament references which, in shadow, symbol and type, speak of a coming Messiah.

As a consequence, Apollos was “instructed in the way of the Lord.” That is to say, he saw the big picture. He understood how, from the time of Abraham, God had been working through Israel to redeem the world. “And being fervent in Spirit,” that is, naturally enthusiastic, one of those bubbly personalities who brings light and life and enthusiasm wherever he or she goes “[Apollos] spoke and taught accurately the things [in the Old Testament] concerning Jesus, though he [personally] knew only the baptism of John.”

Put that all together and you have a remarkable young man with superior qualifications. He was a winner. One of those people who have it all. And we’re told that when he arrived in Ephesus “he began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him [other translations include the word “aside”] where they spoke to him [privately] and expounded to him the way of God more [fully].”

Knowing Jesus is a Personal Thing

In other words, Apollos knew about Jesus intellectually. In his head. But he did not know Jesus personally. In his heart. He had the prophecies down pat, but a *personal, living* relationship through the new birth, was something Apollos had not yet experienced. The key to this understanding of him is found in seven words at the end of verse 25: “he knew only the baptism of John.”

John the Baptist was a stern, joyless man who went about preaching a message of repentance. He was deeply troubled by the casual, superficial, lackadaisical attitude of the people of God toward the claims of God upon their lives. In an unambiguous, uncompromising, passionate way John the Baptist called the people back to righteousness, and the baptism of John was a baptism of repentance for sin. The people baptized by John were giving an external declaration of their internal desire to be righteous. It was a baptism, so to speak, into moral improvement as a way of preparing for things to come.

We must not minimize the importance of this reform movement which prepared “the way of the Lord.” But, John’s message was essentially one of judgment. Matthew 3:1-12 provides us with a short description of his ministry. Verse 2 details his message: “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” Verse 7 tells how, “when he saw some of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said [in a scathing voice] ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’” Verse 10 records how he went on to warn the Hebrew people: “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees;” (the trees symbolized the children of Israel) “and every tree [or person] therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

He then went on to speak of One who would come after him. Verse 12: “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear the threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” In John’s message of judgment and repentance there was this note of anticipation regarding the coming Messiah, and Apollos, knowing the Old Testament scriptures so well, recognized the many references to the Messiah in John’s ministry and message. But what John the Baptist proclaimed was *bad* news. He called people to a better way of living. But he did not *equip* them with the resources required to *live* that better life.

The baptism of *Jesus* and the message of *Jesus* in which Priscilla and Aquila instructed Apollos “more accurately” was just the opposite. Jesus came to declare *good* news. John 3:16 and 17 quote him as saying: “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but have everlasting life. God did not send his son into the world to *condemn* the world, but that *through* Him the world might be *saved*.”

Jesus proclaimed the good news that he was *not* here to call people to a new start, but to give them a new heart. That the way, the truth and the life to which he called people was not a push from below – a self-help program – it was a lift from above because all God requires *of* people he has imparted *to* people in the person of Jesus. Hence the baptism into Jesus was the public declaration of people who had come to realize they were sinners in need of a savior. It was not the declaration of people who were *trying* to be good, as in the case of those who were baptized into John’s baptism. It was a declaration of people who were giving up all self-directed efforts to *be* good and were casting themselves upon the grace of God to *impart* a goodness of which they were incapable.

The difference between those two is monumental. It’s the difference between good news and bad news. It’s the difference between grace and works. It’s the difference between a new life and a new leaf. It’s the difference between resting and striving. It’s the difference between something to *be* accomplished and something which has *been* accomplished. And when Apollos got hold of that tremendous difference, the Jesus whom he had known *intellectually* as a figure in history became one whom he knew *personally*, as a living presence. He passed from head knowledge *about* Jesus to heart knowledge *of* Jesus, and from that time on neither he nor his ministry were the same.

Perhaps you’re like Apollos. You want to be good. With every fiber of your being you are *trying* to be good. You know *about* Jesus. You *admire* him as a figure in history. You have a strong sense of morality and ethics. You are attempting to practice the golden rule. You live by what the community would call a “straight arrow” lifestyle. But despite all this, you’ve missed God’s purpose in sending Jesus into the world.

The reason God sent Jesus is because people like you have “the baptism of John” in the sense of a commitment to that which is good and noble and true. But you do not have “the baptism of Jesus” in the sense of a new birth experience whereby the center of your being shifts from self-directed efforts to *be* good to *God-given* goodness made possible by his amazing grace.

Like all people everywhere, you need a Savior. One who can do for you what you cannot do for yourself. And you’re lost. I’m not talking about an academic lostness. I’m talking about the difference between life and death for you. I’m talking about the difference between good news and bad news of you. I’m talking about the difference between grace and works for you. I’m talking about the difference between resting and striving for you. I’m talking about the difference between claiming what *is*, and reaching for that which can never *be*.

The difference, my friend, is the difference between standing upon solid rock and existing in the quicksand of self reliance so the more you struggle the more desperate your situation becomes. If you only have the baptism of John, there is no atonement for sin. There is no possibility of a personal, living relationship with Jesus. There is no hope and power through his resurrection. There is no internalized Power Source through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. All you know is the ceaseless effort to be good, and there is nothing more debilitating and depressing than that.

Knowing Jesus is a Growing Thing

All of which leads me to say say: *knowing Jesus is a growing thing*. If you know him well enough to admire him, then I urge you to be as humble and as teachable as Apollos so we can “inform (you) more fully” about Jesus. So he whom you know and respect *intellectually*, you come to enjoy *personally*. So he becomes to you what he became to Apollos: a living presence! From that point on nothing was the same for Apollos. His natural gift of enthusiasm was indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit. He wanted *everybody* to know about new life in Christ.

Apparently Priscilla and Aquila told him about the work of Paul in Corinth. Verses 27 and 28 describe how he received a vision for the work in Acha’ia. After securing the blessing of his new brothers and sisters in Christ, he went on to Corinth where “he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, for he powerfully confuted the Jews in public showing by the

scripture that the Christ was Jesus.” Apollos not only encouraged believers, he also *discouraged unbelievers* by his Spirit anointed-gifts of eloquence and intellectual brilliance. Paul later honored him as a valued partner in the ministry when he said, “I planted, Apollos watered, and God gave the increase.”

How I praise God for people with such rare gifts. There are people like that in our town. People who have it all. People who are winners. And, oh, how I covet them for Christ. Some of you are here this morning. You’ve got it all. A wonderful mind. Healthy emotions. A strong determination to do that which is right and good. You have the respect of your fellow citizens, of those with whom you work and live. You’ve got it all. And, oh, how I covet you for the cause of Christ!

Acts 19:1-7 – From Knowing Christ Superficially to Knowing Him Dynamically

Knowing Jesus is a growing thing and in the first section of our text we’ve dealt with a bright, young man who knew Christ intellectually and grew to know him personally. Now, in the second section of our text, we meet some people who knew Jesus superficially and grew to know him dynamically.

Acts 19:1: “While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples.” To properly interpret this passage of scripture we need to know whose “disciples,” or followers they were..

There were the “disciples,” or followers of Jesus (which is what the word “disciples” actually means). There were also the “disciples” of John. The “disciples” of Apollos (2 Corinthians 3:4). The “disciples” of Paul. Scripture uses the term to describe the allegiance of various people. In this case, the context suggests they were the disciples of Apollos and, apparently there was nothing about them which was tangibly, and measurably Christian. This caused Paul to wonder if they had ever been born again. So he entered into a Q & A session with them (19:2-3). We have that session in abbreviated form. “And he said to them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?’” (Acts 19:2a).

Paul's question implies what the scripture elsewhere states: *believing* in Christ as your savior involves *receiving* the gift of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9 -11). Their answer makes it very clear that they had not been born again because they said, "No, we have never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit" (Acts 19:2b). It's impossible, you see, to be a Christian without the Holy Spirit who renews us, who quickens our spirit dead in sin, and brings it to life!

There is an important clue to the identity of these men because any well-tutored Jew would have been familiar with the numerous Old Testament references to the Spirit of God. So their answer, fortified by the fact this happened in Ephesus, a Greek city, suggests these were not twelve Jews, but twelve Jewish proselytes. That is to say, they were Greeks who had been drawn to the concept of monotheism, as contrasted to the Greek religion of polytheism, and had converted to Judaism.

Next Paul asked, "Into what then were you baptized?" They said, "Into John's baptism" (Acts 19:3). John's baptism was a distinctly Jewish ritual. So when Paul heard this he understood the absence of the Spirit's fruit in their lives. How could anyone *in bondage* to a religion of good works, which was where John's baptism put people, experience the fullness of joy and peace in the Holy Spirit? That's what Paul was getting at when in his later letter to the church in Ephesus he wrote, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not of your own doing, it is a gift of God – not because of good works, lest any man should boast" (Ephesians 2:2,9).

So Paul told them about Jesus and "on hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke with tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve of them in all" (Acts 19:4-6). These twelve born-again Ephesian converts illustrate God's Ideal. They had been properly instructed by Paul. They understood that when they were born again they not only received the gift of new life in Christ, simultaneously they received the gift of the Holy Spirit to empower them to *live* this new life.

I don't have time to develop this thought more fully. However, in our study of Acts 2, I explained how the disciples, limited as they were by time in which, historically, events happen

one after another, were saved in the upper room and weeks later, at Pentecost, were filled with the Holy Spirit. Similarly, many of us, limited as we were because we were not properly taught, were saved and years later filled with the Holy Spirit. However, neither they, nor we, represent God's ideal. He wants people to be properly taught so when they are saved, they are simultaneously filled with the Spirit. (See *The Church Established – Acts 1-7*).

Nor do I have time to fully explain the phenomenon of tongues. Again, there are two teachings on that subject in a series of teachings: *The Holy Spirit Now* which provides an hour and a half of study on: *The Purpose and Place of Tongues in Biblical Times and the Purpose and Place of Tongues Today*.

Suffice it to say, there are three places in Acts which describe the miracle of tongues. One is in Acts 2, the occurrence in Jerusalem on Pentecost. Another is in Acts 10, the occurrence in Caesarea and the conversion of Cornelius. The third is here in Acts 19, in Ephesus and the conversion of the Greeks. In Jerusalem the phenomenon occurred among Jews. In Caesarea among Romans. In Ephesus among Greeks. As the gospel was presented to the major ethnic groups of that day and The Church Extended "to the end of the earth," confirmation was needed to prove it was *God* who was at work in his world *through* the apostles. The miracle of tongues was the Spirit's response to that need.

The big lesson for *us* is that *this* church was not, is not and must not ever be a center of self-improvement. Our task is not to call people to "operation bootstrap." To living a better life. To being more noble, generous folk. All of that is good and happens as we grow in Christ. But that is not our primary reason to be. We are not a self-improvement center. We are a resurrection center! God has commissioned us to call people to new life in Christ. To help people, enabled by the Holy Spirit, to walk in the newness of life. To experience the reality of a quality of life they can never achieve in the flesh. *That's* why we're here: to be a resurrection center! And we must never, ever forget that!.

Acts 19:8-20 – From Knowing Jesus Intimately to Knowing Him Practically

Knowing Jesus is a growing thing. In Apollos we had a bright young man who grew from an intellectual knowledge to a personal experience of Jesus. In the Greeks we had twelve seekers

who grew from a superficial knowledge to a dynamic experience of Jesus by simultaneously being born again and filled with the Holy Spirit. In the church at Ephesus we have a congregation of believers who knew Christ intimately, and grew in their awareness of what it means for Jesus to be Lord, until they knew him practically! Down where the rubber meets the road. In the everyday reality of life as it has to be lived.

“And [Paul] entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, arguing and pleading about the kingdom of God; and when some were stubborn and disbelieved, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from [the synagogue], taking the disciples with him, and argued in the hall of Tyrannus [some sources add ‘from 11 in the morning till 4 in the afternoon’]. This continued for two years, so all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:8-10).

In Ephesus, people worked from seven in the morning until eleven o’clock. During the heat of the day, when it was oppressive and uncomfortable to work, they took a break from eleven to four, after which they finished their day’s work. Later, much like Spain today, they would eat and socialize till early morning. According to one historian, more Ephesians were asleep at one o’clock in the afternoon than at one o’clock in the morning. *Paul was so eager to teach the ospel he gave up his noon break* and for five hours, from eleven to four, he taught anybody who was willing to listen.

The other impressive thing about this is that *so many Ephesians wanted to be disciples*. They wanted to know more about Christ. It takes both, you see. A prepared preacher and a prepared people. The preacher can spend hours alone with God making sure he’s ready to proclaim the gospel, but if the people are not open to being taught the Spirit of God is thwarted. It takes both a discipling preacher and a people willing to be disciplined. But when you put those two together, dynamic things happen.

“This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:10). Many scholars believe it was during this time that the seven churches about which we read in Revelation were established, along with others such as the church in Colossae. But while Paul enjoyed great success in ministering to Gentiles, he

continued to reach out to Israelis as is made clear in verse 10 to Luke's reference "both Greeks and Jews."

Acts 19:11-16 – Paul's Ministry Confirmed by Many Miracles

Paul's ministry in Ephesus was not only confirmed by the miracle of tongues, but by other miracles as well. "And God did extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were carried away from his body to the sick, and diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them. Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to pronounce the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, 'I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches.' Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. But the evil spirit answered them, 'Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?' And the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, mastered all of them, and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded" (Acts 19:11-16).

Why did all this happen in Ephesus? A couple of reasons. Ephesus was destined to become the headquarters of the mission work throughout Asia. A great church was to be built there. Timothy would ultimately become its pastor. The church in Ephesus would become a key player in The Church Extended "to the end of the earth." But before that could happen, the body of Christ in Ephesus had to be purified. It had already been empowered by the Holy Spirit. Now it needed to be reminded the Spirit is first, last, and always the *Holy* Spirit. That he calls believers to a life of righteousness.

Ephesus was home to one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world: The Temple of Diana. Emanating from that center of paganism were all kinds of pagan practices. Among these were the famed Ephesian letters: little bits of parchment on which some priest or priestess had written an incantation or so called secret formula. People would wear it around the neck as an amulet to protect them from evil spirits. In that setting Luke says, "God did extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul" (Acts 19:11). His choice of the word "extraordinary" lets us know that what God did in *Ephesus* was not necessarily to be done *everywhere*. It was directed to the peculiar needs of that superstitious city.

Among the things that happened was that sweat bands or handkerchiefs Paul wore around his head to absorb perspiration, and the aprons he wore about his waist as he worked at making tents in the morning, would be taken and used by people to fortify their faith in the power of Christ to heal them and/or deliver them. Apparently the Lord permitted this to help these folks work their way out of superstition. Nowhere does scripture say God *directed* it, but obviously God *permitted* it as they grew from magic to miracles. From a carnal, half-hearted commitment, to full surrender of their best to Christ because as our key truth reminds us: *Knowledge of Christ is a growing thing.*

In Acts 19:13-17 Luke records a humorous incident which reveals his sense of humor. Paul was having great success in the name of Jesus. Some itinerant Jewish exorcists and “seven of the sons of a Jewish high priest” (Acts 19:14), were attempting to cast out an evil spirit in the name of Jesus. The spirit responded by saying, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?” (Acts 19:15).

They were improperly using the name of Jesus and Acts 19:16 describes how “the man who had the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them, overpowered them and stripped them so they fled out of the house.” Everyone in Ephesus heard how these so called “exorcists” misused the name of Jesus and Acts 19:17 says, “Fear fell upon them all; and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled.” Out of that, revival came! The Christians in Ephesus began to confess their personal pagan practices and repent of their self-serving ways. A revival occurred when God’s people stopped talking about *Jesus*, while living like the *devil*!

What happens in verses 18 and 19 is a preface to what occurs in verse 20. “Many also of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices.” Stunned by what happened to the guys who deliberately misused the name of Jesus, God’s people – who had the right to use that name because they *knew* him personally – began to realize they had been treating the name of Jesus far too lightly themselves. They began confessing their dependence upon magic – Jesus plus a little superstition here, Jesus plus an amulet there, Jesus plus a good luck charm here – and they repented of that. A number of people who practiced magic art brought their Ephesian letters and burned them in the sight of all. They put a money value on

them and it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. What that amounts to in dollars is difficult to say, but obviously it was a very costly bonfire.

“So the word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily” (Acts 19:20). The revival which occurred, and the acceleration of the evangelistic outreach of the church, were a by-product of the renewal of the individual members of the church. They grew from knowing Jesus *intimately* as Savior, to knowing him *practically* as Lord in the everyday affairs of life.

You’d like to see a great revival, wouldn’t you? You’d like to see people by the thousands come to Jesus, wouldn’t you? You’d like to see us involved in a great spiritual awakening, wouldn’t you? Are you willing to pay the price? Are you willing to recognize *that* will not happen as long as huge hunks of this particular congregation are unwilling to live with eternity’s values in view?

Some of you would like to be part of the Expect-A-Miracle ministry, but you can’t because you have other financial commitments. Some of you who are faced with the challenge to invest in the work of Christ can’t because you have other investments. I’m not talking about those who *could* help, but *won’t*. God delivered me from bondage to them a long time ago when he told me our building program was going to be a “Gideon Project.” That is to say, our goal of building a great Christian Life Center in this city and dedicating it debt free would be done with the participation of a few hundred people. He made it clear I wasn’t to worry five seconds about the people who *could*, but *won’t*. *They* are the ones who will suffer loss and I grieve for them.

What I’m concerned about are you who *wish* to participate but can’t because of other commitments. And I’m here to tell you in love: there is no shortcut to revival. There is no shortcut to power in your Christian life. It comes today as it did in days of long ago: *through serious, often painful surgery. Through a simple, clear-cut break with the world.*

In Roman 12:11 Paul tells us, “Be not slothful in business, but fervent in the Spirit, serving the Lord.” So I am not suggesting you do dumb things in terms of your business or profession. What I *am* laying before you is the possibility that you may have become “fervent in business,

slothful in Spirit and are serving *yourself!* I'm not blind. I can see the cars you drive. The clothes you wear. The houses in which you live. The restaurants where you eat. The places you go. And God has given me a word for you today:

Examine carefully how you live. How you use what God has provided. It may be painful in the short term to have a bonfire in which you burn your security blankets – your comfort cushions, the *things* you rest in and on – because you can control them. But with burned bridges behind you cast yourself in abandonment upon the sovereignty of God who said, “I will never leave you or forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5).

I said, “Let me walk in the field.” But God said, “No, walk in the town.”

I said, “But there are no flowers there. He said, “No flowers, but a crown.”

I said, “But I'll miss the light, and my friends will miss me they say.”

He answered, “Choose tonight if I am to miss you, or they.”

I pleaded for time to be given. He said, “Is it hard to decide?”

It won't seem hard in heaven to have followed the steps of your guide.”

I cast one look at the field and then set my face to the town.

He said, “My child, do you yield? Will you leave the flowers for the crown?”

Then into his hand went mine, and into my heart came He.

Now I walk with a light Divine, the path I had feared to see.

(Unknown)

The Church Extended - Part 11

Acts 19:21--20:38

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Key Truth: God's love, transferred through us, builds up the body.

Attribute: God is Shepherd.

When the people of God in Ephesus built a bonfire and placed in it everything that might hinder their availability to God, a great revival broke out in that city. As the work of Christ took root and grew, Paul, moved by the Holy Spirit, sensed that time was getting by and began looking at the big picture again including the longing of his heart to carry the gospel of Christ to Rome, "The Capital of the World."

But before proceeding with the thrilling story of Paul's historic third missionary journey, Luke pauses to give us:

A look at another of the many challenges faced by the New Testament church,

A taste of worship as practiced by New Testament church, and

A statement about ministry as done by the New Testament church, all of which will inform us and serve to guide us as we seek to become a church after God's own heart.

A Brief Review

Applying today's terminology to our last study, Luke dealt with the twin perils of "factionalism" and "sensationalism" (Acts 18:22 – Acts 19:20). One faction was involved in what scholars called "The Cult of John the Baptist." To the simple message of salvation by grace through faith plus nothing (Ephesians 2:8,9), this group insisted that one must also be baptized to be saved.

Another faction was hooked on "sensationalism." Like many people today they were constantly searching for "something new." A higher high. A more exciting experience to help them make it through the day. Many of these became involved in magic and the occult.

But however fractious "factionalism" and "sensationalism" were, *and are*, to the body of Christ, neither was or is a match for "materialism," the challenge Luke focuses on in our text.

The Temple of Diana

Let me give you a bit of background. Hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, a huge black meteorite had fallen in an area which later became the city of Ephesus. Believing the meteorite to be a gift from Jupiter, the god of the sky, a temple was built in which to place this so-called sacred stone. Later *that* temple was burned and replaced by the magnificent temple of Diana or Artemis, the names being interchangeable, which was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. *This* huge structure was almost as big as a football field, built out of huge granite stones held together, we're told, by gold rather than mortar and surrounded by magnificent columns. It was an awesome sight and visitors from all over the known world came to see this magnificent wonder and to worship Diana, the so-called mother God.

Materialism

Enter materialism. Visitors wanted replicas of what they had seen, so the Ephesian artisans created small replicas of the temple. They also created icons in the shape of a multi-breasted woman made out of terra cotta, as well as silver and other precious metals. In time these collector's items became idols – an interesting illustration of the evolution of evil – and, rooted in religious superstitions, idolatry became big business.

The plain message of salvation by grace through faith in Christ proved to be threatening to this bit of highly profitable “relig-biz.” So Demetrius, who appears to have been a leader among his fellow craftsmen, called the artisans of Ephesus together and made an impassioned speech. “Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth. And you see and hear that not only at Ephesus but almost throughout all Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a considerable company of people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may count for nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship.

“When they heard this they were enraged, and cried out, ‘Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!’ So the city was filled with the confusion; and they rushed together into the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul’s companions in travel” (Acts 19:25b-29).

Now try to get this picture. Here in Ephesus, one of the three great metropolitan centers of Paul's time, was the magnificent Temple of Diana, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Here, too, was an industry built around the worship of that so-called goddess. Into that bustling center of paganism came Paul armed with the Truth about God and that whole system began to topple.

How did that happen? Because Paul went around attacking Diana (Artemis)? No! Because he went around attacking the temple? No. Because he went around making a mockery of the people's heritage? No. Because Paul was anti- this or anti- that? No. Paul succeeded by being pro-Jesus. Everywhere he went he talked about Jesus. The more he talked about the *living* Christ, the more obvious it was that gods made by human hands are not gods at all. Slowly, but surely, Christ who *is* "the Way, the Truth and the Life" began to change people.

Whenever given a chance, Life will always overcome death and Truth will overcome deceit. So the whole pagan system began to topple. That can be bad for business, and the local merchants were scared. Whenever business concerns are mixed with religious superstition and political intimidation, you've got the makings of a first-class riot. And that's exactly what they had. Verse 29 says, "the city was filled with confusion."

To give you a feeling for the confusion, grab a hymn book, pick a hymn on any page and when I say, "go" begin reading as loud as you can. On your mark, get set, go! Read! Louder! Louder! Now, stop. The result was bedlam was it not? Well, now you have a tiny idea of what it was like in the theater of Ephesus that day. There are hundreds of us here, but that day there were over 25,000 people present. Wild, crazy, out of control confusion occurred. The more the people shouted, the more angry they became. The more angry they became, the more confused they were. The more confused they were, the louder they became. It was chaotic..

Acts 19:30-34 explain that one of the community leaders, Alexander by name, attempted to bring order out of chaos. But when they found out he was a Jew they attacked him, too. As far as these pagans were concerned Jews and Christians were two peas in a pod because both Jews and Christians opposed idolatry.

Rudyard Kipling has a poem in which he describes the qualities of maturity. One line says, “If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you, then you’re a man, my son.” Well, after two hours of wild confusion, the town clerk took charge and brought sense out of nonsense. Verses 35-41 record his carefully reasoned, calming argument. Let me paraphrase: “We all know our city is special because we are keepers of this great temple of Diana and of the sacred stone which fell from the sky. So, obviously, Diana is not a god made with hands. Since all of this is common knowledge, keep your cool. Furthermore, these men have done nothing with which they can be charged. If Demetrius can come up with a charge which will stick, let him take them to court. That’s what the courts are for. Until then, let’s behave ourselves because this session is getting out of hand and if we get the Romans riled up we could lose even more of our freedoms.” As a consequence of the town clerk’s exhortation, “order returned’ (Acts 19:41).

Tucked away in this section of our text is a verse of scripture which states our key truth in a negative way. Our key truth says, *God’s love, transferred through us, builds up the body.* Acts 19:32 states the antithesis of that and shows us what not to do. “Now some cried one thing, some another; for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together.”

This leads me to say: if you are going to shout be sure you know what you’re shouting about! Unfortunately, many of us go about shouting, not knowing at all what we’re shouting about because we haven’t taken the time, or mustered the courage, to discern the difference between our principles and our prejudices. Many of our so-called “convictions” are nothing more than traditions or prejudices we have never seriously examined in the light of biblical teaching.

The icon makers in Ephesus knew what they were shouting about. They knew what Paul was saying was true. They knew those idols they were making weren’t gods. They had made them with their own hands. In their own shops. They knew the charge was true, they just didn’t want to hear about it. It was bad for business. But the crowd “did not know why they had come together” (Acts 19:32) So if we’re going to, friends, let’s know what we’re shouting about. Let’s be sure it’s worth shouting for. Let’s get the facts, even if it hurts, lest we act in an inappropriate way out of ignorance, as the crowd did.

I got a chuckle out of the story about a fellow who was so overwhelmed by the price his wife was paying for poultry at the local supermarket he decided to go into the chicken raising business. He bought 3,000 chicks and a few weeks later the farmer from whom he had bought them asked him how business was going. “Not well at all,” he replied, “Either I planted them too deep, or too close together.” Someone else shared how his store had been broken into the night before. “Did you lose much?” he was asked. “Yes, but it wasn’t too bad because yesterday we lowered the price on everything 30%.”

Well, these are humorous, harmless happenings. But when it comes to the body of Christ it’s important that we not act ineptly out of ignorance. That we get the facts, so if we’re going to shout we know what we’re shouting about. And, if there is a principle involved, that we handle it with love because *God’s love, transferred through us, builds up the body*. Conversely, where there is no love, the body of Christ is decimated.

I remember hearing W. A. Criswell tell about the most famous church fight in Southern Baptist history. It took place in what was a great and growing church. People came from all over the area to be ministered to by that church. Then someone gave them a grand piano and the church divided over whether the piano should be on the right side or on the left side of the platform. The country folk got on horseback and road from farm to farm, while the city folk went from neighbor to neighbor mustering up votes for the right side or the left side.

Dr. Criswell tells how two of the members of his very first church were the layman and his sister who led that fight. Criswell was overwhelmed at the thought of being the pastor of two such contentious people. Fortunately, they had gotten old and tired. Some of their “spizzerinctum” had “spunk.” When W. A. would call on them, the man would just sit there, inanimate, until W. A. said, “Brother, tell me about that church fight.” The man would come to life, his eyes would begin to flash and he would tell how they had this tremendous fight over whether the piano should be on the right side or the left side of the platform.

One day when W. A. was visiting in their home, he said, “Brother, you’ve told me about that church fight many times, but you never told me whether you wanted the piano on the right side or the left side. Which side *did* you want to the piano on?” The old man thought for a moment,

then grabbed his cane, hit it on the floor, and called to his sister who was in another room. “Lizzie! Come here!” Lizzie came tottering in, and he said, “Lizzie, which side *did* we want that piano on anyway?”

Think of it. A great church, ministering to the needs of people dying in their sin, destroyed over such nonsense as where a piano should be. A fight led by a man who, years later, couldn’t remember which side he was on. Friends, if you’ve got to shout, make sure you know what you’re shouting about. Make sure it’s worth shouting for. And, if you must shout do so in love. Because *God’s love, transferred through us, will build up the body!* But shouting in the flesh will destroy the body.

While doing everything we read about in chapter 19, Paul also had other things on his mind. He was a many faceted, multi-ministry man. The church in Corinth was having problems. So while in Ephesus, Paul wrote them several letters two of which are in our New Testament. The heart of this touring pastor was deeply concerned for the body of Christ. Underlying that concern was a growing sense of urgency that time was getting short.

Acts 20:1-2

As we move into chapter 20 we see Paul leaving Ephesus to visit Macedonia and then, going on to Greece, he ministered to the Gentile churches from which he collected an offering to share with the church in Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 10; 2 Corinthians 9). The Christians in Jerusalem were a small, weak, economically poor minority. Social, familial and political pressures were directed against them to keep them from growing and, if possible, motivate them to reconvert to Judaism. They were really hurting. Paul knew this and urged the Gentile Christians, who enjoyed much more freedom in which to work and worship, to help their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ in Jerusalem with a generous love offering because *God’s love, transferred through us, builds up the body.*

Acts 20: 3-12 New Testament Worship

At this point Luke informs us in an offhand way about New Testament worship. Paul had planned to go back to Jerusalem by ship. He learned there was a plot set for him. Maybe his enemies were going to toss him overboard. But having caught word of this plot to do him in,

Paul returned to his home base by land. Acts 20:4 and 5 give us the names of some of his friends who had gone ahead to Troas by boat and explain that when Paul finally arrived he rejoined his friends and they stayed in Troas for a week.

Acts 20:7-12 provide an interesting example of a New Testament church worship service. Notice, first of all, it was held on Sunday, answering those who assert that Sabbath worship was the practice of first century churches. Some did meet in synagogues on the Sabbath because that's where the Jews were whom they hoped to win for Christ. But on Sunday, the Lord's day, believers met together to worship the Lord and minister to one another. Notice, too, it was held in the evening which was probably the only time slaves, who made up most of the members of the early church, could get away. So the time of worship was flexible, as was its style of worship. It was not staid or static. It was dynamic and related to the needs of now.

God's love, transferred through us, builds up the body and verse 7 provides us with a positive statement to that effect. If the mob (chapter 19) showed us what *not* to do, the packed-out church shows us what *to* do. This little verse, coupled with other verses scattered through scripture, and the research and writings of the early church fathers, give us an idea of Christian worship New Testament style. It involved, first of all, a common meal or what we would call the "love feast."

It may have been the only good, balanced, substantial meal some of the slave members of the church had all week. They gathered together in a common meal so they could minister to the physical needs of one another. In the process they discovered *koinania*: a Greek word for the kind of fellowship which involves people touching one another heart to heart, not just hand to hand. Spontaneously, that common meal became a "memorial service" because Jesus had said, "As often as you eat this bread and drink of this cup, do this in remembrance of me."

I don't believe our Lord ever intended that a liturgy be developed, and then on some kind of schedule, be it once a week or once a month or once a year, we would conduct a formal service in which we served what we call communion, and other traditions call a sacrament. I believe Jesus meant that *every time* we sit down to the dining table, the bread we eat would remind us of his life spent for us, and whatever we drink would remind us of his blood spilled for us. That

every time we break bread with our brothers and sisters in Christ it would remind us how Jesus lived and died, because his lifestyle is to become our lifestyle, too.

Then there was teaching and expression, because Paul not only taught, but when the need arose he reached out to respond to the human need of a boy who was hurt. Thus, all of the character of the New Testament church as spelled out in Acts 2: 41-47 were there: teaching, fellowship, worship and expression. That's body life. That's what we're meant to be and do. And sometimes I wonder if, in the process of developing our liturgies with all their beauty, we haven't lost the spontaneity God meant our gatherings to have.

Acts 20:13-38 A Lovely Interlude

The last few verses of our text form a lovely little interlude. After Paul had ministered to the people of God all night, he sensed his own need to be ministered to. You see, there is a time to give out for Jesus, and there is a time to take in from Jesus. There is a time to talk about Jesus, and there is a time to let Jesus talk to you. It's a mark of Paul's maturity, as well as his humanity, that he let the crowd go one way while he went the other way . . . alone.

Acts 20:14-18 Paul's Rush Toward Jerusalem

Verses 14-18 record the hurry-up voyage of Paul as he tried to get to Jerusalem in time for Pentecost. En route, the ship on which he was sailing stopped at Ephesus to unload or to take on cargo and passengers. Paul seized the opportunity to share with the elders of the church there.

Acts 20:18-35 Paul's Sermon to Christians.

Verses 18-35 provide us with an example of Paul's preaching to a Christian audience. It was a three-point sermon in which he spoke about the past, the present and the future.

Acts 20:18-21 The Past

Paul began by reflecting on the past: God empowered me to minister to you in many ways, he said. Mine was **an intimate ministry**. I lived among you all the time (verse 18). It was **a humble ministry**. I was moved to serve you in Jesus' name (verse 19a). It was **a costly ministry**. I was beset with trials plotted by the Jews (verse 19b). It was **a faithful ministry**. I

didn't shrink back from declaring to you what you needed to hear (verse 20a). It was **a varied ministry**. I taught in public and in private. If you didn't come to me, I came to you . . . house to house (verse 20b). It was **a relevant ministry**. I testified to both the Greeks and the Jews of repentance to God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (verse 21).

Acts 20:22-27 The Present

Then Paul spoke of the present. I'm involved in **a Spirit-led ministry**, he said. I don't know what lies ahead, but I sense it's going to be **a difficult ministry** because everywhere I go I'm reminded that affliction and imprisonment await me (verse 22, 23). But, he continued, **Mine is a necessary ministry**,. Apparently thinking of Jesus of whom it was said, "He set his face toward Jerusalem," Paul explained I'm going to Jerusalem because that's the only way my task can be accomplished, and my witness to the grace of God can be known (verses 24). That was not a "puff job." Paul was not playing the little Jack Horner game: "What a good boy am I." Paul was not just saying, look at me. Paul was saying, look at me *because* ministry will increasingly involve you, as well as me, and you need to understand it will be **a painful ministry**. We will not see each other again and that *hurts* (verse 25).

The last thing my father said to me before he died was, "I'll see you at the Eastern gate." When I asked, "Why the Eastern gate?" he answered, "Because that's where the throne is."

Throughout my early ministry my Father was my greatest supporter. Not with money, because he didn't have any. Not with words of encouragement, because he wasn't comfortable giving verbal accolades. I never heard my Father say, "I love you." Not once. In my entire life. But I knew he loved me because of what he did and the prayers with which he surrounded me. Now, I like to think of my father sitting near the throne, and from time to time when I'm under oppression, reaching up to get Christ's attention by grabbing the hem of his garment, saying, "Jesus! Jesus! Don't forget Johnnie down there. He needs your help!" And together, Jesus and my father, intercede for me at the throne of Grace on behalf of this ministry.

For the Ephesians it would be **a painful ministry**. They would never see each other again. As for himself, Paul could say, it's been **a satisfying ministry**. I didn't shrink back from telling you what you *needed* to hear (verses 26,27).

Acts 20:28-35 The Future

He concluded his sermon to Christians by reminding them that in the future theirs must be a **shepherding ministry**. “Take heed to yourselves and to the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians, to feed the church” (verse 28). Therefore, Paul said, yours must be a **watchful ministry**. “After my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking perverse things, to draw away the flock” (verse 29). You must learn to deal with the double whammy of fierce foes without and false friends within. Be alert and follow the example I set for you. Remember how for three years I provided around the clock watch care, often with tears. Do for others as I did for you.

Finally, verse 32, “I commend you to God and the word of his grace.” Conduct a **word-centered ministry** which builds up the body. Equip the saints to enjoy their full inheritance in Christ. And let yours be a **work-oriented ministry**, “by so toiling one must help the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” (20:35). "When He had spoken this, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And they all wept and embraced Paul and kissed him, sorrowing most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they should see his face no more. And they brought him to the ship" (Acts 20:36-38).

In 1951 Lucille and I conducted a ministry of encouragement throughout Europe. Among other places, it took us to Gothenburg, Sweden. We had a great revival there. One of those whom the Lord touched was Stella, a sweet little Swedish nurse. The morning we left by boat for Denmark, Stella and several others from the Gothenburg Church gathered at the dock to say farewell. She and one of her friends twirled up handkerchiefs until they were taut and held them up in the form a cross reminding us that "when we asunder part, it gives us inward pain, but we shall still be joined in heart and hope to meet again."

This morning I want to finish by preaching Paul's sermon to the Christians in Ephesus. Please close your eyes, and as you listen, put yourself in the picture.

"Your yourselves know how I lived among you all the time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which befell me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance to God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

“And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, bound in the Spirit, not knowing what shall befall me there; except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may accomplish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the Gospel of the grace of God.

“And now, behold, I know that all you among whom I have gone about preaching the Kingdom will see my face no more. Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians, to feed the church of the Lord which he obtained with his own blood.

“I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

“I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities, and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by so toiling one must help the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (Acts 20:18b-35).

And when He had spoken this, He knelt down and prayed with them all. And they all wept and embraced Paul and kissed him, sorrowing most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they should see his face no more (Acts 20:36-38a).

The Church Extended - Part 12

Acts 20:40 – 22:29

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Key Truth: The same Spirit who warns of danger provides power to face it in Jesus' name.

Attribute: God is comforter.

My choice for a key verse in our scripture lesson today is Acts 21:13, “Then Paul answered, ‘What are you doing weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.’”

Many years ago Lydia Baxter wrote these words of wisdom:

“Take the name of Jesus with you, child of sorrow and of woe. It will joy and comfort give you. Take it, then, where ere you go. Take the name of Jesus ever, as a shield from every snare. If temptations round you gather, breathe that Holy name in prayer.” That was Paul’s practice as, with great resolve, he moved toward the climax of his ministry on earth. He leaned hard on the name of Jesus.

Acts 21:1-16 Paul’s Journey to Jerusalem.

It’s impossible to read the book of Acts without sensing the accelerating pace of Luke’s pen as he moves toward the climax of his story about the New Testament church and takes us almost 600 miles in just three verses: Acts 21:1-3. “And when we had parted from [the Ephesians] and set sail, we came by a straight course to Cos . . .” a small island about 40 miles from Ephesus and the home of Hippocrates, the father of modern medicine. “And the next day to Rhodes . . .” about 70 miles from Cos where the Colossus of Rhodes, another of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World had stood. Over 150 feet tall, solid bronze, requiring 12 years to construct, it was completed in 280 B.C. and stood for 56 years until in 224 B.C. it was destroyed by a terrible earthquake. The Colossus was so huge the great sailing vessels of that time were able to pass through its outspread legs as it stood astride the opening to the harbor of Rhodes. The remains of that ancient wonder were still standing when Paul was there.

Moving on in verse 1, “From there to Patara . . .” on the mainland of Asia Minor about 70 miles from Rhodes where (verse 2), they boarded a larger, more seaworthy vessel headed for “Phoenicia” which is modern Lebanon, some 350 miles away. Instead of hugging the coastline, they moved into the open sea and sailed “in sight of Cyprus” (verse 3a). In my mind’s eye I can see Paul gathering his little party around him at the railing and telling them about the exciting things which had happened when he and Barnabas visited Cyprus on his first missionary tour years before. And then (verse 3b), “we sailed to Syria, and landed at Tyre . . .”

While their ship was unloading its cargo Paul and his party went ashore where he followed his standard M.O., his method of operation, which was to win the lost and disciple them. Verse 4 tells us “he sought out the disciples and he stayed [with them] for seven days . . .” probably ministering in their home, teaching them and sharing with them what God was doing in his life and wanted to do in the lives of all believers, everywhere..

One of the common criticisms often leveled against Paul is that he was totally devoid of any aesthetic or artistic sense, because in his three missionary journeys he visited some of the greatest cities on earth, cities famed for their art, culture and architecture, yet never once did Paul bother to mention this in any of his writings. In my judgment this was not because he lacked an aesthetic sense. No one could write such beautiful prose as we find in I Corinthians 13 and not have a feeling for beauty. But, as a Bible teacher from an earlier era said, “For Paul there was no scenery. There was no geography. For Paul there was nothing but lost humanity and the redeeming blood of Jesus Christ.”

Paul belonged to what I call “The Fellowship of the One-Track Mind.” He was guided by an unsophisticated singleness of purpose which was to win the lost and disciple them. What powerful, transforming things could happen in our church, in our city, and in this area of God’s vineyard which has been assigned to us, if that same single-mindedness, that same one-track “obsession,” were to grip us.

While in Tyre Paul received confirmation of his own premonition in the Spirit which he described earlier in Acts 20:22-24, that the road ahead would be rough. “Through the Spirit

[Paul's friends] told [him] not to go on to Jerusalem" (Acts 21:4a). Notice, please, it wasn't the Spirit who told him not to go. It was some of his friends who were burdened *in* the Spirit *for* him. That's important. We'll find another of these prophetic warnings of bad things to come in just a moment. We'll talk about the purpose of those warnings, and whether or not Paul was correct in ignoring them.

For the moment, I want you to fasten your attention on Acts 21:5 and 6 to see if you can picture in your mind's eye that lovely farewell scene which took place so long ago. One of the glorious joys of being a Christian is the miracle of fellowship which occurs between brothers and sisters in Christ who, until the moment of their meeting, are total strangers and then, when they discover a common bond in Jesus, become lifelong friends. This has happened to me again and again as I've been privileged to minister in the name of Jesus around the world.

I remember a cab driver in Fiji on our return from New Zealand. I shared the fact that Lucille and I were completing a missionary tour to that part of the world. He pulled over, stopped the cab, looked at me and said, "You're a Christian?" "Yes." His black hand reached out and gripped mine, "I'm a Christian, too, brotha," and for the balance of our tour of the island the three of us shared sweet communion in the Spirit. As we left his cab he said, "I may not see you again on earth brotha, but I'll see you over there."

"Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love,
the fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above."

Luke's report of Paul's journey to Jerusalem continues in verse 7. They had an overnight stop at Ptolemais, which is about 20 miles south of Tyre. And then (verse 8), they traveled another 40 miles to Caesarea, the beautiful Roman Seagate city to Jerusalem. There Paul's party met Philip and his family and were invited to be their house guests. Talk about the healing power of Christian love and the unity that exists between Spirit-filled Christians! I doubt you can find a more beautiful example than what is recorded here in our text: the meeting of Paul and Philip.

Think back a bit about how things had been 20 years before. Because of his dedication, loyalty, faithfulness and Spirit-filled life, Philip was selected as one of the original seven deacons. The

Lord gave this laymen the ministry gift of evangelism. It was Philip who, long before any of the apostles got sight of the greater goal Jesus had in the forming of his church and went beyond the walls of Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria to preach the gospel. It was Philip who went down toward the desert and ministered to an Ethiopian eunuch and baptized him there. It was Philip with his strong desire to win people to Jesus who, along with many others, was scattered because of persecution by a young, fire-breathing zealot for Judaism named Saul.

It was Saul who had stood by and watched Stephen stoned. It was Saul who went out of his way to get official sanction to go up to Damascus and harass, imprison and persecute the Christians there. It was Saul who, more than any other, single-handedly brought about the scattering of the church. And now, 20 years later, here they are: Philip, the persecuted and Saul, now Paul, the persecutor breaking bread together! Recalling the chaos and confusion of those earlier years. Reflecting in awe at the sovereignty of God who had taken all that evil and used it for good so 20 years later Paul could go into various cities he had visited on his three missionary journeys and find Christians there. Christians who were believers because earlier, due to his persecution, the church had been scattered. Excuse me, but hallelujah!

As they reminisced, I'm sure there were times when Philip and Paul laughed together and wept together. In my imagination I can hear Paul saying, "You know, Philip, I'm just now beginning to understand the deeper reality of what the Holy Spirit led me to write in my letter to the Romans: 'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? No. In all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. . . . for in everything God works for the good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.' You know, Philip, I didn't fully appreciate what the Spirit was directing me to write until just now. You and I are former adversaries. You were a victim of the scattering of the church, and I was the cause of that scattering. You were the first to see the larger vision of what Jesus had intended for his body, and I am the one to whom God gave the privilege of following that vision 'to the end of the earth.' It wasn't until now, Philip, as you and I were breaking bread together and ministering to one another, that I began to understand how God turns every tragedy into a triumph. He does, Philip. He does. He does."

My! I can see them having a great old “Praise God, Hallelujah” time together as, in that moment, they saw how the sovereignty of God had operated independently and corporately in their lives to bring about God’s purpose for the church.

How about you, my friend? Can you, will you, look back and think of how, at various stages of your life experience, God has been there? Can you, will you, look back and see how what seemed to be a tragedy actually was the stepping stone to a triumph? Can you, will you, look back and reflect upon how God took what was an obvious evil and, because you were willing to let him do so, turned that evil into good? Can you, will you, look at your present situation and believe with all your heart God can do it again? Can you, will you, let go of the future and believe that despite your own well meaning, but sometimes misguided, efforts in which you flubbed the dub, that God will never let you down or give you up? Can you, will you, believe that in everything, God works for good to those who love him? Oh, if you can, if you will, you’ll be free! You’ll be free to be available *to* him so he can work *through* you to the glory of his name.

Acts 21:10-16 The Balance of Paul’s Journey to Jerusalem

A brief interruption in Paul’s journey to Jerusalem briefly provided him with another of these prophetic warnings of bad things to come. “And coming to us [Agabus, a prophet] took Paul’s girdle and bound his own feet and hands, and said, ‘Thus says the Holy Spirit, so shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this girdle and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.’ And when we heard this, we and the people there begged [Paul] not to go up to Jerusalem. Then [he] answered, “What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart?”

Notice, first of all, it was a warning, not a direction from the Holy Spirit. It was a confirmation of the premonition Paul already had. That’s important. Then notice in verse 12, it was Paul’s party who begged him not to go and it was to them that Paul spoke when he said, “Why are you breaking my heart?” In the original it means why are you feeding my fears? Why are you trying to hold me back? Paul was saying, please don’t do that. I don’t need anybody to feed my fears, I need somebody to feed my faith!

Boy, how I can identify with Paul in that regard! Over the past few years as we've struggled with what it means to be Truly Trinitarian, what it means to really be a New Testament church, I've had to go to some of my friends and say, "Please, stop feeding my fears. I know all the pitfalls that lie ahead. God has clearly set before me an understanding of the problems we've got to overcome. So, please don't feed my fears. Feed my faith." And I thank God for those of you who have done that.

We're coming to the end of what may be one the most remarkable 30 days in the history of this church. For months, some people have been asking, "What's wrong? Why aren't things moving faster? What's wrong?" They said it so often even I began to say, "Yeah, Lord, what's wrong? Is something wrong? Are we out of your will?" Feeding my fears. And then, somehow, I would find the courage to say, "Nothing is wrong. We're just waiting for God's timing. And now, in just 30 days, the Lord has provided us with two and a half million dollars. He has given us the building permit to proceed with our buildings. He has given each of us a chance to be a part of his miracle. From the youngest to the oldest. From the poorest to the richest. And it's all happened in 30 days. Praise God for those of you who fed my faith instead of my fears.

I can hear Paul saying, "Hey, gang, don't you remember I told you a long time ago it was going to get tough? Don't you remember I told you the Holy Spirit had informed me the road ahead would not be easy? I've known all along what awaits me in Jerusalem. These prophecies come as no surprise to me. God is using them to reminder me that I must walk by faith, not sight.

"And, friends, he is providing these prophecies in your presence to prepare you, so when you see the wrath of God's enemy descending on me in Jerusalem, you will know it is part of God's plan and he will use it for good. Remember this prophecy and rejoice that I am more than conqueror through Christ who strengthens me. Indeed, 'I am ready not only to be imprisoned, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus' (Acts 21:13)." Again, I think they had a wonderful "Glory, hallelujah, praise the Lord" time, as they were liberated from their fears for their friend.

“And when he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, ‘The will of the Lord be done.’ After these days we made ready and went up to Jerusalem” (Acts 21:14,15). “We ceased,” Luke reports. We were motivated by love for Paul. We didn’t want to see him get hurt. But Paul was motivated by love for Jesus. He was determined to do what the Lord had laid upon his heart to do. When Paul mentioned the name of Jesus we knew he was right and we were wrong, and “we ceased.” Verse 15 continues, “We made ready.” We packed our bags and “went.” To put it in contemporary slang, “We shut up, packed up and went up.” We didn’t abandon him when the going got tough. We tried to be “foul weather friends” who would be there when he needed us. Praise God for friends like that.

Henry Jacobson has observed, “A lot of us are like the fellow who decided life had gotten too tough to handle and tried to hang himself by tying a rope around his waist. He discovered that when he put the rope around his neck it impeded his breathing.” Mr. Jacobson goes on to observe that, “Many Christians are ready to suffer and die for Jesus as long as it doesn’t hurt. But Paul knew, and his party knew going to Jerusalem would cost them . . . a lot!” And it did. But underlying Paul’s determination was this key truth: *The same Spirit who warns of danger provides power to face it in Jesus’ name.*

Acts 21:15 and 16 describe how the journey to Jerusalem ended. William Graham Scroggy, who preceded our beloved J. Sidlow Baxter as pastor of Charlotte Chapel in Edinburgh, Scotland says, “Verses 15 and 16 are both terminal and germinal.” Don’t you love the way those English preachers play with words? “One part of Paul’s ministry ended and another part of Paul’s ministry began. Everything preceding verse 15 records his tireless activities for Christ. Everything after verse 16 records his fruitful captivities for Christ.”

Acts 21:17 – Acts 22:29 Paul Jeopardized in Jerusalem

This brings us to the second portion of our scripture lesson: Paul Jeopardized in Jerusalem. In verse 17 we are told he was “received gladly.” Not only because of who he was, but because of what he brought with him: an offering from the church in Asia which was mostly Gentile, to minister to the needs of the church in Jerusalem which was mostly Jewish.

Verses 18-20 tell us he met with the elders and James, the pastor. He told them everything God had done on his missionary journeys, and “they glorified God.” Not to be outdone by what Paul had accomplished with Gentiles, the Jerusalem elders pointed to their accomplishments in reaching Jews. “Many thousands,” they said, “who are zealous for the law” (verse 20b).

The strategy of the Jerusalem church was one of accommodation to the law and , over time, it sowed the seeds for the reversionary movement which almost killed the New Testament church. Over the years an aggressive effort arose by some Jewish believers to bring Christianity back under Judaism and proclaim a message of “Jesus plus.” “Jesus plus” the law. “Jesus plus” the ordinances. “Jesus plus” the teachings of Judaism. That reversionary movement had its birth in the strategy of accommodation adopted by the church in Jerusalem.

After speaking of these who were “zealous for the law,” the elders continued, “And they have been told about you [Paul], that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or observe the customs” (Acts 21:21). Paul did not do that, but that’s what was rumored. “What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow [probably a Nazirite vow]; take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you but that you yourself live in observance of the law” (Acts 21:22-24).

Luke goes on to explain in the balance of chapter 21 how Paul followed the advice of the elders and James. Whether it was good advice or bad advice is a matter of difference with Bible expositors, and whether Paul was right or wrong in following their advice is also a matter of conjecture. One thing is clear to me, by following their advice Paul remained true to his *modus operandi*. In 1 Corinthians 9:20, he explains how he became “all things to all men . . . to those under the law [he] became as one under the law that [he] might win those under the law.” So when he agreed to follow the counsel of James and the Jerusalem elders, he was just doing what he was prepared to do anyway: become a Jew if that’s what it took to win the Jews. Just like he “became” a Greek, or a Roman, when attempting to win them.

As the week wore on, I believe Paul intensified his communion with the Lord because the process of purification from a Nazarite vow included the offering of a sacrifice, something Paul was not prepared to do. Go through the motions of a ritual that had no real meaning to him? Yes, he could do that. But offer a sacrifice? No, he could not do that. He would be turning his back on the “once-for-all sacrifice” Jesus had made at Calvary and Paul could not and would not do that. So as the seventh day arrived I can imagine Paul saying, “God, you’ve got a problem. I’m doing what I believe to be your will, but Lord, my trust is in the ‘once-for-all sacrifice’ of Jesus. I’m not prepared to make another sacrifice. But to complete this process of purification I will be required to do exactly that, so you’ve got a problem, God! How are you going to get me out of this one?”

The loving Father rescued him in a most interesting way: God let Paul be arrested! “When the seven days were almost completed” . . . God is never late, but he sure is last minute a lot . . . “the Jews from Asia who had seen him in the temple, stirred up all the crowd, and laid hands on him, crying out, ‘Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching men everywhere against the people and the law and this place’” Paul had not done that. It, too, was a false accusation, but the crowd believed it. “Moreover he also brought Greeks into the temple, and he has defiled this holy place” (Acts 21:27-28). Paul had not done that, either. All of which is to say: when people want to throw a monkey wrench into God’s plan any excuse will do, whether it’s true or not.

What actually happened is that some of them had seen Trophimus, the Ephesian, with Paul in Jerusalem and they supposed Paul had taken him into the temple, which he had not. “Then all the city was aroused, and the people ran together; they seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut. And as they were trying to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. He at once took soldiers and centurions, and ran down to them; and when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. Then the tribune came up and arrested him, and ordered him to be bound with two chains. He inquired who [Paul] was and what he had done. Some in the crowd shouted one thing, some another; and as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered [Paul] to be brought into the barracks. And when [Paul] came to the steps, he was actually carried by

the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd; for the mob of the people followed, crying, 'Away with him!'

“As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, ‘May I say something to you?’ And [the tribune] said, ‘Do you know Greek? Are you not the Egyptian, then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?’ And Paul replied, ‘I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city; I beg you, let me speak to the people.’ And when he had given him leave, Paul, standing on the steps, motioned with his hand to the people; and when there was a great hush, he spoke to them in the Hebrew language . . .” (Acts 21:30-40).

Paul’s Testimony

The New Testament reports five times when Paul shared his testimony. One of those is here in Acts 22. Another comes in chapter 26 when, in a slightly different form, he testified before Festus and King Agrippa. We will wait until we come to chapter 26 to examine his testimony in detail, but bottom line, it consisted of three points: What happened before, at and after his conversion experience on the road to Damascus.

In verses 1-5 Paul described those events which occurred *before* his conversion. In verses 6-16 he described those events which occurred *at* his conversion. In verses 17-21 Paul described those events which occurred *after* his conversion and concludes, at the very end of verse 21, with a reference to God sending him to the “Gentiles.” Up until then the people had listened carefully as he spoke in flawless Hebrew. But when he mentioned the “Gentiles” it was as if he had thrown a lighted match into a gasoline tank.

Boom! An emotional explosion went off. The people yelled, “Away with him,” and began to wave their clothing and toss dust into the air, an ancient gesture to register anger and bitterness. Why? Because of their Jewish pride in their unique place in the plan of God. They simply could not conceive of God having anything to do with Paul ministering to “Gentile dogs.”

If they had bothered to study their scriptures they would have known God's plan had always included the Gentiles (Isaiah 49:6; 61:11; Malachi 1:11). But, as someone has said, "None are so blind as those who refuse to see." That was the problem with the Jews. Had it not been for the Roman guards, Paul may have been killed. Hence our Key Truth: *The same Spirit who warns of danger provides power to face it in Jesus' name.*

So What?

The noise and confusion were so great the Roman Centurion couldn't decide what Paul had done. He assumed it must have been something horrendous to have created such chaos, so he decided to subject Paul to a Roman scourging. Paul was never more close to death. He had survived beatings, stoning, the attacks and insults from mobs, but now he was about to be subjected to a Roman scourge. Few, in any, survived that early form of "the third degree" designed to make a man talk.

At the very last moment the Spirit of God led Paul to evoke his higher citizenship. "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman citizen?" he said to the centurion who was about to hit him. (Verse 25). The centurion was stunned and went to his superior. "What are you about to do?" he asked. 'This man is a Roman citizen.' So the tribune approached Paul and asked, "Are you a Roman?" And he answered, "Yes" (Acts 22:26,27).

Looking at that bedraggled, battered, shriveled up little Jew the tribune must have thought: you sure don't look like a Roman. How could a fellow like you pay the enormous price it takes to purchase Roman citizenship? And he said, as reported in verse 28, "I bought my citizenship at a great price.' Paul replied, 'I was born a citizen.' So those who were about to examine him withdrew from him instantly; and the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that (the tribune) had bound him" (Acts 22:28-29).

What a beautiful affirmation of our key truth: *The same Spirit who warns of danger provides power to face it in Jesus' name.* While Paul was detained, never again was he subjected to violent indignity. God worked through all of these events to fulfill his purpose for Paul: that he

go to Rome. The capital of the world. The place which would become the springboard from which the gospel would go “to the end of the earth.”

The fulfillment of Christ’s prophecy regarding worldwide evangelism has occurred in strange ways. Through the Protestant Reformation. Through the Modern Mission Movement. Through satellites which speed through our sky. But it all goes back to that day, and that event, when the Spirit of God gave Paul the power to face the very dangers of which the Spirit had warned.

When you came in this morning you were given a Spiritual Prescription. I want you to look at it for a moment. It is designed to give you one tool – one weapon – with which to fight effective spiritual warfare. In the process of seeking to know and do God’s will, sometimes the Spirit moves in different ways. The Spirit may impress me one way and you another way. But what he wants more than anything else is that we never stop loving each other. Never stop affirming each other. Never stop respecting each other. Standing with each other, because we need each other. Satan, if we let him, will take our different opinions and points of view and plant the seeds of distrust. If we let them grow, they will destroy the unity of this body and that would be a tragedy.

So look at your Spiritual Prescription: “I come against you, Satan, in Jesus name. You have no authority over me in the area of _____.” Make it personal. Describe the warfare going on in your life. If you don’t want to write it out use a code which will have meaning for you and no one else. This is a private contract between you and the Lord. Then, as the Prescription says, assert your position in Christ: “I am a child of God and hereby evoke my higher citizenship and the protection due me in the Kingdom of God.”

Paul evoked his standing as a citizen of Rome. That was appropriate then, but it won’t do you much good to face Satan today and say, “I’m an American.” That won’t help. He doesn’t fear the red, white and blue. But if you evoke your higher citizenship as a member of the Kingdom of Heaven and, in the name of Jesus plead the blood of Jesus, Satan will flee.

As we seek to know and do God's will, let us never allow Satan to plant a seed, fertilize it and nurture it until it grows to where its roots will destroy the foundation of this church. Rather, let us be sensitive to what the Spirit says to us, remembering, if we blunder – I have and will, you have and may – God in his mercy will never let us down and never give us up. Hallelujah!

The Church Extended - Part 13

Acts 22:30-23:35

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Key Truth: Our willingness to be willing to do God's will, regardless, is what makes it work.

Attribute: God is Encourager

A number of years ago Lucille and I had the privilege of visiting Switzerland. In the course of our all too brief stay we boarded an Alpine Railroad and made our way up a precipitous grade to the summit. From that vantage point we could see a panorama of fifty Swiss Alps, all of them over 15,000 feet high. I remember training my binoculars on those magnificent mountains, looking at each of them, one by one, trying to decide which was the most beautiful, the most impressive, the most memorable of them all. After a while it became clear that in terms of greatness, it was impossible to distinguish one from another. Each was a magnificent expression of God's creative genius as it stood there, snow-capped, glistening in the sun.

I've thought about that day in Switzerland many times as we've worked our way through Acts. This fifth book of the New Testament is one spiritual mountaintop after another. One tries to decide which is the most important chapter, the most meaningful verse, the most heart-stopping word and finally you realize it's an impossible task. Each of these chapters, verses and words is a special expression of the revelation of God and each, in it's own way, speaks to some need in us. Acts 23 no exception. It may be the most exciting chapter in the entire book and to help you get hold of it, I have divided it into four sections.

Acts 22:30–23:10 detail **A Dangerous Stratagem**. A stratagem is more than a strategy, it is a strategy *plus* skill aimed at outwitting an enemy.

Acts 22:11 spells out **A Divine Support System**. Another way of doing effective spiritual warfare.

Acts 22:12-15 reveal **A Dastardly Scheme**. A malicious menace the enemies of Paul concocted.

Acts 22:16-35 presents **A Delightful Solution**. A wonderful verification that: *Our willingness to be willing to do God's will, regardless, is what makes it work.*

Based on all of this I will draw **A Dual Summation**. One relating to the book of Acts itself and the other to you and me.

Acts 22:30–23:10 A Dangerous Stratagem

When we left Paul he had just escaped lynching at the hands of an enraged mob of Jews. God delivered him in a most fascinating way. He allowed Paul to be arrested, bound and prepared for the Roman scourge. Indeed, “God works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform!” At the very last moment Paul appealed to his higher citizenship. “I’m a Roman,” he said. “Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman citizen?” (Acts 22:25).

Having made his point, Paul went to sleep. So did Claudius, and it’s interesting to contemplate which of these two slept the best. The Bible doesn’t say, but I think it was Paul. Earlier he had accepted the worst. Luke quotes him as saying, “I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 21:13b). One of the best ways to win over worry and neutralize an intimidating situation is to accept the worst. Once you’ve done that everything is an improvement. Paul accepted the possibility of imprisonment, even death, knowing that in both those circumstances he would be “more than conqueror” (Romans 8:37). So having accepted the worst, everything that followed was an improvement, and I think he slept well.

On the other hand, Claudius, the Roman tribune, had really had a bad day. Among the points of pride in Rome was the Pax Romana. Caesar and his cohorts took great satisfaction in their ability to maintain tranquility throughout the empire because of their military might and provincial rulers. One of the worst things that could happen to a provincial ruler was to have a riot and Claudius had experienced one. To make matters worse, he had prepared this Jew, who appeared to be the source of his problems, for a beating only to learn he was a Roman. Nothing would have gotten him into more trouble than to scourge a Roman citizen.

I can imagine Claudius tossing back and forth on his regal bed wondering: how do I get myself out of this fix? Then the light dawned. Even though this fellow was a Roman by birth, he was a Jew by race and religion. This is a matter of Jewish law, Claudius reasoned. I'll turn him over to the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of Israel, and let them solve my problem. I'll let them judge him and suggest the form of punishment. So, "on the morrow, desiring to know the real reason why the Jews accused him, [Claudius] unbound him, and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet, and he brought Paul down and set him before them" (Acts 22:30).

At this point Paul embarked on his Dangerous Stratagem. He had decided, guided I believe by the Holy Spirit, to follow the maxim: "The best defense is an offense." So he presented himself as their equal and as one having a clear conscience. Instead of bowing and scraping to this august body, Paul called them, "Brethren." You and I are equals, he argued. Then he added, "I have lived before God in all good conscience up to this day" (Acts 23:1). What an incredible thing for Paul to say! Prior to becoming a Christian he had gone around looking for ways to make life miserable for Christians. How could Paul say, "In all good conscience I have lived before God to this day"?

I think he was saying: Look! When I was a Jew, I was a conscientious Jew. There was nothing piecemeal about my service for Jehovah. I went all out for him. When I became a Christian, I became a conscientious Christian. I didn't go at it halfway. The same fervor with which I served Jehovah, I have served Jesus. Therefore I have a clear conscience before God.

The response of Ananias was one of outrage. He commanded those standing next to Paul to strike him in the mouth (Acts 23:2). It was a common, though according to Jewish law illegal, practice that should someone on trial express any insolence or disrespect the guard standing next to that person was ordered to strike him or her in the mouth with a sandal. It was humiliating to be hit in the face and, no pun intended, for Paul to be hit in the face with a sandal, a symbol of dirt, was a low blow. But Ananias was a violent fellow. In fact, it would be difficult to find any high priest before or after him who exceeded him in his ability to disgrace

that office. So while his action was against Jewish law, it was in keeping with the character of Ananias.

Paul's reaction was equally strong. "God shall strike you, you whitewashed [tomb]! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you ordered me to be struck?" (Acts 23:3). Jews wanted nothing to do with death. If someone touched a tomb, he or she was considered to be defiled by the decay of death. To make tombs easier to avoid and seem less fearful, they were painted white. So when Paul called Ananias "a whitewashed wall" he was saying, "You're contaminated. You're rotten to the core. You're full of dead men's bones."

Some expositors say Paul "carnaled out." I can identify with that. I don't know about you, but I carnal out quickly. It amazes me how quickly I can move from a Spirit-filled moment to a carnal state. It happened Friday afternoon. As you might imagine, I'm interested in how our building program progresses, and anything that suggests it will cost more money fills me with anxiety.

Well, Friday afternoon I learned some people had taken a position which could cost us \$25,000. I got fearful. As you may know, fear is the other side of anger and I really got angry. I "carnaled out." To make matters worse, I enjoyed being carnal. I enjoyed thinking of all the vindictive things I could do.

I went to bed about midnight and at 4 o'clock in the morning I awakened with a start. I was really oppressed. I tried to pray that oppression out, but "think-prayers" don't work for me when I'm under pressure. I can "think-pray" when I'm talking to people and asking God for wisdom to best help them. But when I'm oppressed "think-prayers" just start my head spinning. My thoughts get more complex and oppressive. So I got out of bed and went downstairs to our family room where I could verbalize my prayer. I find that "out loud praying" has several values. It lets my ears hear what my mouth is saying so I know what I mean. It helps me stay focused instead of having my thoughts ramble all over the place. And, it provides a kind of verbal catharsis which allows me to lance a wound and drain out the pus.

So I started praying out loud! Immediately I was aware of my deep need to be filled with the Holy Spirit. I did not want to stay in that carnal state one moment more. It was too uncomfortable! In addition to which, I knew I couldn't afford it. I had this sermon to prepare and I couldn't do that if I was "carnaled out." I needed to be filled with God's Holy Spirit. So I told God that. In my spirit I heard him say, "Forgive them." I started forgiving each of these people by name and it wasn't nearly as hard as I thought it would be. After a while I heard myself saying, "God, fill me with your supernatural love for them." To my amazement I realized I really did love them! As the Lord made me aware of the problems *they* were facing, I began to pray *for* them instead of *at* them.

Then, as time went on, I was moved to forgive and love all the people who have been a disappointment to me. Who have made things more difficult than they need to be. Suddenly I was filled with an overwhelming sense of joy. It was like a river bubbling up inside me. I began to laugh and sing. What a time I had! I was filled with the Holy Spirit, folks, and began to see things from God's perspective.

I was reminded of my daughter who called Friday morning. Jodi was so concerned that it was going to cost an extra \$25 to complete work she was doing on an audio cassette Julie was making. I said, "Honey, don't worry about that. I'll send you a check when I get to the office." You see, folks, I have a lot of \$25's." I really do. I don't have a lot of \$25,000's. Or \$2500's. But I have a lot of \$25's. At least enough to take care of her need. Then it hit me: my little daughter is worrying about a \$25 need because she doesn't understand her father's capacity and Lord, I've just added a couple of zeros to that number. I'm worrying about \$25,000. There are probably other people around town who are worrying about twenty-five million dollars. All of us are fretting because we've taken our eyes off of you, our Source, and have put them on our circumstances. And, folks, when you get your eyes on your circumstances you're going to be anxious, even angry. But if you keep your eyes on your Source, your loving, caring, fully-capable Heavenly Father will fill you with his peace and the joy of his salvation.

I started singing that grand old hymn, I'm a Child of the King.

"My father is rich in houses and lands,

He holds the wealth of the world in his hands,
Of rubies and diamonds and silver and gold
His coffers are full, he has riches untold.

“I’m a child of the King,
A child of the King,
With Jesus, my Savior,
I’m a child of the King.

And as a child of THE king, I started praising God for HIS \$25,000 problem! It was neat. It really was!

Some expositors say Paul “carnaled out.” Maybe so. I don’t know. I’ve never been hit in the mouth with a shoe and if I were I doubt I would respond too well. But even if Paul did “carnal out,” when he learned he had spoken inappropriately to the high priest, Paul “fessed up.” The next best thing to not sinning at all, is to confess it when you do sin, and seek forgiveness from the Lord and those who may have been affected by your sin.

Maybe Paul was guilty of mistaken identity. Maybe he didn’t recognize Ananias because, as some scholars suggest, his “thorn in the flesh” was eye trouble (2 Cor.12:7). Others, however, really put him down. They accuse Paul of “dirty” anger which does negatively affect one’s judgment. But there’s clean anger, too. It’s called “goodness” in Galatians 5:22 and is part of the fruit of the Spirit. “Goodness” is sound judgment plus Christ’s character monitoring our feelings. I personally think that while Paul may have momentarily responded in the flesh, he realized it and quickly reverted to a Spirit-filled expression of “goodness.” Righteous indignation. Sound judgment plus Christ’s character monitoring his feelings. And, with sanctified sarcasm, Paul may have said, “Oh, excuse me, sir. I didn’t realize someone like you could *be* the high priest!”

Incidentally, the prophecy Paul uttered here: “God shall strike you” was fulfilled. Ten years later Ananias, this violent man, was a victim of the violence that characterized him. He was caught in a sewer, dragged out and murdered by political assassins.

At this point Paul's Dangerous Stratagem moved into high gear. He knew there was no way he would get an honest hearing. Not from this bunch. So, not to divide and conquer but to divide and confound, and in the process create an opportunity to communicate the Gospel, Paul did an interesting thing. "When [he] perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, 'Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead I am on trial.' And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided" (Acts 23:6).

The Supreme Council of Israel had Pharisees on it and while they were uptight, Pharisees loved the Lord and the Lord's law. The Sadducees were secular materialists. They didn't believe much of anything, spiritually speaking. For example, they didn't believe in the resurrection. That was what made them "sad you see." (Sorry about that.) So Paul's Dangerous Stratagem worked. The carnal members were confounded, and verse 9 tells us the Pharisees actually started defending Paul. They couldn't care less about him. They, too, wanted him dead. But when Paul mentioned "resurrection" in which they strongly believed, the Pharisees found themselves defending him. Some of them said, "Who knows but what he was spoken to by a spirit" (Acts 23:9b).

It was, indeed, a very Dangerous Stratagem. Paul was like a worm caught in the beak of two birds. He was pulled this way by the Pharisees who defended him, and that way by the Sadducees who wanted him dead. He was being torn apart. Fortunately Claudius, the Roman tribune, came to his rescue and once again Paul was under house arrest (Acts 23:10).

Acts 22:11 A Divine Support System.

"The following night the Lord stood by him and said, 'Take courage, for as you have testified about me at Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also at Rome'" (Acts 23:11). What is not explicit in our text is implicit. That is to say, what Luke does not actually say, the Holy Spirit implies by this inclusion of reference to the Lord himself coming alongside Paul. He had been under severe oppression. If he weren't tempted to second guess his perception of God's will, I'd wonder if he was really human. But we know he was very human, and I can imagine him

thinking, “What next?” Well, the Lord knew what Paul may not have known: he was going to need a special anointing to carry him through what was coming next.

God has always responded to the needs of those whom he calls to serve him. I’m thinking of Abram back there in Genesis 14. The kings of the north raided Sodom and Gomorrah. They captured Lot, Abram’s nephew, and carried him off with his family and the treasures of Sodom and Gomorrah. When Abram heard about it he organized a rag-tag “army” of 317 poorly equipped soldiers and went after the kings of the north. He caught them, rescued Lot and the other captives, regained the booty which had been stolen and brought them and it safely home. He didn’t keep anything for himself.

Then, after this great victory, depression set in. Genesis 15 begins: “After these things, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, ‘Fear not, Abram.’” The Lord wouldn’t say that to someone who wasn’t dealing with fear. “‘Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great’” (Genesis 15:1). Thus encouraged, Abram went on to become the man God meant him to be.

Paul was in a similar fix. Previously he had experienced God’s deliverance. But the adrenalin was flowing. He was churning inside. Wondering what was going to happen *next*. It’s terribly human to second guess one’s perception of God’s will when times of testing come. But the point of temptation for Paul was not so much God’s will, as it was God’s way of fulfilling his will. Paul knew it was God’s will that he go to Rome, but was he willing to let God work it out God’s way? As our key truth explains: *Our willingness to be willing to do God’s will, regardless, is what makes it work.*

Acts 23 is the hinge point upon which the door of opportunity for world evangelism hangs. Paul had carried the gospel to Asia and Asia Minor, but there was a whole world to be won for Jesus. Getting the gospel to Rome was key to doing that. Over ensuing centuries Rome would be the springboard from which the gospel would literally extend “to the end of the earth.” But what Paul may not have realized at the time was the fact that apparent obstacles were actually

vehicles God was using to get him to Rome. God was literally paving the road to Rome for Paul with stepping stones which looked like rocks.

So Paul wasn't so much *doing* God's will as he was the *object* of God's will. What was at stake was Paul's willingness to be made willing to let God do God's will God's way. It's as if the Lord said, "Son, we're going to Rome but we're going on my terms. Are you willing to do it my way?" I can imagine Paul thinking, I'm not sure I'm up to it, Lord. In fact, if he had said, "No," all of us would understand. But Paul said, "Yes!" As a result he went on in the strength of the Lord. And what a way to go!

So What?

The application to us is obvious. None of us expected it would cost almost 10 million dollars to build a new campus for the World Mission–Community Outreach ministries of our church. We were thinking in terms of a million or two for phase one which includes a dining and interim worship center, offices and educational facilities. Then, sometime in the future, there would be a second phase costing a couple million for a sanctuary. That was it. But over time our perception of God's plan and purpose for us changed. Inflation set in. Suddenly, instead of three or four million, we were talking about twice that amount when we added in the cost of streets, curbs, gutters, sidewalks, sewers and everything else involved.

It's as if the Lord said, "You asked me for a miracle. I'll give you one if you're willing to do things my way?" And look what has happened. For every quarter you and I have invested in this ministry through our gifts, the good Lord has provided 75 cents in the form of properties he made available to us. While the cost of building has gone up, so has the value of those properties. If we just had money we'd be in big trouble because the value of money has gone down. But the value of property has gone up. God knew that was going to happen and led us to put what little money we had into property.

So, when we drive on that campus, no one can ever say, "Look what we did!" Instead, we must humbly and gratefully say, "Look what God did. The impossible! For every quarter we gave,

he provided 75 cents. God made it possible for us to dedicate a beautiful new 35 acre worship, service and ministry center—debt-free!” Excuse me, but Hallelujah!

Our quarters were necessary because nothing is so significant as help given when help is needed. But now the question facing each of us is: “Are we willing to be made willing to do God’s will God’s way?” Because, as our key truth makes clear: *Our willingness to be willing to do God’s will, regardless, is what makes it work.* God is not a manipulator and we are not puppets. There are no strings he can pull to make us obey. We are free to disobey. To be indifferent to his will and way. If we are, God’s will for us as individuals won’t work. But, friends, God’s will for us corporately is going to work because of the faithfulness of so many of you. The only thing at stake is whether or not all of us will have the fun and privilege of being part of what God is doing.

Acts 23:12-15 A Dastardly Scheme

Well, Satan didn’t wait long to test Paul’s faith and God’s faithfulness. “[That very next morning] the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul” (Acts 23:12). Forty zealots got together and decided Paul had to go. “They went to the chief priests and elders and said, ‘We have strictly bound ourselves by an oath not to eat or drink until we have killed Paul’” (Acts 23:14), and believe it or not, the leaders of the Sanhedrin agreed that Paul should be assassinated because he had become a bother to them.

Notice, “they bound themselves” (Acts 23:12). Isn’t that the way it always is? I’ve had all kinds of bondage in my lifetime, but I must admit I caused every bit of it. I bound myself! Either by what I did, or did not do, and by my failure to deal with what other people did or did not do in a loving, healing way. No one else bound me. I bound myself. Isn’t that the way it is with you? Sure! We bind ourselves. We put ourselves in bondage.

Acts 22:16-35 A Delightful Solution

God has a “zillion” ways to fulfill his commitment to be “a very present help in time of trouble,” and a Delightful Solution to all this turmoil is recorded in Acts 23:16-35. I’ve said it

before, but let me say it again: *a miracle is a natural or supernatural event accompanied by precise timing to give glory to God.* There was nothing supernatural about what happened to Paul. Everything was a natural occurrence. But it was all accompanied by precise timing in a manner which glorified God. Hence, we can say Paul's deliverance was a miracle.

God's Delightful Solution involved a little boy who did what he could, when he should. Unnamed, he appears briefly on the pages of sacred writ, does his thing and is never heard from again. He was Paul's nephew and somehow learned about a plot to murder Paul. Maybe he overheard some of those zealots boasting. Maybe he worked in and around the Supreme Court and picked up word that Paul was going to "get his" the following morning. At any rate, this boy knew the Sanhedrin was going to ask Claudius to let Paul come for another hearing at which time forty men would ambush him. So he warned Paul of this menace. Paul called the centurion and asked that the boy be taken to Claudius. The lad related his tale to the tribune and Claudius's response was, "Thank you son, now go home and keep quiet" (Acts 23:22).

What impresses me is that the boy did what he could, when he should. It didn't seem like a big deal to pick up a rumor, take it to the man involved and then be a messenger to the Roman ruler. But the boy did what he could, when he should. If he had waited a couple of hours Paul might have been ambushed and the story of his work and influence would have ended right here. But the boy did what he could, when he should, and that's important. No help is so significant as that which comes when help is needed. Again, the application to us is obvious. We need your help *now*. We don't need it in two weeks. Or two months. Or two years. We need it now!

We urgently need ten or more of our families whom God has blessed in a special way to loan the Lord \$20,000 each. Not give it, loan it. The common people, the so-called "little people" have done their part. They've loaned \$250 or \$500 or \$1,000. Now those with greater capacity are being asked to do their part and put us over the \$800,000 goal.

Lest you doubt this message was ordained by God, let me tell you that over a year ago the staff and I met in a room at Rio Bravo Country Club and worked for two days selecting these passages from Acts, picking key truths and identifying attributes of God. This particular

teaching was scheduled for last January, but I got sick and that had to change. Now, here we are six or seven months later with a text and key truth which exactly fit the needs of now! We are at a critical point in the spending curve of our building program and are in danger of dishonoring the name of Jesus by not being able to pay our bills.

I believe God, in his fore-knowledge, knew we would be in this situation today and allowed me to get sick so our preaching schedule would be rearranged and, without forcing the issue, I could naturally and comfortably confront you in love with the needs of now. *No help is so significant as that which comes when help is needed most.* Paul's nephew did what he could, when he should, and became a part of the great thing God was doing. Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

Well, as we're told in verse 23 and following, Claudius couldn't take any more chances. He already had a public disturbance in the temple courtyard, a near riot in the Supreme Court, and now an assassination plot against a Roman citizen. So he ordered 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen and 200 spears men – 470 troops in all – to begin a forced march, and at nine o'clock that very night Paul pulled out of Jerusalem on the first leg of his journey to Rome.

Only the good Lord could have figured out *that* scenario. Actually, it's funny when you think about it. Here was this missionary prisoner riding on one of Caesar's horses, with Caesar's soldiers protecting him, heading for Caesar's stronghold in the city of Rome, and *doing so at Caesar's expense!* That blesses me. I wonder what happened to those forty guys who put themselves under an oath. Man! They must have had a "Big Mac hunger" and a "Rondo thirst." I can imagine one of them saying, "Where is this fellow, Paul? We've got to get him because I'm hungry." Acts 23:31 tells us that by morning the 470 troopers had made it to Antipatris, thirty miles west of Jerusalem. The danger of an ambush was over because the coast was primarily inhabited by Gentiles. So the cavalry took Paul the remaining 27 miles to Ceasarea. Imagine how Paul felt. 57 miles! On a horse! He must have waddled around Herod's court!

Claudius's letter to Felix, recorded in verses 26-30, illustrates our need to make ourselves look good. "I learned he was a Roman and rescued and delivered him," Claudius wrote That isn't

what happened at all. He rescued Paul and *then* learned he was a Roman. Notice, he also conveniently omitted any reference to having bound Paul and having him prepared for a beating.

“On reading the letter, [Felix] asked to what province Paul belonged. When he learned that he was from Cilicia he said, ‘I will hear you when your accusers arrive.’ and he commanded him to be guarded in Herod’s Praetorium” (Acts 23:34,35). So it wasn’t all that bad for Paul. He spent the night in Herod’s palace. Indeed, God was on his throne and all was well with this “King’s Kid.”

In passing, look at the way Agabus’s prophecy proved true – again! Back in chapter 15 he prophesied a famine and there was one. In chapter 21 he prophesied Paul would be delivered by the Jews to the hands of the Gentiles and that’s exactly what happened. Any question about who was in control, folks? Any questions about God being sovereign? Any question about Paul’s God being your God? I hope not, because he is ever so much active in our midst.

A Dual Summation

Quickly, let me draw a Dual Summation. One regarding the book of Acts itself and a second regarding you and me. Many months ago, at the beginning of this series, I said the book of Acts records the second *offer* of the King and his kingdom to Israel. It also records the second *refusal* of their King and his kingdom by Israel. When Jesus came initially he wore the garb of a servant. That he might be rejected was something Jehovah God could, and did, understand. So he offered Jesus to Israel a second time. Not in the garb of a suffering servant, but in the robe of a risen sovereign. They rejected him again. Thus two themes thread throughout the book of Acts. One, the eclipse of Israel as the primary agency through which God had worked in the past and two, the emergence of the church as the primary means through which God would work in the future.

This was Paul’s last visit to Jerusalem. In a sense it was his last opportunity to reach his people for Christ as a nation, by winning their leaders. Which means his reference to the resurrection

was not just clever. It was supernaturally inspired. It enabled Paul to face the Supreme Court of Israel with the supreme issue of all time: “What will you do with Jesus, the risen Lord?”

And that’s the issue for you today. What will you do with Jesus, the risen Lord? Will you reject him and continue to bind yourself in the trap of your own machinations and maneuvering to survive? Or will you believe him, trust him, humble yourself before him and pray, “God be merciful to me a sinner and save me for Jesus’ sake.”

When I was a boy, my Sunday School teacher challenged us to memorize Romans 10:9, “If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.” I was having trouble memorizing it until I noticed the verse begins with “if” which is a question, and ends with “saved” which is an assurance. In between the anxiety of “if” and the assurance of “saved” are three “shalt(s),” at least in the Old King James Version as I memorized it.

So I worked it out on my hand. I assigned the question “if” to my little finger which isn’t very strong. I assigned the assurance “saved” to my thumb where the grip or real strength is.

The first “shalt” was assigned to my fourth finger: “If thou shalt *confess* with thy mouth the Lord Jesus . . .” Why is it important to confess with your mouth? So your ears will hear what your mouth says and your brain will know you really believe Jesus is Lord.

The second “shalt” was assigned to my middle finger: “and shalt *believe* in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead.” There are many matters in Christian doctrine you may or may not believe. The resurrection is not one of them. It is essential. According to the Bible you cannot disbelieve the resurrection and be saved.

The third “shalt” was assigned to my index finger: “*If* (little finger), thou shalt *confess* with thy mouth the Lord Jesus (fourth finger), and shalt *believe* in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead (middle finger), thou shalt *be* (index finger), oh grand assurance: *saved*” (thumb). And I had it.

I want you to have it, too. Use this opportunity to declare with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and that you believe God has raised him from the dead. If you do, you will be saved! This morning I ask you the same question Paul asked the Supreme Court of Israel so long ago: “What will you do with Jesus, the risen Lord?”

The Church Extended – Part 14

Acts 24:1 -- 26:32

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Attribute: God is Witness.

Key Truth: God wants us to use every opportunity to share our faith in secular situations.

Sometime prior to the events recorded in our text Paul was in Corinth. While there he wrote a letter to the church in Rome. Inspired by the Holy Spirit he penned this wonderful truth: “For we know that in everything God works for good with those who love him; with those who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

Earlier still, while in the city of Ephesus, he had written several other letters. In what we know to be his second letter to the Corinthians Paul wrote: “Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of Him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing” (2 Corinthians 2:14,15). It is from this verse that we took our key truth: *God wants us to use every opportunity to share our faith in secular situations.*

In the three chapters we have before us we will see Paul not only experiencing the reality of what he earlier wrote to the people in Rome and to the people in Corinth, we will also see him using every opportunity to share his faith in secular situations, to be: “the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing” (2 Cor.2:15).

Our text falls neatly into three sections: Acts 24 – Paul’s trial before Felix and Acts 26 – Paul’s witness before Agrippa. Acts 25 forms a bridge between these two big scenes. By way of review, Paul had gone to Jerusalem on an errand of mercy, but was met with hostility and almost lynched by the Jews. Under cover of darkness he was given a convoy to Caesarea where he was scheduled to stand before Felix.

Acts 24:1-9 Paul Indicted

His enemies had learned from painful personal experience they were no match for quick-witted Paul. So, on this occasion, they employed a fascinating strategy. Determined to convict Paul they brought out their big gun. “After five days the high priest Ananias came down with some elders and a spokesman, one Tertullus” (Acts 24:1). Tertullus was a professional orator and barrister who, judging from his name, was either a Gentile or a Roman citizen familiar with the Roman court system.

Acts 24:1-3 Tertullus Employs Nauseating Flattery

The next three verses are nothing but pure, unadulterated, “soft-soap” designed to “tickle the ears” of Felix and receive a good hearing. “Since through you we enjoy much peace, and since by your provision, most excellent Felix, reforms are introduced on behalf of this nation, in every way and everywhere we accept this with all gratitude.” That was pure bunk. It would be hard to find a more ruthless tyrant than Felix. He did everything he could to make life miserable for the Israelites. There were no reforms. There was no real peace. Felix was not looked upon with gratitude anywhere, at any time, by anyone who would call himself a respectable Jew. And yet, despite these realities Tertullus made this ludicrous statement. Flattery is a double danger. It is harmful to the “flattered” because he or she may actually believe that stuff, and it is harmful to the “flatterer” because he or she gets trapped in a web of deception. That is what happened to Tertullus. He moved from nauseating flattery to tantalizing falsity.

Acts 24:5-8 Tantalizing Falsity

He made three false charges against Paul: he was seditious, dangerous and infectious. First, he was seditious. “This man [is] a pestilent fellow, an agitator among all the Jews throughout the world” (Acts 24:5). Second, he was dangerous. “[He is] a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes” (Acts 24:5b). Third, he was infectious. “He even tried to profane the temple” (Acts 24:6). None of that was true, but the charges were serious because Paul was being accused of capital crimes for which he could receive a death sentence. To cap it off, the chief priests and elders committed unblushing perjury because they told Felix, “all this was

(true)” (Acts 24:9). So Paul’s indictment consisted of nauseating flattery followed by tantalizing falsity leading to unblushing perjury.

Acts 24:10-21 Paul’s Defense

In contrast to Tertullus’ flattery, Paul responded with honesty. “You have been judge over this nation for sometime (which was true) and I cheerfully make my defense” (Acts 24:10,11).

Christians are susceptible to the same temptations which beleaguer others. We, too, can fall into the pattern of gilding the lily. Of saying things which may not be untrue, but are only half-true. Paul wisely circumvented that temptation.

When I was doing my undergraduate work at San Francisco State University I took a course in ethics. Our professor, Dr. Alfred Fisk, emphasized the importance of honesty at all costs. He shared how one day his mother, who to his knowledge never told a lie, was given a jar of jam by a neighbor. Either it had been improperly cooked or badly bottled or the recipe was faulty, but it was inedible and his mother threw it in the garbage can. Dr. Fisk wondered how she would handle this situation. He was sure the lady was going to ask how they liked the jam. And he knew that even though she was irrevocably committed to telling the truth his mother would not offend her if at all possible. Sure enough the neighbor lady stopped by. “How did you like my strawberry jam?” She asked. Dr. Fisk said, “I stood breathlessly, awaiting my mother’s answer. Then I heard her say, ‘My, you should have seen it go!’” In an even more perplexing situation, Paul wisely hewed to the truth.

Acts 24:11-13 Paul’s Reply to Being Seditious

As to the charge of being seditious Paul answered, I was only there “twelve days” (verse 11). There wasn’t enough time for me to be involved in any sort of agitation aimed at undermining the Roman government. Furthermore, there is no evidence to support that charge” (verse 13).

Acts 24:14,15 Paul’s Reply to Being Dangerous

Verse 14 records his reply to the charge of being dangerous. Yes, he said, I do belong to what the Jews call a sect. It’s known as “the way.” But there’s nothing dangerous about belonging to a sect, Felix. As a matter of fact, the Pharisees and Sadducees are both sects of Judaism. I

am not dangerous. I worship the same God they do. I read the same scriptures they do. I have the same hope they do. The difference is what they hope for, I have in Jesus (Verse 15). Wow! What wonderful words of witness.

Acts 24:16-21 Paul's Reply to Being Infectious

Regarding my being infectious, that is, one who has contaminated the people and the holy places of Israel "my conscience is clear" (verse 16). The King James Version says, "I exercise myself." The Revised Standard Version says, "So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward God and toward men." That is, I make a sincere effort to support what I say with what I do.

Wouldn't it be wonderful (?) if all of us could stand before our accusers and say with Paul, "I exercise myself." "I take pains to have a clear conscience at all times."

Paul continues to the effect, "I went to Jerusalem to bring a love offering in the form of financial aid to my people (verse 17). While I was being ritually purified, that is, while I was being a Jew among Jew (verse 18), a group of Jews from Asia accused me of bringing Gentiles into the temple. But that never happened, Felix. And there were no crowds, no tumult. Where are my accusers? They ought to be here . . . if they have anything against me"(verse 19).

The high priest and the others who were present knew Paul was being falsely accused. The only reason he was on trial was because the Supreme Court of Israel became unglued when he mentioned "the resurrection" in their presence (verse 21). When Paul made that clear he raised the issue from a political concern about agitation against Rome, to a theological issue over which Felix had no jurisdiction. In the closing chapters of the book of Acts the resurrection becomes increasing central because the resurrection is THE issue. Everything stands or falls upon the reality of the resurrection. Everything! The truth of Christianity itself! Your hope and mine! Because, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, we are the most miserable of all people and are mere creatures of time, not citizens of Eternity, if the resurrection is not true. So in pleading his case, Paul raised his defense to the highest possible level when he referred to "the resurrection."

Acts 24:22-27 The Outcome

Paul's argument was unanswerable and everybody knew it. Felix knew Paul was innocent but, not wanting to offend the Jews, he put them off on the pretext of getting more evidence from Lysias, the Roman tribune. (Acts 24:22). Paul was still under house arrest, but don't feel sorry for him. This aging "King's kid" was living like a king. He was eating like a king. He was sleeping in a king's bed. His friends could visit with him. And even though his house arrest lasted two years, those years were well spent.

Dr. Luke probably spent that time researching his two books: the Gospel of Luke and Acts. He may very well have written the first draft of his gospel. He undoubtedly spent a good deal of time with Paul. As a result, we have "an eye-witness report" even though, from time to time, Luke himself may not have been personally present at some of the events about which he writes. I believe the accuracy of Acts is attributable, in large part, to the care of this brilliant historian who spent those two years asking the five questions which are the basis of any worthy news story: who? what? when? where? and why? I can hear him say, "Paul, tell me, again, what happened and where? Who was there? What did you say? Why did you say it? How did they respond?" Over and over, until Luke was able to put together the only remaining record of life in the early church.

Acts 24: 24-26 A Case of Inquiry and Indecision

Later, Felix and Drusilla asked Paul to speak to them about Jesus (verses 24-26). Their motive has been called in question. Felix had heard Paul speak about taking an offering to Jerusalem and, assuming that there was more where that came from, hoped for a bribe (verse 26). Well, even if he could, which he couldn't because all the money had gone to the Jerusalem church, Paul did not bribe him. Again, as Christians, we must never allow the end to justify the means. That's a trap into which Satan would have all of us fall. And sometimes the plausibility of the means and the attraction of the end are difficult to cope with.

Some years ago our board of missions had a beautiful, but vacant, hospital in northern Thailand. We also had a brilliant young doctor who was prepared to go there. He would be the only medical resource for 50,000 citizens in northern Thailand. But we could not get him an

entrance visa because our mission board was unwilling to pay \$2,000 under the table to Thai officials. But we would not pay a penny in bribery. “Because,” the letter said, “if we do, the light will become like the darkness.” I have never been more proud of being an American Baptist. Our mission board would not play Satan’s game by Satan’s rules. As a result, we got a visa for nothing, as it should be, and today a gifted doctor is ministering to thousands of people. In a similar way, Paul would not fall for a not-too-cleverly disguised appeal for a bribe.

But I think there was another reason why Drusilla and Felix went to see him. They had a spiritual hunger. There is a lot of good in the worst of us and, as a pastor I have seen people at their worst. I am shock proof regarding the sinful nature of people. But I have also seen people at their best. That happens every Sunday. I believe that during this hour we spend together, I am seeing you at your best. I believe you are expressing your higher nature and are reaching up for a better way to be and do.

Despite their wretched personal lives, I believe there was something of that in Felix and Drusilla. We know what a monster Felix was. According to historians Drusilla was a lovely, twenty-year old girl. A mixture of youthful ambition and physical beauty made her susceptible to Felix’s avarice and lust. He managed to seduce her and then added her to his growing stable of polygamous wives. But as Felix and Drusilla witnessed Paul moving about the palace, as they heard him talking with the guards and his friends, as they saw the life of Jesus lived out by Paul in that secular situation, it triggered their higher nature and they came seeking to know about Jesus.

The Bible says Paul spoke to them of “justice and self-control and future judgment” (verse 25). He did not tell them what they wanted to hear; Paul told them what they needed to hear. He spoke about the holiness of God to two people who were living in sin. He confronted them with God’s standard of righteousness and spoke to them “of justice.”

He also spoke to them of “self-control.” It is the inevitable temptation of the rich and royal to feel the rules do not belong to them. Sooner or later people with a little bit of money, or a little bit of power and prominence, begin to chip the corners off a cube of truth so the dice will fall in

their direction. They bend the rules to satisfy themselves. That's what Felix and Drusilla had done, so Paul spoke to them of "self-control." Of putting a harness on their passion.

And he spoke to them of "future judgment." A young swimmer, caught in a riptide, was being pulled out to sea and about to drown. A strong swimmer saw his plight, dove into the water, swam out and with a strong grip took hold of the drowning young man, pulled him safely to shore and gave him artificial respiration. They went their separate ways. The rescuer pursued a vocation in law and ultimately became a judge. The young man he had rescued chose to go another way. To do his own thing. To follow the philosophy of our time: "if it feels good, do it." As a result he wound up in trouble. When he entered the courtroom whom should he see sitting as his judge but the man who had saved him from drowning years before. "I'm a friend of the judge," he thought, "he'll go easy on me." But after hearing the evidence and finding the young man guilty, the judge handed down the stiffest possible sentence under the law. "How could you do this to me," young man protested, "you rescued when I was drowning." The judge replied, "Young man, on the beach I was your savior. On the bench I am your judge."

I can hear Paul say to Felix and Drusilla, "Jesus died to bridge the difference between your unrighteousness and the holiness of God. On the cross he was your Savior. But on the throne he is your judge." When Paul spoke to them of "justice, self-control and future judgment, Felix "trembled" (KJV). He was "alarmed" (RSV). But as the King James Version says so beautifully, he asked for "a (more) convenient season" (verse 25). What a tragedy! To tremble before the truth of the gospel, but not to trust it.

Acts 25:1-17 Exit Felix, Enter Festus – A Bridge Between Big Scenes

The self-indulgence of Felix finally went too far and he was carted back to Rome in disgrace. Festus, about whom we know very little, took over as provincial ruler. The first thing he did was try to patch up affairs with the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem.

Acts 25: 2-7 The Intransigence of the Jews

The key theme in these later chapters of Acts is Israel's repeated rejection of Jesus as their Savior, their Lord, and their King. They were intransigent. Inflexible. Rigidly unyielding in

their bitter determination to have nothing to do with Jesus and nothing to do with this spokesman for Jesus. After two years, they were still angry at Paul. They still wanted to kill him (verse 3). They were still willing to lie, misrepresent and perjure themselves to get him (verse 7).

Acts 25:8-12 Paul Makes His Big Move

Verse 8 records, point by point, Paul's irrefutable rebuttal to which Festus makes an odd offer: "Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem to be tried?" (Verse 9) I wonder why he did that? Scripture doesn't say. Maybe he had a method in his madness. Maybe he figured he could kill two birds with one stone. He could please the Jews by appearing to give them another shot at Paul, and he could always say, "Hey, gang, I tried to help you, but it didn't work out."

At the same time, he could give Paul a chance to make his big move if he was smart enough. Well, Paul was smart enough and he did make his big move. Verse 10 and following: No, Paul said, I don't want to go Jerusalem. I'm getting a good trial here as a Roman before a Roman court. These people know I am not guilty. If I were, I'd be willing die. I am prepared to pay for any crime I have committed, but I haven't committed any. Since you can't find me innocent, and they won't, "I appeal to Caesar" (Acts 25:12).

With that statement Paul made his big move. He appealed to Roman law which went back 500 years before Christ and allowed any Roman, anywhere, at any time, to ask for and get a personal hearing before the Emperor. When he invoked what was called, "The Caesarean Appello," the appeal to Caesar, all local proceedings stopped. Further legal action was stayed and the person, together with written charges against him, were transported to Rome at government expense. I don't know if Paul fully understood the implications of his appeal to Caesar, but we are told in verse 12 that Festus said: "You have appealed to Caesar; to Caesar you shall go." Paul was about to take the next step toward Rome, his ultimate goal, at government expense!

Acts 25:13-27 Festus Releases Paul to Agrippa

The plot thickens when Agrippa and Bernice enter the scene. Herod, the Great, Agrippa's infamous ancestor, became the official ruler of Palestine in 40 B.C. and a member of his family, in this case Agrippa II, had been puppet king of that part of the Roman Empire ever since. Bernice, Agrippa's sister, was really mixed up. She not only had numerous illicit lovers, she was involved in an incestuous relationship with Agrippa. So brother and sister, living as husband and wife, made a courtesy call on the new provincial chief and Festus sees, in their visit, a solution to his problem. Paul had requested a hearing before Caesar, but there was no credible charge against him. So Festus asked Agrippa to interview Paul in a kind of fishing expedition to see if they could discover something with which Paul could be charged. Agrippa agreed to hear Paul and verse 23 describes how, amidst all the pomp and pageantry of a Roman court, Festus reviewed Paul's case. He explained there was no credible evidence against Paul and "it seems unreasonable, in sending a prisoner [to Rome], not to indicate the charges against him" Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself" (Acts 25:24 - 26:1).

Matthew 10:16-19 A Fascinating Footnote

Matthew 10:16-18 records Christ's warning to the twelve disciples, and those who would come after them, that he would send them out "as sheep in the midst of wolves," and people would "deliver [them] up to councils." "You will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake," (Jesus said), "to bear testimony before them and the Gentiles" (Matthew 10:18).

That prophecy, made scores of years earlier by Jesus, was fulfilled to the last scintilla in the life of Paul. He was, indeed, "dragged before governors and kings." But the promise in Matthew 10:19 was also fulfilled. "When they deliver you up, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour; for it is not you who speaks, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you." Wow!

Acts 26:2-32 Paul's Witness Before Agrippa

Listen to what the Spirit of God said through Paul in the second Big Scene in our text: Paul's witness before Agrippa. Like a good preacher, Paul had three points. Things which happened approaching his conversion. Things which happened at his conversion. Things which happened after his conversion.

Acts 26:2-12 Approaching Paul's Conversion

Paul begins by describing what happened in the years approaching his conversion. Things like his background and former life. It was well known to the Jews, because Paul lived much of it in Jerusalem. He had come from the strictest party in Judaism, the Pharisee party. Listen as he freely admits to the violent acts he perpetrated against Christians. "I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem; I not only shut up many of the saints in prison, by authority of the chief of priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme; and in raging fury against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities" (Acts 26:9-11).

No wonder Paul could call himself "the chief of sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15). He was sincere, but he was sincerely wrong. The gospel is designed to help bad people be good, but sometimes nice people remain lost because they don't see themselves as being bad. They compare themselves with the worst folk they know and come off looking good. What we need to understand is that however well we compare with our fellows, when we are compared to the righteousness of God all of us need a savior.

When I was an evangelist traveling around the country, I used to tell my life story. Not because it was exciting, but because it was so unexciting! I figured that folks who had heard thrilling tales about sinners who had been saved "from gutter-most to utter-most" might be able to identify with a simple, down-to-earth sinner like me. So I shared my story entitled: "God and the Ordinary." I told about an ordinary kid who did the ordinary thing kids do. I never broke the law. I tried to steal a candy bar from a drug store once. But I got caught. The cop took me home, told my father and believe me, he set my britches on fire. The most violent thing I did was kick a cat. I did get into a fist fight one day and bloodied a kid's nose. It scared me to death. I ran off crying as if it were my nose that had been bloodied.

I told how all the factors in my very ordinary life -- a Christian home with a praying Mother, a Godly Father, a beautiful sister who loved the Savior and lived for him in my presence --

prepared me for the moment of my conversion. Mr. James, my Sunday school teacher, told the story of the Good Shepherd who went after one lost sheep. I could identify with that little lamb being carried in the Savior's arms, and one Sunday night, when I was nine years old, I realized I needed a savior and Jesus has died to save me. I got out of my seat in the second row, went forward, knelt to pray and was born again. It was so simple. So quiet. So natural. Like putting on my shoes. And it was so very unlike what happened at Paul's conversion.

Acts 26:13-17 At Paul's Conversion

When Paul was converted he had a vision, he heard a voice and he experienced a victory. "At midnight, O king, I saw a light from Heaven brighter than the sun, shining around me and those who journeyed with me . . . and I heard a voice speak to me in Hebrew, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' I asked. The voice answered, 'I am Jesus.'" Then came a victory . . . a victory over darkness. We don't have all of Paul's testimony here in Acts 26. Part of it is back in chapter 22. But when you put it all together, you realize there was a double healing for Paul. His physical eyes were healed and he began to see again. The eyes of his soul were also opened. I don't know which miracle Paul would consider to be the greatest. I think it was his spiritual healing because after that he saw people in a whole new light, and he saw the terms upon which his new life was to be lived.

Acts 26:18-23 After Conversion

Paul was to be to his world what Christ would be if Christ were where he was. He was to have a ministry of illumination: "to open [people's] eyes" (18a). He was to have a ministry of conviction and conversion: "that they may turn from darkness to light" (18b). He was to have a ministry of emancipation: to help free them "from the power of Satan to God" (18c). He was to have a ministry of liberation and remission: "that they may receive forgiveness" (18d). He was to have a ministry of inclusion: to tell them they had a "place among those who are sanctified by faith in Christ" (18e). They were now part of the family of God. No longer outsiders, they were insiders! And, co-inheritors of the riches of God in Christ!

"Wherefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those at Damascus, then at Jerusalem and then throughout all . . . of Judea, and also to the

Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God and perform deeds worthy of their repentance” (Acts 26:20). It was the same threefold message Paul preached everywhere he went: First, repent! It’s not enough to be sorry for your sins. It’s not enough to be remorseful for your guilty past. You must do something about it. You must repent. You must turn from what you were.

Second, you must not only turn from, you must turn to. If you only turn from something there is a vacuum and emptiness unless you are filled with something grander, something greater, something more satisfying. Jesus told about a man who turned from, but never turned to, in the parable of the Empty House (Mt. 12:43-45). He told how an evil spirit was driven out of that man, went around trying to find a place to go, couldn’t find one, went back to the man in whom it had previously dwelt, and found the man “was swept and clean” (Mt. 12:44). That is to say, the man had repented. He had turned from, but he had not turned to. As a result, Jesus said, the evil spirit found the man “was empty.” So he went and got “seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they entered that man and,” Jesus said, “the last state of that man was worse than the first” (Mt. 12:45).

Third, the gods (small “g”) which we turn from, must be replaced by the God (capital “G”) whom we turn to. The One who previously meant nothing to us, must mean everything to us. And this must be reflected in a new lifestyle. People are to “repent,” Paul said, “to turn to God and perform deeds worthy of their repentance” (Acts 26:20). It’s not enough to know you need a savior. It’s not enough to know Jesus is the Savior. It’s not enough to know he will accept you, if you accept him. It’s not enough to go down an aisle, take a preacher by the hand, be baptized and join a church. There must be a change in your life. The proof of the pudding is in a new life, with new priorities and new values. New policies and new procedures for living. Not as a result of a law which confines you, but as a result of a love which refines you. Spirit-filled, growing Christians obey not because they are afraid to break God’s law, but because they never, never, never want to break God’s heart!

Acts 26:24-32 Indecision

What was the reaction to Paul's witness? Well, everybody was affected, but nobody was converted.

Festus was confused and covered his sense of need with a put-down: "Paul, you are mad; your great learning has turned you mad" (verse 24).

Agrippa was convicted and covered his sense of need with a wisecrack: You are trying to convert me, Paul, and in one meeting at that! The King James Version says it so beautifully: "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian" (verse 28). But almost is not enough and like Felix, Agrippa put it off. I have said it before, let me say it again: Knowledge is not enough. Conviction is not enough. Almost is not enough. "Almost cannot avail. Almost is but to fail. Sad, sad that bitter wail, Almost, but lost. . ." Information plus conviction plus ACTION spells salvation.

One of Satan's favorite tricks is to allow you to hear the Gospel and then whisper in your ear, "It's true, you know. Don't reject Jesus. Just put it off! Wait for a more convenient day." Satan is quite willing for you to be "almost" persuaded, provided you are not "altogether" persuaded, to the point of action. (Mt. 12:44). How is it with you today? Almost? Or all together? It's the difference between death and life. Between hell and Heaven. Between a hopeless end, and an endless hope. I pray that today you will be altogether persuaded for Jesus.

The Church Extended - Part 15

Acts 27:1-28:10

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Key Truth: The encouragement God gives us is transferable to others when we express it.

Attribute: God is Sustainer

Luke is rapidly approaching the end of his incredible saga of the New Testament church. Had it been his purpose to merely detail the life of Paul, he would have concluded with the death of Paul, which he does not. But Luke's goal was greater than that. He wanted to show how the prophetic exhortation of Jesus recorded in Acts 1:8 had been fulfilled through those who were his witnesses "to the end of the earth."

For them that meant "the end" of the Roman Empire. Hence, in these closing chapters of Acts, Luke is focused on Paul's push toward Rome, "the capital of the world." As subsequent church history shows, Rome was the springboard from which the gospel ultimately did, in fact, extend "to the end of earth" by virtue of the Protestant reformation and the modern missionary movement.

Three words: storm, shipwreck, and safety relate nicely to the three sections of our text. Storm (Acts 27:1-26). Shipwreck (Acts 27:27-44). And Safety (Acts 28:1-10).

Acts 27:1-26 Storm

We have a terrific key truth for today: *The encouragement God gives us is transferable to others when we express it*, and the first three verses of our text report three instances in which Paul was the recipient of encouragement. "And when it was decided that we should sail for Italy, they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan cohort, named Julius" (Acts 27:1). Skipping on to the end of verse 2: "We put to sea accompanied by Aristarchus." Two pronouns demand special attention: "we" which is Luke's way of including himself in the story, and "Aristarchus" a Macedonian. To understand how these two were an encouragement to Paul it will be helpful to take a look at life on board a ship commandeered by the Emperor to carry prisoners to Rome. The only people allowed on board were the crew,

Roman soldiers, the prisoners themselves and slaves belonging to the more affluent or prestigious prisoners.

The only way Luke and Aristarchus could have been on board was as slaves of Paul. That they assumed this role says a great deal about these two men. In the Roman Empire slaves included professional people like physicians, lawyers, teachers, accountants etc. as well as household help. So for Luke to assume the role of a slave was not unusual, but it says something about his spirit. By doing so, Luke gave Paul a level of prestige which may account, at least in part, for the special treatment Paul received on board.

Aristarchus was a Macedonian from Thessalonica. Other references to him in the New Testament indicate he had a servant's heart. In Acts 19:28,29 he was a stand-in for Paul during the riot in Ephesus. In Acts 20:4 he was one of the men picked to accompany Paul with the offering collected from Gentile Christians for Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. Aristarchus was clearly a man of good repute, possessing the qualities of a servant-leader. In our text we see him as a loyal companion.

On my office wall I have pictures of people who have been important to me over the years. On one of them is this handwritten note: "A friend is one who walks in when others walk out." Aristarchus never walked out on Paul. He was there when Paul needed him. The encouragement God's grace gave to Aristarchus was transferred to Paul because Aristarchus expressed it. He was there for Paul when Paul needed him. In Philemon 24 he is called a "faithful co-worker." In Colossians 4:10 Paul speaks of him as "my fellow prisoner." According to tradition Aristarchus was martyred in Rome during Nero's persecution. Two remarkable men, Luke and Aristarchus, who were welcome sources of encouragement to Paul.

Acts 27:3 records yet another occasion in which Paul was the recipient of encouragement. "The next day we put into Sidon; and Julius treated Paul kindly, and gave him leave to go to his friends and be cared for." Sometimes we forget that strong people need encouragement, too. A friend of mine had the responsibility of leading a difficult negotiating session. When that long, demanding meeting was over a fellow worker called him aside and said, "I appreciate you.

Knowing what you've been through today, and watching how you've handled yourself tonight, I've been wondering how you can still be smiling. You are great at what you do. Thanks for being you." My friend is a strong man, but that word of affirmation from a friend meant a great deal to him. I know, because he told me so.

We forget that strong people need encouragement, too. We reach out to the weak and broken. We bind up their wounds and try to lift their spirits. But the strong also need encouragement, too. The church in Sidon did not lose sight of the fact that Paul, who was such a strong leader, was also human and needed to be cared for. To its credit the church did just that.

Through Luke, Aristarchus, Julius and the brothers and sisters in Sidon, Paul was the recipient of encouragement. Then, "putting to sea from there we sailed under the lee of Cyprus, because the winds were against us" (Acts 27:3). At that time of the year the weather was uncertain, so instead of taking the northern route directly across the Mediterranean to Rhodes, the captain hugged the land and by sailing along the downwind side of the island of Cyprus was able to manage the winds which Luke says "were against us."

I can imagine, can't you, how Paul must have felt as he stood at the rail that day and watched the coastline of Cilicia pass. Tarsus, where he was born was in Cilicia. It was there he had been educated. On down the coast were the lowlands where he contracted malaria. Beyond the Tarsus Mountains which bordered the Mediterranean Sea was Galacia. There, in Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe he had given birth to a string of new churches. And my! how he must have longed for even a short visit with those whom he had led to Christ in Galacia.

When they arrived in Myra, Julius, the centurion, found a large grain vessel from Egypt bound for Italy (Acts 27:6). The Nile valley was the breadbasket for the Roman Empire. Corn, wheat and other grains raised there were transported by huge sailing vessels. Some of these ships carried as many as 600 passengers and crew. It was to such a ship, headed for Rome, to which Paul was transferred along with his fellow prisoners, and Luke writes, "We sailed slowly for a number of days . . . until finally with much difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens" (Acts 27:7,8).

Now, look back at that little phrase in verse 4, “the winds were against us.” Those five words could easily be a mini-biography of Saul, now Paul. To begin with, Saul had everything going for him. A fine family, brilliant mind, excellent education, the character traits of toughness and tenderness which make for a strong leader. In addition, he was a world citizen. By tradition he was a Hebrew. By birth he was a Roman. By education he was a Greek. He could move freely among all three major ethnic groups of that time. And yet, despite all this, “the winds of life” were against him.

Before he became a Christian, Saul of Tarsus was a driven man. Violent emotional storms raged within him, conflicted as he was by a sensitive spirit, a searching mind and a strict conscience. There’s a sense in which he was a spiritual schizophrenic torn between what his head said and what his heart said. Indeed, in his pre-Christian days “the winds” were against Saul of Tarsus.

When he became a Christian and entered into his inheritance – the peace of Christ – those internal storms were replaced by external “winds” which raged around him. His own people, the Jews, made life miserable for him everywhere he went. His friends let him down by their silence whenever so much he needed them to speak up on his behalf. Everywhere he went, his own handicaps and weaknesses were accentuated by the primitive circumstances under which he had to travel, work, live and witness. Indeed, these five words, “the winds were against us” were a mini-biography of Paul.

And, in a manner of speaking, they are also a mini-biography of us. We enjoy good days – some of which are strung together to provide seasons of undiluted blessings – then whamo, out of nowhere, comes foul weather. We shouldn’t be surprised by this because Satan is the prince of the air. He is the author of confusion. His works include strife and ugliness, harassment and distain. His M. O. is to promise pleasure but produce pain, and we have a choice. We can roll over and play dead, or we can rise up and do what Paul did. We can learn to use all of the spiritual armament at our command. Which leads us to a principle: *It isn’t what happens to us that’s important, it’s how we handle what happens to us.*

It wasn't so important that Paul was harassed by the Jews, what was important was how he handled that harassment. He never once lost a supernatural love for his people. Everywhere he went he preached the gospel "to the Jews first." It wasn't so important that Paul was put in prison, what was important was how he handled that imprisonment and learned to glory in his chains. It wasn't so important that he suffered from a plaguing "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor.12:7) from which he was never relieved, what was important was that he learned to rejoice in his weakness because he discovered that when he was weak God was strong.

And that's the way it must be with us. It's not so important what happens to you or me, what is important is how we handle what happens to us. That we learn to use all the armament with which God has equipped us. That we learn to praise him in every circumstance because God has promised to use everything for good (Romans 8:28).

Paul's Strategy for Surviving Adversity

Our text reveals several steps Paul took to survive adversity when "the winds were against (him)." They will work for us as well.

Step One: Exercise Common Sense. That is, try to avoid foul weather (Acts 27:9-10). Paul was no stranger to the sea. He knew how unpredictable the Mediterranean could be at that time of the year. "The day of the fast [the day of Atonement which comes at the end of September or early October] had passed" (Acts 27:9). Sailing on the Mediterranean in the latter part of October could be treacherous. Come November shipping stopped completely. No captain with any concern for the safety of his passengers, crew and cargo would put his ship to sea until the following March when spring came. Based on his personal knowledge of the Mediterranean Sea and common sense Paul sought to avoid danger and advised against leaving Fair Havens Harbor. This is a wonderful illustration of making positive use of negative memories.

Referring to things other people have done to them, I often hear people say, "I can forgive, but I can't forget." That's true. They can't forget. Their brain is equipped with a fail-safe system which makes it impossible to forget. That's what enables us to survive in this world. We have an unpleasant experience. Remembering how painful it was helps us deal with a similar

subsequent experience if we put a positive meaning on our negative memory. One way to do that is by releasing the power in praise. Satan loves to get us thinking about events which reveal our less than best self, or the less than best self in others. When that happens we need to recall God's grace. Grace which is greater than all our sins and the sins of others as well. The instant an ugly memory crops up we must begin praising God. Satan hates it when we go around praising God and, if we keep it up, he'll stop bringing bad memories to mind.

Another way to put a positive meaning on a negative memory is to turn memory into a silent sentinel which warns us of foul weather ahead. When a bad memory presents itself we should immediately and automatically remember, "I've been here before! I know what happens in a situation like this. I'm getting out of here!" Or if that's not possible, do as Paul did: choose to stay in our "Fair Havens" (Acts 27:8b), that is, places in which we feel safe and secure. There's a principle involved and this is it: *Surviving adverse winds begins with intelligence, not endurance.*

Dealing effectively with winds which blow against us calls for an intelligent use of intuition, knowledge of God's word, memory, the counsel of others and common sense all aimed at avoiding danger and staying clear of foul weather whenever possible. There wasn't anyone on board that ship who wanted to get to Rome as badly as Paul. He was on an errand for his King. But common sense told him not to be brash or hasty but to play it safe because *surviving adverse winds begins with intelligence, not endurance.*

Step Two: Do the Obvious

If, after we've done everything we can to avoid it, danger still presents itself, Paul's experience reveals a second step we can take to survive adversity: do the obvious. Sadly, the centurion did not heed Paul's counsel but listened to the captain and owner of the boat who wanted to find a more suitable harbor in which to spend the winter. A gentle south wind lured them out to sea but they hadn't gone far when "a tempestuous wind, called the northeaster, struck down from the land; and when the ship was caught and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and were driven" (Acts 27:14, 15). They were helpless!

They had one short respite from the wind as they passed under the lee of Cauda, a tiny little island off Crete, during which they did the obvious. “We managed with difficulty to secure the boat” (Acts 27:16). That is to say, they pulled in the dinghy they had been towing because it was about to swamp. “[The crew also] took measures to undergird the ship” (Acts 27:17a). Pictures of ancient Egyptian sailing ships show sets of huge ropes running from stem to the stern and under the keel at midship.

When a severe storm arose those cable-like ropes were drawn taut around the ship by wenches to keep it from breaking up when buffeted by the sea. Then “they [dropped a sea anchor]” (Acts 27:17b). If the northeast caught them broadside it could drive the ship across the Mediterranean to the coast of North Africa and dash it against a treacherous reef known as the Syrtis. So they lowered a huge hunk of canvas aft of the ship to act as a drag against the current. They probably raised a small storm sail to help position them in the wind, and otherwise powerless, they “were driven [by the storm]” (Acts 27:17c).

The next day they did another obvious thing. “As we were violently storm tossed, [the crew] began to throw the cargo overboard” (Acts 27:18). A day later extra tackle and sailing gear was tossed into the sea (Acts 27:19). Even so, when they were without sun by day or stars by night, nothing but driving wind and rain, completely at the mercy of the elements for “many a day . . . all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned” (Acts 27:20).

Step Three: Show Uncommon Courage

Paul’s third secret for surviving adverse winds was to show uncommon courage, which was more than whistling in the dark.

This reminds me of my favorite cemetery joke. It doesn’t have any application, but you’re getting tired so let me give you a good laugh. Two fellows had been picking apples and because it was getting dark decided to cut through a cemetery on their way home. On the other side of the cemetery was a wall. As they started to climb over it, the sack in which they were carrying the apples broke, spilling all of its contents inside the wall except for two apples which

fell outside of the cemetery. They had an extra sack and decided to divvy up their harvest as they picked up the apples. One said, "I'll take this one." The other said, "I'll take that one."

An old country boy was riding by the cemetery on his bicycle, whistling in the dark to keep up his courage, and heard two voices on the other side of the wall. One said, "I'll take this one." The other said, "I'll take that one." He drew a hasty conclusion and raced into town yelling, "The day of judgment has come! The day of judgment has come! The Lord and the devil are in the cemetery dividing up the souls." His friends thought that was nonsense, but one of the town boys agreed to ride him out to the cemetery on the handlebars and see for himself. When they got there, the two pickers were finished divvying up the apples. The town boy hopped off the handle bars, walked toward the wall just in time to hear a voice say, "That takes care of these. Let's get those two on the other side of the wall." I'm told that's the only time a man on foot outraced a man on a bicycle.

Well, Paul wasn't "whistling in the dark." The uncommon courage he displayed was based on his unshakable conviction that God had a purpose for his life and would not be deterred. As a consequence, this man, who on at least three occasions had been the *recipient* of encouragement, became a *source* of encouragement as he passed on to others the encouragement given to him. Truly: *the encouragement God gives us is transferable to others when we express it.*

The same thing can be said of negative emotions. Fear is transferable. I'm sure a lot of fear was transferred from one person to another on that ship because they were in a terrifying situation. Doubt is transferable. I'm sure a lot of doubt was passed among them as they questioned if they'd ever see their loved ones again. This was a treacherous storm, but at the height of it God spoke words of encouragement to Paul. "Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and [I have] granted [safety] to all who sail with you" (Acts 27:24).

Paul could have kept that good news to himself and been blessed, but nobody else on board would have been blessed. Instead, in keeping with our key truth, he saw fit to share the good news God had given to him, and the encouragement God gave Paul was transferable to others

when he expressed it. But he did it in an interesting and confrontational way. “I told you so,” he said (Acts 27:21). That’s a tempting thing to say under many experiences and most of us do it in the flesh. Paul did it in the Spirit. Not as a put-down but a help up, as a spirit-lifting exhortation. I think he said something like this: Look guys, I want you to listen to me this time because I was right the last time and I’m right now! “Take heart; for there will be no loss of life” (Acts 27:22). What wonderful words of hope and encouragement. Some of them probably asked, “How do you know Paul?” “Because God said so. Last night the Lord reminded me I have an appointment with the Emperor. I can’t drown before I see him. I may drown in a bathtub after I get to Rome, but I can’t drown out here.”

Some of the sailors may have rejected that word based on their experience with the sea and that was OK with Paul. He didn’t expect unbelievers to share his assurance as a believer, but Paul was certain his date with destiny would be kept. Besides which, God had given him this added word of hope: not just you, Paul, all who are with you (Acts 27:24). Wow! *The encouragement God gives us is transferable to others when we express it.*

Many non-Christians are openly hostile toward Christians. They think we want to take away their fun. But if the truth were known, many non-Christians owe a tremendous debt to Christians. Only eternity will show how many non-Christians were protected from potential peril and the immediate consequences of their faulty choices, because there was a Christian in their midst whom God was protecting for some higher purpose.

In Genesis 19 we’re told God spared Sodom and Gomorrah because Lot was there. I don’t intend a pun, but Lot left a lot to be desired. Yet, despite Lot’s inadequacies, God spared those wicked cities until Lot got out of there. Then judgment fell.

In Genesis 41 we’re told the whole nation of Egypt was spared because God was protecting Joseph. He was the means by which God would reunite the family of Jacob, and the nation of Israel could flourish. When a seven-year famine hit that part of the world, every Egyptian was spared so God could save Joseph, and the destiny of Israel could be secured.

In our text we're told 276 people were saved because God had a purpose for Paul. God was protecting his man. As a result, everyone around Paul enjoyed the same protection. Only eternity will reveal to unbelievers how much protection from harm they received because one of God's chosen was in their midst doing God's will regardless of the peril. He or she was under God's care which extended to those around him or her.

Acts 27:27 - 44 Shipwrecked

I've given the memory hook "Shipwrecked" to the second section of our text, Acts 27:27-44.

William Ramsey was a young man who did not believe in God and was militantly anti-Christian. He set out to prove the Bible was a book of fables and filled with mistakes. Instead, to his surprise, he discovered the validity of scripture in minute detail and not only became a Christian, but a powerful apologist for the Christian faith and God's written word

In one of his books Ramsey provides a great deal of information about this particular part of Luke's narrative. His research showed there were roughly 476 miles from Cauda to Malta. When the storm died down and they were powered by a small storm sail, one of the few they had left, they moved through the water at about one and a half knots per hour, so it took 13 days 1 hour and 21 minutes from point to point. Interesting! Because Luke writes, "when the fourteenth night had come" (Acts 27:27) the practiced ear of the lookout sailor on the bow of the ship heard a familiar sound. It was the rhythmic beating of waves on rocks signaling they were nearing land. They began to take soundings. First, twenty fathoms. A short time later, fifteen fathoms. They were being relentlessly driven toward some unknown shore. Hastily they let out four anchors to stop the progress of the ship, pulling the bow toward whatever shoreline lay ahead, and "prayed for day to come" (Acts 27:29).

Step Four: Identify Character Flaws

At this point Paul demonstrated the fourth quality required to survive adversity: identify character flaws in the people around you because only then can you take corrective action to avoid the harm those flaws might bring you and others. Under the pretext of putting out anchors on the bow, several sailors started to lower the dinghy. Intuitively Paul recognized their evil intent and took corrective action. "Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be

saved,” he told the centurion (Acts 27:31). Simply put, there won’t be anybody on board who knows how to get us to safe harbor. Unfortunately, some of the Roman soldiers acted as impetuously as did the Egyptian sailors. They got in the boat and cut it loose (Acts 27:32) leaving Paul and the others “in the soup.” Now, if they were going to get to shore they’d have to swim.

Step Five: Eat Something

At this point Paul took charge of the situation and demonstrated a fifth secret to surviving adversity: get some food on your stomach (Acts 27:33-38). I think we’d all agree the world looks a lot better when our tummy is full. A wise mother whose daughter was about to get married gave her some sound advice: “Give your husband lots of love and a hot breakfast.” Well, they didn’t have a hot breakfast that day, but Paul saw to their need for food. They had gone 14 days without eating. Many had been seasick. Some were depressed. One of the symptoms of depression is a loss of appetite, and one of the results of a loss of appetite is depression! So Paul said, “Take some food, it will give you strength” (Acts 27:34a).

Then he repeated his words of encouragement, “Not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you. And when he had said this, he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all, he broke it and began to eat. Then they were all encouraged and ate some bread themselves” (Acts 27:34-36). Once again our key truth: *The encouragement God gives us is transferable to others when we express it.*

I don’t know what he prayed, but being an evangelist he knew an opportunity to share the gospel when he saw one. I can imagine him praying, “Lord, we remember how on the night Jesus was crucified he took bread, broke it and said, ‘do this in remembrance of me.’ Lord, we thank you for seeing Jesus through death on a cross and by raising him from the dead turned tragedy into a triumph. Now Lord, in the name of Jesus, we claim the same victory over this crisis as you gave Jesus in his crisis.” I don’t know if that’s how he prayed, but Luke says “they were encouraged” and began tossing the remaining cargo overboard so the ship would ride high in the water and hopefully be safely beached.

As day was dawning they looked through the mist and saw what is now called St. Paul's Bay. At the far end of the bay was a beach. Their plan was to sail through a narrow opening into the bay, but they didn't realize high tides had deposited a sand bar across the middle of the bay. So when day dawned they did three things in rapid succession (Acts 7:40). They cut the ropes and left the sea anchor behind. They loosened the steering paddles so they could maneuver. They raised the foresail which gave them a little power and made a break for the beach.

Everything was going great until they hit the sand bar. The bow stuck in the mud and the beating of waves on the aft of the ship caused it to begin to break up. Then, as if Paul was not in enough trouble, some of the Roman soldiers threatened to kill all the prisoners. Roman law required that any Roman soldier who allowed a prisoner to escape had to bear the penalty assigned to that prisoner. It was a workable way of discouraging soldiers from taking a bribe. Fearful that in the melee and confusion Paul and the prisoners might swim away, some of the soldiers planned to kill them. Julius, the centurion, wanting to save Paul, put a stop to that and once again nonbelievers survived because, in their midst, there was a man for whom God had a purpose and over whom God was watching. Paul ordered those who could to jump overboard and swim to shore. The rest clung to bits of wreckage and "so it was that all escaped to land" exactly as God had promised (Acts 27:44).

Acts 28:1-10 Safety

This leads us to the third and last section of our text to which I've assigned the memory hook: Safety. Paul and Luke learned they had landed on the Isle of Malta. The people were friendly and built a fire to help dry them out. Not one to sit around watching when there was work to do, Paul began gathering firewood. How different from many people today who want more and more for doing less and less. One of my favorite stories is about a panhandler who stopped at a farmhouse and asked for a meal. The lady of the house said, "I'll feed you if you saw that pile of wood." "I don't see any wood," the panhandler answered. "But I saw you see it," the woman insisted. To which the man replied, "Lady, you may have saw me see it, but you'll never see me saw it!"

Not so with Paul. He began gathering wood, and a viper aroused by the heat of the fire bit Paul on the hand and wouldn't let go. Here we find a fascinating illustration of humankind's most common athletic ability: jumping to conclusions. The natives concluded that because Paul had survived the storm and was then attacked by a snake, he must be a very bad fellow, maybe a murderer with whom justice had finally caught up.

Step Six: Have a Cool Head and Quick Hand

Paul illustrated another of those qualities needed for surviving adversity: a cool head and quick hand. "He shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. [The natives] waited, expecting him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead." (Acts 28:5,6a). When nothing happened they leapt to another conclusion: he must be a god (Acts 28:6b). One minute they thought he was a murderer and the next minute they decided he was a god. If that isn't a beautiful example of humankind's amazing ability to jump to conclusions, I don't know what it is.

Well, the Lord used both of those hasty conclusions for good. Verse 7 tells us Paul and his friends were invited to the home of the chief man of the island. That act of hospitality was rewarded because Paul laid hands on the man's father who was ill, prayed for him and he was healed. Word got out and "the rest of the people on the island who had diseases came and were cured" (Acts 28:9).

Notice the words: "healed" and "cured" (Acts 28:8,9). Two different words in Greek. "Healed" means "made whole." "Cured" means "received medical attention." What's suggested by use of these two adjectives is that some came to Paul to be prayed for and others came to Luke to be doctored. The combination of Paul's prayer therapy and Luke's pharmacopeia resulted in their getting better. What a lovely prelude to, and illustration of, the modern medical missionary movement and how God would, and continues to, minister to different people with different needs in different ways. After Paul and Luke worked there for three months, the locals took up a love offering and gave it to Paul. With enough money for the last leg of their journey, Paul and Luke headed for Rome (Acts 28:10.).

So What?

Three abiding lessons are here for us.

1. God has a plan in which we can have a part.
2. Despite adverse circumstances God's will for us will be done if we trust and obey.
3. In the process of trusting and obeying we can be a blessing to others because: *The encouragement God gives us is transferable to others when we express it.*

The Church Extended - Part 16

Acts 28:11-31

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Key Truth: What God planned in the beginning will be the end.

Attribute: God is Victor.

The last leg of this historic journey went swiftly, and as William Barclay points out, the last part of Paul's trip to Rome "was as prosperous as the early part had been disastrous." Luke describes it in fewer than a hundred words. "After three months we set sail in a ship which had wintered in the island, a ship of Alexandria, with the Twin Brothers as figurehead. Putting in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days. And from there we made a circuit and arrived at Rheguim; and after one day a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli. There we found brethren, and were invited to stay with them for seven days. And so we came to Rome " (Acts 28:11-14).

They were shipwrecked in late October and spent three months on Malta, so it was getting on toward the end of January or early February. Weather conditions on the Mediterranean were still uncertain. An early winter had apparently been followed by an early spring. Even so they were pushing their luck by continuing their journey so early in the season. But passage on another of those huge grain vessels from Alexandria became available and they decided to take it.

The "twin brothers" referred to in verse 11 were legendary sea deities, the two sons of Zeus, and were said to be symbols of good fortune for men of the sea. "Putting in at Syracuse" one of the main cities on Sicily, "we stayed there for three days. And from there we made a circuit [tacking this way and that] and arrived at Rhegium [a village on the toe of the boot of Italy]; and after one day a south wind sprang up [and running before the wind] on the second day we came to Puteoli." They had covered 180 miles in two days, moving before a south wind through the narrow straight of Masina between Sicily and Italy.

Puteoli is on the northern coast of the bay of Naples. As they came up the Mediterranean and looked to the east they could see the majestic cone of Vesuvius rising above Pompeii, a famous

resort town along the coast. The volcanic nature of Vesuvius had not yet been discovered. Twenty years later that magnificent mountain, which had previously been covered with vines erupted, burying the city of Pompeii under tons and tons of volcanic ash.

Acts 28:14b “And so we came to Rome”

“[In Puteoli],” Luke writes, “we found brethren, and were invited to stay with them for seven days.” Then, almost as an afterthought he adds, “And so we came to Rome.” With magnificent restraint Luke says in six words what he’s been wanting to say all along. We did it! We did it! Praise God! We did it! We were faithful to our high calling and with the help of the Holy Spirit we have been what Jesus asked us to be: his witnesses! “In Jerusalem” where the church was established. “In all Judea and Samaria” where the church was scattered. And now “to the end of the earth.”

Rome was “The Queen City.” The political, cultural, financial, societal center of the first-century world. To have made it to Rome was to have “made it” – period. But for Paul and company it meant even more. It meant their part of the great commission was ending and a new chapter was beginning. Beyond their world – the Roman Empire – was another world about which they knew nothing. A world about which you and I are just beginning to learn something. But it was the same world. They saw a slice of it. We see it globally. But it was the same old world. The world God loved. The world for which Jesus died. The world you and I have been told to reach for Jesus.

So while six words – “and so we came to Rome” – mark the climax of the book of Acts they in no way mean the story is over. It’s just beginning. Since then hundreds and hundreds, indeed million of chapters have been written. Others will be written. You and I are penning our page in the narrative today. The final line will be written when the finger of God pulls back the curtain of the blue and Jesus comes sweeping down the stairway of the stars. Then every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that he, Jesus the Christ, is Lord. Don’t you long for that day? Please say “yes.” And we can know that we know that we know that day will come, and we shall see him face to face, because of these six words: “and so we came to Rome.” Indeed, As our key truth affirms: *What God planned in the beginning will be the end.*

God's Plan Was Accomplished

Rome was first-century proof of that truth. The modern missionary movement was 18th and 19th century proof of that truth. The third-world indigenous church is 20th century proof of that truth. The electronic age in which the gospel is communicated to the whole earth every hour of every night and day via satellite is 21st century proof of that truth. *What God planned in the beginning will be in the end.* He will triumph. His purpose will be achieved. His goal for creation will be realized. We know that because of the miracles expressed in these six words: “and so we came to Rome.”

Think back thirty or more years before those six words were written. The disciples were cowering in an upper room. Their leader had been executed. Their dreams had been shattered. Their hopes for themselves and their nation had been crushed. Every reason for being was gone. They were a broken, battered, bewildered bunch of losers. Who could have imagined, in his or her most illusionary fantasy, that the tiny group of quaking cowards would, within little more than three decades, become a mighty army of hundreds of thousands of people, with clusters of Christians gathering to support and encourage each other all over the known world!

But that's exactly what happened. The incredible. The unbelievable. Against insurmountable odds, common people like you and me, filled with the Holy Spirit and stubborn faithfulness, took God at his word, obeyed his orders, and to put it plainly: went where he wanted them to go and did what he wanted them to do. Regardless! And the church was extended “to the end of the earth.”

Is there any reason why that can't happen here, today, in us? God is ready, willing and able to use us. So there's no reason top side. The only reason is inside – you and me. Are we willing to be used? Are we willing to take God at his word, believe his promises, obey his orders, and to put it plainly: go where he wants us to go and do what he wants us to do? Regardless? If so, the sky is the limit for people who will trust and obey God like that. Our key truth states it clearly: *What God planned in the beginning will be done in the end.* Excuse me, but hallelujah!

Acts 28:15 “Paul took courage” – Again!

Well, I’m getting ahead of myself, but that’s exactly what Luke did. In verse 15 he writes about things that actually happened in verse 14. We’ve learned, in this study of Acts, that while Paul had a capability for great elation he was also susceptible to mild depression. That seems to be true of many, if not most, creative people.

On the wall behind my desk is an anonymous quotation. I carry this small copy in my wallet. Let me share with you: “God fits the preacher with a spirit that is supersensitive. One day he’s calling down fire from heaven. The next he’s requesting permission to quit. [I do that every Monday.] The ability to both soar and plunge is an absolute necessity in the ministry, else we could never feel what we must in order to identify with the needs of our people. Some of us find times in our lives when we can’t handle that. Paul said he had to learn. We also must learn that our task is to minister, to serve, to glorify God, regardless of whatever emotional climate appears on our horizon.”

Paul could scale the heights. He could also, and did at times, descend to the depths. I’m confident, as are most evangelical scholars, he was more than a little apprehensive as he approached Rome. What would he would find there? How would he be treated there? He was anxious about the state of the church there. It had been three years since he wrote the letter we now know to be the book of Romans. There had been no direct communication between them, and the questions – my! – how they must have kept his mind in a whirl. What will be their reaction when they see me walking into Rome in chains? Will that discourage them? Will it enrage them? Will it scatter them? Will it unite them? The questions must have flooded his mind and may have oppressed him.

“[But] the brethren there, when they heard of us, came as far as the Forum of Appius [about 40 miles south of Rome] and three taverns [about 30 miles south of Rome] to meet us. On seeing them Paul thanked God *and took courage*” (Acts 28:15) Another illustration of God’s people doing what they could when they should. Sometimes you and I are so concerned with what we can’t do, we fail to do what we can do. Because we’re incapable of doing something grand, we don’t do something simple. Because we can’t do big things, we don’t do small things. And ever

so much we need to emulate the spirit of the person who said, “I can’t do everything, but I can do something. Because I can do something, I should do something. And because I should do something, I will do something.” Some of the people mentioned in Acts 28 walked 30 miles . . . 40 miles . . . round trip! They did what they could, and Paul “thanked God and took courage.” It’s a beautiful thing when the children of God find ways to show troubled people they care.

In my little book *Why Prayers Are Unanswered* is the story of a poor man who fell while attempting to repair the roof of his small home. He had no money and was unable to work. The future looked mighty grim. A group of the folk from his church offered to pray for him. Word went out and a number of them gathered to pray. In the midst of their prayers there was a knock on the church door and a farm boy whispered, “Dad couldn’t come to the prayer meeting, so he sent his prayers in a wagon.” Down at the curb was an old buckboard full of beans and potatoes, fruit and other necessities. Real prayer always puts wheels on its concern. It loads its compassion in a wagon. It does more than talk about helping. It helps. Real prayer understands the most vital prayer we ever pray is what we do when we aren’t praying. Sensing a need in Paul the people mentioned in our text did what they could, when they should. In doing so they had the joy and honor of ministering to a man who ministered to the world Fantastic!

Acts 28:17-23 “The hope of Israel”

Luke continues, “And when we came to Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier that guarded him. After three days he called together the local leaders of the Jews” (Acts 28:16,17a). Let me paraphrase what he said as reported in Acts 28:17b -19. “I have done nothing against the people or customs of Israel. There was no evidence to support a death sentence which the Sanhedrin was demanding, and the Roman judge wanted to set me free. Our leaders objected and to save my neck I appealed to Caesar. You see, I am a Roman as well as a Jew.” Then, Paul makes his main point: “Because of *the hope of Israel*, I am bound by this chain” (Acts 28:20).

That was a phrase they instantaneously understood. All true Jews shared “the hope of Israel.” They longed for the coming of the promised Messiah. When Jesus came in the role of a suffering servant the people of Israel did not recognize him. He didn’t look like a Messiah. He

didn't talk like a Messiah. He didn't act like a Messiah. At least, not as the Jews commonly conceived a Messiah to be. But when Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus as the risen Lord, he knew as an absolute certainty that Jesus *was* the Messiah. Hope became reality for him! And with every fiber of his being, Paul longed that every son and daughter of Israel would share that reality with him.

The Jewish leaders treated him with cautious respect, and agreed to hear him later (Acts 28:21-22). A date was set and on the appointed day they gathered at Paul's place "in great numbers" (Acts 28:23a). Maybe in a common hall, a lobby, or an outdoor courtyard. We don't know. But we do know he spoke to them *all day long*. (And you think you have it rough when the Presbyterians "get out" before you do on Sunday morning!) "When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in great numbers. And he expounded the matter to them *from morning until evening*, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets. And some were convinced by what he said, while others disbelieved" (Acts 28:23,24).

Acts 28:23c Paul's Two Themes

One of Paul's two themes was the Kingdom of God which is the will of God in operation. In his wonderful book, *The Presence of the Future*, George Ladd explains how the Kingdom of God, which will fully come someday and extend to the whole wide world, is partially present today in the lives of those who allow God's will to be done in their small world. The second of Paul's two themes was Jesus, the Messiah. He went to great pains to show how Jesus fulfilled every Old Testament prophecy and that his resurrection proved Jesus was the Messiah.

As has been true throughout history, some chose to believe and some chose not to believe. So Paul quoted a passage from Isaiah which Jesus himself had referred to when he was rejected: "Go to this people, and say, 'You shall indeed hear but never understand, and you shall indeed see but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest they should perceive with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn for me to heal them'" (Acts 28:25-27; Isaiah 6:9,10).

Several thousand years ago Isaiah articulated a profound psychological principle: when we face an option and choose from among the alternatives, our decision is registered in our brain so the next time we face the same option our first inclination is to respond the way we did before. Every time we face the same option and make the same decision, that decision is reiterated in our brain, our memory bank. If we continue to respond to the same thing the same way long enough, there comes a time when it's nearly impossible for us to respond in a different way.

The Old Testament records how Israel repeatedly rejected Jehovah. The four Gospels and the book of Acts record how Israel repeatedly rejected Jesus. As I have said throughout this series: two themes run concurrently from the beginning of Acts to the end. One is the rejection of Jesus by the Jews. The other is the response to Jesus by the Gentiles. As a consequence we witness the eclipse of Israel as the primary means through which God does his work in the world and the emergence of the church in that role. "Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen" (Acts 28:28).

Finishing Up

Ever so quickly let me overview the remaining verses for you. Paul was placed under house arrest (Acts 28:16). He was chained at all times to a guard, but otherwise was free to do what he wanted to do. During the two years of his incarceration he wrote the books of Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon and Philippians. In the latter Paul explains how those chains had worked to the advance of the gospel (Philippians 1:12-14). He was never alone. There was a Roman soldier chained to him around the clock. As he dictated his letters explaining the gospel to his scribes, the guards were listening. They couldn't get away from this guy. Whether they wanted to or not they heard the gospel. Some believed, were transformed, went back to the guard house and shared the Good News with their fellow guards. Many of the soldiers became believers, as did many of people who worked in the palace. Indeed, God was using everything for good. Even Paul's chains! I find that encouraging. Don't you? Yes!

So What?

Two so-what? elements demand our attention. The first is the importance of our doing what we can when it counts. When it's needed most. The second is our learning faith is choice. We

choose to believe or we choose not to believe and there are consequences to each of those choices. When the Jewish nation chose not to believe in Jesus as their Messiah, God could no longer use them as the primary means through which he would do his work in the world. That role fell to “the Gentiles,” Paul’s pseudonym for “the church.” *What God planned in the beginning will be in the end.* Know it. Believe it. God’s intention for his creation will be realized. If not through you, through someone else. But oh! how he longs for it to be accomplished, at least in part, through you.

In Conclusion

Luke doesn’t tell us what happened to Paul. Most evangelical scholars believe he was released two years later. Probably for lack of evidence. Then followed several years of ministry during which Paul went back through Greece, quite possibly through Macedonia, and over to Spain. Some say he traveled as far as the British Isles, the farthest outpost of the Roman Empire. Then came the fire during which “Nero fiddled while Rome burned.” To cover his “sitting place” Nero blamed Christians, and world-wide persecution of the church began. Paul was arrested again, but this time he was treated like a common criminal. During his captivity Paul wrote a second letter to Timothy. Then found guilty, he was probably beheaded three miles south of town.

Acts 28:31 “openly and unhindered”

Luke ends his magnificent history of the early church on a note of triumph. “And he lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite *openly and unhindered*” (Acts 28:30, 31). In Greek the phrase: “openly and unhindered” is a single word. It’s like a victory yell at a football game: *Ak-o-loo-toce!* As Luke laid down his pen, having written the final word, one can hear him yell, “*Ak-o-loo-toce!* The gospel has been preached ‘openly and unhindered’ *in Rome!* The capital of the world. It’s a *miracle!*” And it *was* a miracle. Out of obvious defeat had come glorious victory. A tiny handful of disciples had grown into a mighty army. The Good News had spread from Jerusalem to Rome and beyond in three decades. Impossible? From man’s perspective, yes. But from God’s perspective, no. *What God planned in the beginning will be in the end.* And all God’s people said, “Amen!”