



## **Acts - Book Two**

CHAPTERS 8-12

# **The Church Scattered**

"in all SAMARIA and JUDEA"

THE APOSTLES RECEIVE AND OBEY CHRIST'S COMMAND TO "BE MY WITNESSES IN JERUSALEM AND IN JUDEA AND SAMARIA AND TO THE END OF THE EARTH." THIS BOOK DESCRIBES THEIR WITNESS IN SAMARIA AND JUDEA, IT TELLS **WHAT HAPPENED AND WHY!**

## **John Allan Lavender**

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## **The Church Scattered - Part 1**

Acts 8:1-25

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Key truth: God's people are never more powerful and purposeful  
than when under oppression.

Attribute: God is Grand Designer

The book of Acts divides nicely into three major divisions:

Chapters 1-7 focus on The Church Established with Jerusalem as the center of activity.

Chapters 8-12 focus on The Church Scattered with Judea and Samaria as the centers of activity.

Chapters 13-28 focus on The Church Extended with the known world as the center of activity.

In just a few decades, Christ's prophecy recorded in Acts 1:8 began to be fulfilled: "You will be my witnesses in *Jerusalem*, and in *Judea* and *Samaria*, and *to the end of the earth*." And two thousand years later, the latter third of that Great Commission continues to define our task as part of the body of Christ.

In terms of a New Testament overview, Acts 8 may be the most important chapter in the New Testament. It traces the transition of the body of Christ from what might be called a renewal movement within Judaism centered in Jerusalem, to the Church Universal with an identity of its own as well as the mission of being to the world what Christ would be if he were here himself.

Our text for today, Acts 8:1-25, divides into three sections which are best defined by three key words: persecution, power and peril.

### **Acts 8:1-4 Persecution**

To get a feel for the *persecution* to which the early church was subjected, we need to return for a moment to chapter seven. Stephen, a layman, gave a powerful witness before the supreme court of Israel. When he finished, Acts 7:54 reports, "When they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth against him." Verse 58 continues; "They cast him out of the city and stoned him; and the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' and he knelt down and cried with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' When he said this, he fell asleep. And Saul was consenting to his death. On that (very) day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen, and made great lamentation over him. But Saul laid waste the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word" (Acts 7:54, 58-60; 8:1-4).

As I pondered these verses this past week the seed thoughts for at least fifteen sermons came to mind. I'm not going to preach them all this morning, but let me share with you a few of the tremendous truths tucked away here. First of all, look at the *last* two words in the *last* verse of chapter seven.

### **Acts 7:60 "Fell Asleep"**

These two words – *fell asleep* – express a growing awareness in the church of the true nature of death. Before the resurrection of Jesus, the ancients buried their loved ones with their faces to the West. To them death was an eternal sunset. After the resurrection, the followers of Jesus buried their loved ones with their faces to the East. To them death was an eternal sunrise.

The phrase “fell asleep” does not support the doctrine of “soul sleep” as some assert, because 2 Corinthians 5:8 declares: “to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.” What these two words *do* make clear, however, is that death is not a step into nothingness. It is falling asleep to awaken in the everlasting arms of our heavenly Father.

Peter Marshall loved to tell the story of a little boy with leukemia. Day by day his parents watched him waste away and the smell of death permeated their home. One day, sensing the concern of his parents and having heard the word “death” mentioned, the laddie asked, “Mommy, what is it like to die? Does it hurt?” His words ripped through her heart as if she’d been cut by a piece of jagged glass. She left the room for a moment to compose herself and to ask God what to say to her son. When she returned she said, “Do you remember when you were very small how you would play hard and then suddenly fall asleep? Sometimes daddy would find you asleep on the carpet or in a chair. Sometimes you crawled up on mommy’s bed. But no matter where you went to sleep, when you awoke in the morning you were in your own little bed. You were where you belonged. Daddy had picked you up and taken you to a safe place prepared just for you. Death is like that, son. As we go through our days we grow weary and somewhere along the way we just stop. But that isn’t the end. God comes and takes us from where we are to where he wants us to be, in a room he’s prepared just for us.” The answer satisfied the little boy and several days later he fell asleep in the arms of his earthly father to awaken in the arms of his heavenly father.

Praise God for the hope which is ours in Christ, for we know death is not the end. It is not a terminus. It is a passageway. A stepping into a larger, better, sweeter, and finer part of life in a safe place the loving Father has prepared just for us.

### **Acts 8:2 “Great Lamentation”**

Or look at that little phrase in Acts 8:2, *great lamentation*. You’ll remember from our study of chapter 7, there were some questions about the legality of Stephen’s trial and the manner in which he was put to death. Any questions about his *innocence* of the charges leveled against him are removed by this little phrase: “great lamentation.” Here’s why. As bible scholar Ralph Earle points out, “Jewish law forbade public mourning at the death of a *criminal*.” If the Jewish *community* had thought Stephen was guilty of those charges, or if their *leaders* had recognized him as a criminal, any such public lamentation for him would have been prohibited. The fact that “devout men,” Jewish believers and deeply grieved Jewish citizens, buried him and then *publicly* lamented him proves Stephen was absolutely innocent and his cruel death was illegal.

### **Acts 8:3 “Laid Waste”**

Did you notice the rapidity with which sin progressively ensnared Saul? Look at those two words in Acts 8:3: *laid waste*. Saul began as a curious observer watching the stoning of Stephen “and the witnesses laid down their garments at (his) feet” (Acts 7:58).

He quickly ceased to be a curious observer and became a consenting advocate. In Acts 8:1 we read, "Saul was *consenting* to his death." He wasn't *personally* involved in actually casting stones, but he *was* advocating it. He was committed emotionally and intellectually to what was happening. When we get to verse 3, he had become a committed activist: "Saul *laid waste* the church." He started as a casual observer, became a consenting advocate and before he knew it was a committed activist.

Isn't that the way sin works in your life? That's how it works in mine. Is it not true, as you think about your walk with the Lord, that the enemy begins by triggering natural curiosity. "I wonder what it would be like to do this? Or do that? Go there? Or linger here? I wonder what it would be like to take a drink? Or to get high on drugs? Or experience this? Or that? Just natural curiosity.

Fondling these thoughts lead to growing consent. "Maybe there *is* no right or wrong. Maybe ethics and morality *are* situational. Maybe there *is* no black or white. Maybe there are only shades of gray." Just natural curiosity. But before we know it we have bought into the system and have become committed activists, ensnared by things which a short while ago had been nothing more than a curiosity.

### **Acts 8:1 "Scattered"**

And there is the word *scattered* in Acts 8:1. Stephen's death triggered a campaign of repression. "That (very) day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem and they were *scattered* throughout the region of Judea and Samaria . . ." (Acts 8:1). What Jesus said *would* happen, *did* happen. Acts 1:8 records him as prophesying, "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem *and in all Judea and Samaria . . .*" In Acts 8:1 his followers were scattered and began to witness *exactly where Jesus said they would*: "in all Judea and Samaria."

The Greek word translated "scattered" is really interesting. It doesn't mean a willy-nilly, helter-skelter blowing about like tumbleweed before a wind. It means "as if by plan." The image is best illustrated by a farmer who goes into his field and *scatters* seed in that part of the field he has prepared to produce a harvest.

God is the great designer. Nothing that *has* happened, nothing that *is* happening, nothing that *will* happen is outside the circle of his concern. God is using *all* of it to fulfill his great plan. From our human point of view it may *seem* that for believers to be scattered was a terrible tragedy, but from *God's* perspective everything was right on schedule.

### **Acts 8:4 "Preaching the Word"**

Look also at the last three words from verse 4: "Those who were scattered went about *preaching the word*" (Acts 8:4). Who were scattered? The lay members of the church. The apostles stayed in Jerusalem. That's important. We like to think we must receive a special calling to be witnesses for Christ. Not so! In the New Testament church the laity went around "*preaching the word*." Their extremity became their opportunity. As our key truth says: *God's people are never more powerful and purposeful than when under oppression*. The same events Satan tried to use for evil, God used for good!

**Acts 8:5-8 “Power”**

In verse 5 we pick up the second key word in our study: *power!* Look at our key truth again: *God’s people are never more powerful and purposeful than when under oppression.* Luke uses Phillip as an illustration of what other lay people were doing as a result of being scattered.!

“Phillip went down to a city of Samaria, and (did what?) *proclaimed to them the Christ.* And the multitudes with one accord gave heed to what was said by Phillip, when they heard him and saw the signs which he did. For unclean spirits came out of many who were possessed, crying with a loud voice; and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was much joy in that city” (Acts 8:5-8). Two words cry out for our undivided attention: *Samaria* and *Phillip*.

**Acts 8:5 “Samaria”**

It’s incredible that Jews would proclaim Christ in *Samaria*. A long standing antipathy existed between the Jews and the Samaritans. It went back to the 8th century B.C. when the United Kingdom brought into being under Saul, solidified under David and extended under Solomon, divided after the death of Solomon into a Northern Kingdom called Israel with its capitol at Samaria, and a Southern Kingdom called Judah with its capitol in Jerusalem. In the 7th century B.C. the Assyrians attacked the north, conquered Samaria, dispersed the people and brought in non-Jews to settle the land. Some of the Jews who remained married these settlers and their offspring became a mongrel race: part Jewish, part non-Jewish.

In the 6th century B.C. the Babylonians conquered Judah, the Southern Kingdom. They destroyed Jerusalem. Instead of dispersing the people helter-skelter as the Assyrians had done, the Babylonians transported the leaders, craftsmen and intelligentsia of Judah to Babylonia. There they formed a kind of Jewish barrio within the state of Babylon and maintained their Jewish identity, traditions and dreams. In the 5th century B.C. Cyrus came to the throne and God laid it upon his heart to let the Jews go back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and city walls. We read about that in Ezra and Nehemiah.

The Samaritans, who were part Jewish and part non-Jewish, offered to help rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, but Nehemiah and the other so called “true-blue Jews” from Babylon said, “Nothing doing. We don’t want to have anything to do with half-breeds.” As a result, tremendous antipathy took root in these groups. Over the centuries inferiority feelings grew in the people in Samaria and superiority feelings grew in the people in Israel. Incredibly, despite this deep division, the first place the scattered church goes with the message of Christ is *Samaria!*

You see, God is the grand designer. God knew that while Samaria appeared to be the most unlikely place for the gospel to spread, it was actually the most fertile place in which the gospel could grow because the Samaritans *were* part Jewish! They believed in Jehovah. They read the Pentateuch. They had the hope of a Messiah in their hearts. They were a natural bridge across which Christianity could spread from a Jewish center in Jerusalem to the Gentile world God was concerned about reaching.

God is the grand designer. It looked like a big step to take the gospel to Samaria, but it was really the easiest step.

**Acts 8:5 “Phillip”**

The other of those two words which cries out for attention is *Phillip*. This is not Phillip the apostle, because the apostles remained in Jerusalem. This is Phillip the deacon. He's listed in chapter 7 along with Stephen and others. Phillip was a layman and is one of many lay people whom God used to spread the Good News. He is an example of God's game plan for doing his work in the world which is to use ordinary people to do extraordinary things through the power of the Holy Spirit. As verse 5 says, "*Phillip* (a layman) proclaimed to them the Christ." Or as our key truth reminds us: *The people of God are never more powerful and purposeful than when under oppression.*

**Acts 8:5 “Proclaimed”**

The word *proclaimed* means heralded, like blowing a trumpet to get one's attention. Or like sitting in front of a tv set when a message flashes across the screen and a voice says, "We interrupt our regular programming to bring you this special report." Phillip marched into Samaria and, as it were, said, "We interrupt your regular routine to bring you this special report: The Messiah has come!"

Instantly a chord of response struck in the heart of the Samaritans who, along with the Jews, carried that high hope in their hearts. Verse 6 says, "The multitudes with one accord gave heed." Tuck those words *gave heed* away for a moment because we will come back to them.

**Acts 8:6 “With one accord”**

"*With one accord* they gave heed" to what they saw to be a sign. In an earlier study we learned there are wonders, miracles and signs. *Wonders* are those events designed to capture attention. *Miracles* are those natural or supernatural events accompanied by precise timing to bring glory to God. *Signs* are wonders or miracles which have within them a hidden message so astute observers, or participants in those events, are led to ask: "What is God saying in this sign, this action message?"

In the prophecies regarding the Messiah there were many references to miraculous deeds. So Phillip marched into Samaria and said, "The Messiah has come. Look at the *signs*." The primary *sign* being the fact God was touching the *totality* of life.

And that's what he wants to do for you: touch the totality of your life. If you let him, Jesus will redeem *all* of you. Your private self, your social self and your public self. Not just your soul or private self, but also your social self which is involved in the voluntary relationships you make with family and friends.. In addition to your private and social selves, Jesus will redeem your public self, that part of you engaged in voluntary and involuntary relationships related to your job, or school, or various community associations. Jesus came to redeem *all* of you. To touch the *totality* of your life.

Look at how Jesus dealt with people when he was on earth. He was concerned for their private self, but he also ministered to their social and public self. Unclean spirits were cast out. That which polluted the mind, soured the emotions, paralyzed the will, made social relationships difficult and unpleasant, were removed. The lame were healed. Troubled souls were helped so they no longer were a burden to society. No wonder there was so "much joy in the city" (Acts

8:8). People were being *totally* touched! *Not* because Phillip preached a “social gospel,” but because Phillip preached *a gospel which had social and public, as well as, private implications!*

### **Acts 8:9-24 “Power”**

The key word for section two of our text is *power*. You see, this was not the first time the Samaritans had been impressed by a man with wonder-working power. Look at verse 9ff. “There was a man named Simon who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the nation of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. They all gave heed to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, ‘This man is that power of God which is called great.’ And they gave heed to him, because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic.”

Notice the words “all *gave heed* to him from the least to the greatest” in verse 10 and then reflect back on verse 6 which says, “the multitude with one accord *gave heed*.” The Samaritans were semi-pagan, superstitious, highly suggestible people. Simon arrived in town with his bag of tricks not unlike the magicians in Egypt during the time of Moses, and he dazzled them. He also misled them into believing he was from God, and *maybe* the Messiah himself. And they followed Simon. He was a big attraction. But verse 12 says, “When they believed *Phillip* as he preached *good news* about the Kingdom of God and *the name of Jesus Christ*, they were *baptized*, both men and women.” Phillip didn’t dazzle them. He touched an ache deep inside them which yearned for something more than entertainment,

### **Acts 8:12 “Men and Women”**

Those last three words in verse 12 are certainly more seed thoughts for a sermon: *men* and *women*! Judaism was a male dominated religion. Women were not major players in Judaism. Jesus changed all that. Both men *and* women believed and were baptized, and wonder of wonders, “Simon himself believed and (was baptized) . . . and seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was *amazed*” (Acts 8:13,15).

### **Were These People Born Again?**

The *people* believed, were *baptized* and “there was much *joy* in the city.” *Simon* believed, was baptized and was *amazed*. This is an interesting clue to the outcome of our story, because the key question is: were these people born again?

Some say they were. I’m convinced they were not. They “believed” but it takes more than belief to be born again. James 2:19 says “the demons believe and shudder.” They were “baptized” but it takes more than baptism to be born again. Many have gone through the rite of baptism, but do not enjoy a personal relationship with God.

Verses 14-16 provide clues: “Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had ‘received’ the word of God . . .” the Greek translated ‘received’ means ‘gave a favorable reception to’ . . . when they heard the gospel they gave the word of God ‘a favorable reception’. So the apostles “sent Peter and John who came and prayed for them that they might ‘receive’ . . .” Here the Greek word translated ‘receive’ changes and means ‘to get a hold of.’ The apostles prayed that the Samaritans might ‘get a hold of’ the Holy Spirit; for it had not yet fallen on any of them.” The Greek word translated ‘fallen’ means ‘to embrace with affection, to seize or get a hold of.’

The people believed and were baptized. They were convinced and had been converted, *not* from Simon to *Christ*, but from Simon to *Phillip*! That's an important distinction. These unsophisticated folks had been conditioned to give their allegiance to any wonder-working man. Anyone who could dazzle and amaze them got their attention. When Simon came to town and pulled out his magic tricks they were amazed and called him a great man, a god.

But when *Phillip* did things Simon couldn't even imagine, they were able to discern the difference between what Simon accomplished through what Watchman Nee calls "the latent power of the soul," and what Phillip accomplished through the power of the Holy Spirit. And they were converted. Sadly, they were converted from Simon to *Phillip*. The process was incomplete, and had it not been for the discernment of the apostles back in Jerusalem it would have stayed incomplete.

Peter and John were sent to pray the Samaritans would "get a hold of" the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit would "get hold of them." Verse 17 says, "they laid hands on them and they 'received,' that is to say, they 'got a hold' of the Holy Spirit." And He them! Praise the Lord.

But notice it doesn't say they were "filled" with the Holy Spirit. That's *another* Greek word which means 'to be controlled by.' *That* part of their spiritual growth journey would continue though out their lifetime, as it does for us. The text says, they "received" the Holy Spirit. Which means they were born again! At this point they ceased to be interested disciples, or even baptized believers, and became quickened spirits. They were made alive in Christ.

How do we know? John 20:22 records how, following his death and resurrection, Jesus came into the upper room where the disciples were, breathed on them, and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." The Greek word in John 20:22 is the same Greek word used Acts 8:17. Just as the disciples "got a hold of" the Holy Spirit and were born again in the upper room, the Samaritans who previously had believed and been baptized, "got a hold of" the Holy Spirit and were also born again.

### **Acts 8:9-25 "Peril"**

The key word in this third section of Acts 8:9-25 is *peril*. There was *the peril* people might *intellectualize* the gospel and settle for a head religion instead of a heart relationship. But, praise God, because of the concern of the apostles, *that* didn't happen. They came into a personal, intimate relationship with God through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

There was also *the peril* Simon might *commercialize* the Good News. Look at verses 18 and 19. "When Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, 'Give me also this power that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.'"

Notice he doesn't ask for the Holy Spirit! He asks for power *to give* the Holy Spirit. He was not interested in the Giver. He wanted the gift. He was not interested in holiness. He was interested in profiteering. He was not interested in what the Holy Spirit might do *through* him, but what the Holy Spirit could do *for* him. And notice Peter's stinging rebuke, "Your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!"



I'm putting it discretely. A literal translation would be, "To hell with you and your money! You're in trouble, Simon, but you're not hopeless (for verse 22 continues) 'Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.'"

Simon was sinful, but not hopeless. He needed to be born again, but what did he do? The same old thing. Verse 24: "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me." He didn't ask for forgiveness. He didn't ask to receive the Holy Spirit. He didn't ask to be born again. He wasn't interested in new life. He was interested in saving his skin and avoiding the consequences of his sin. There was no repentance, and as a result there was no salvation.

In the years that followed, Simon became a thorn in the side of the church. In the writings of the early church there is reference to Simon being a persistent antagonist to Peter. There are many who believe it was Simon who started the Gnosticism movement, one of the early heresies which beleaguered the early church.

### **One Last Peril**

There's one more peril which needs to be addressed: it's the *peril* facing *us*. Not that we would intellectualize the gospel, or commercialize the gospel, but that we would *systematize* the gospel in such a way that we develop an inflexible understanding of how God does his work in the world.

The book of Acts will not permit us to do that. God cannot be nailed down. Every time we try to fit him into some system, he escapes us. He does it another way. In our text the apostles put their hands on the Samaritans and they received the Holy Spirit. The peril is that we might say, "So *that's* how God does his work. A *great man of God* puts his hands on people and they are saved. *That's* how God does it. I've got it all figured out!" And we run around laying hands on people for salvation.

No, no, NO! In Acts 9 we find Ananias putting his hand on Saul and Saul receives the Holy Spirit. Who was Ananias? Not a great man of God, *an ordinary layman* filled with the Holy Spirit who was doing what God told him to do.

Later on in Acts people receive the Holy Spirit and hands *aren't* laid on them. It happens *after* they were baptized. Still later in Acts the Holy Spirit came upon people *before* they were baptized while Peter was still preaching.

God will not be put in a box. We cannot systematize the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Bible simply will not permit us to draw up an inflexible pattern into which the Holy Spirit must fit. As Jesus said, "The wind blows where it wills" (John 3:8). You can hear it and feel it but you cannot tell where it's coming from or where it's going. *That's* how it is with the Holy Spirit, he said. You can't systematize it. You must make room for God to do what God wants to do the way God wants to do, which will always be the way which is best for the people involved.

In Acts 8:1-25 the people were Samaritans. That's key. They were half-breeds rejected by "true blue Jews" who felt themselves to be superior. Suppose, as a result of Phillip's ministry the

Holy Spirit had come at that time. What would have happened? The church would have split in two. There would have been a Jerusalem church and a Samaritan church. A Jewish church and a half-Jewish church. God couldn't permit that. So with love, the Holy Spirit motivated the apostles to send Peter and John to follow Phillip and in an act of incredible love, acceptance and unity two *Jews*, who at one time thought themselves as being superior, put their hands on *Samaritans*! And they prayed for them! And blessed them! In so doing they said, "There are not two churches. There is one body with many members and we need each other."

This is beautifully illustrated by what we read in verse 25: "When *they* had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, *they* returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel to *many villages* of the Samaritans." Who were *they*? Peter and John. What's significant about that? Luke 9 tells the story of how Jesus and his disciples wanted to pass through Samaria and the Samaritans said "No." Why? Jesus was going to *Jerusalem*, the Jewish capitol, and the Samaritans were not about to help Jesus go *there*! Then, mild mannered John was one of the guys who said, "Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to consume them?" (Luke 9:54). Now, John is part of a ministry team which goes throughout Samaria proclaiming the Good News that Jesus saves! The same guy who wanted to "call down fire from heaven" and take the Samaritans *out*, drew a circle of love and took them *in*.

God grant that we, too, shall have such a clear vision of the church. God grant that we, too, shall understand the body of Christ is *one* regardless of the shape or form it takes. God grant that regardless of the denominational blood-types we hang on ourselves, we shall make it plain that *the body of Christ is one* and we love it, serve it and give ourselves to it.

I pray *this* church will be a church whose blinders are off so we can see how big God really is. How great his love really is. How wonderful his design really is. How broad the ministry of his church really is. God grant we will love the body of Christ in whatever size or shape or style it comes, and will draw a circle of love for *all* followers of Jesus, and *take them in*!

## The Church Scattered - Part 2

Acts 8:26-40

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Key Truth: God's Spirit moves us to apply our faith to a needy and open world.

Attribute: God is Mover

When God has an important job to do, he doesn't pick someone sitting around twiddling her thumbs, or picking his teeth, or looking out the window and wondering what God's will is for her life. When God has an important job to do, he picks someone who is busily engaged in meeting the nearest need and in the process is *discovering* (present tense) God's will for him or her.

Phillip was such a person. He was busy, very busy. But God had something for Phillip to do. At the time, it didn't seem important. It looked like Phillip was being asked to leave a center of great activity to go to a place of grim *inactivity*. But God had been preparing Phillip to do something really, really special. God was going to use him to open a wedge for spreading the gospel "*to the ends of the earth.*" Let's see how God did it.

If you're taking notes there are five memory pegs I've attached to the five sections of our text:

Acts 8:26-28 – people.

Acts 8:29 -- prayer.

Acts 8:30-34 -- problem.

Acts 8:35 -- plain, as in simple

Acts 8:36-40 -- presented.

### Acts 8:26-28 People

Verses 26-28 focus on people. First, *Phillip*, a layman with a huge heart for ministry and second, *an Ethiopian eunuch*, a needy and open black man.

### Phillip

Last week we took a careful look at the ministry of Phillip to the Samaritans. You'll remember Peter and John were sent from Jerusalem to complete the ministry Phillip had begun. When they completed their work there, verse 25 says, "*They* (that is, Peter and John) returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans." Verse 26 adds this interesting insight into how God uses people who are available to be used: "But an angel of the Lord said to *Phillip*, 'Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza' (this is a desert road) *and he rose and went.*"

We first met Phillip in Acts 6 when the apostles appointed seven deacons to help in the serving ministries of the church. The qualifications for these seven men are found in Acts 6:3. Let them be "men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom."

That Phillip met those qualifications is abundantly clear by what we learned about him in Acts 8. Everything about this man's attitudes and behavior illustrate the baptizing quality of a Spirit-filled life. There was measurable, tangible, external evidence that he was a man "filled with, or controlled by, the Holy Spirit." Look at the fruit he naturally and spontaneously bore:

In Acts 8:5-7 we see the fruit of the Spirit called *kindness*, which is love acting. He moved into a Samaritan community, sensed their need and began ministering to them. There were many healings, and many people were liberated from Satanic oppression.

In Acts 8 we see *joy*, which is love singing. The radiance of Phillip's delight in serving these people was irresistible and his joy burst forth in *them!* "There was much *joy* in that city" (vs. 8).

Moving on down to Acts 8:14-17 we find *meekness*, which is love submitting. And *self-control*, which is love ruling. When Peter and John came from Jerusalem to finish the work Phillip began, there was no jealousy on Phillip's part. He was at *peace*, which is love resting and full of *patience*, which is love waiting. Instead of a carnal response, "I've got to protect *my* turf" typical of many in the ministry: "these are *my* converts, keep your cotton pickin' hands off of them. If anybody's going to lay hands on them *I'll* do it!" Instead of that arrogant attitude which causes strife and dissension in the body, Phillip waited patiently for the Spirit to complete the work the Spirit had begun.

In Acts 8:26, 27 we find *faithfulness*, which is love obeying. The Spirit directed Phillip to go minister in a desert place. And *Phillip went!* No hesitation. No arguments. No complaining. No "Listen, Lord, there's a revival taking place here in Samaria. Look at all the people being saved and all the miracles being done. If I go down to Gaza there won't be a big crowd to hear me preach. There won't be any adulation, any exciting ministries to perform, any notoriety." None of that. Instead, Phillip demonstrated *faithfulness*, which is love obeying, and verse 22 says simply, "*he went!*" This tells us a lot about Phillip. He qualified for ministry based on Acts 6:3. He was "a man of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom."

### **The Ethiopian Eunuch**

In Acts 8: 27a we are introduced to the second of these people: the Ethiopian Eunuch. "And behold, an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a minister of Candace the Queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of all her treasure, had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah."

One and one half verses tell us a lot about this man. He was black. He did not come from that part of Africa we identify as Ethiopia today, but he came from Southern Egypt which would be Northern Sudan. He was a eunuch. For reasons incomprehensible to us, in ancient times, surgery was performed on certain males to free them from the uglier aspects of untamed male sexuality. They were placed in charge of the King's harem or given high positions of responsibility. Eunuchs were devoid of the aggressiveness, acquisitiveness and possessiveness typical of many so-called "macho" men. *This* man held a special place of honor. He was a "minister of Candace," the Queen mother of Ethiopia, and was in charge "of all her treasure." In contemporary terms he was Secretary of the Treasury or, in other parts of the world, Chancellor of the Exchequer.

In this brief bit of early church history the Holy Spirit is saying something truly profound: *the church must be ready to reach up, as well as down, in harvesting fruit for the Savior.* Sometimes Christians are uncomfortable with the thought of reaching "up-and-outers," but are quick to commit to a ministry of reaching "down-and-outers." But God sees it differently.

There is no social ladder in God's understanding of human need. As the body of Christ, we must be prepared to reach up, as well as down, in harvesting fruit for the Savior.

Acts 8:27 ends with an interesting phrase. The eunuch had gone to Jerusalem to worship, which indicates he was either a proselyte, a convert to Judaism or, as I see it, a "God-fearer." The reason I lean toward identifying him as a "God-fearer," is that in Deuteronomy there were specific rules which specify that eunuchs were to be excluded from the camp of Israel. "God-fearers" were people who had been drawn to monotheism, the concept of *one* God, taught by Judaism. They were attracted by the high moral teachings of Judaism as contrasted to the social degradation connected with polytheism and animism. But for any one of a number of reasons, "God-fearers" remained on the fringes of Hebrew life, *fearing* God and *wanting to know more about him*, but never becoming involved *with* God in a personal way.

As an earnest seeker the eunuch had gone out of his way to worship in Jerusalem and somehow secured a copy of the book of Isaiah. Which leads to our key truth: *God's Spirit moves us to apply our faith to a needy and open world.* That the Holy Spirit had moved Phillip to share his faith is obvious and clear. It is equally clear God had prepared this particular man for Phillip's ministry. He was not only *needy*, but he was *open* to learning more about God.

These are the **people** in our story: *Phillip*, a layman with a heart for ministry, and *an Ethiopian eunuch* who was both needy and open. Notice the lengths to which God went to meet the needs of a genuinely open person. Think of the precise timing required for the miracle of new birth to occur. Long before the eunuch left Jerusalem, perhaps while he was still standing on the outer fringes of Jewish society trying to worship God, or searching for a copy of Isaiah to read, the Spirit of God touched Phillip and told him to go to Gaza. Phillip was willing to be used, and with a wonderful economy of words the Bible says: "*he went.*"

Then, God worked in the circumstances of the eunuch's life and put him on the road where Phillip already was! When they came together the eunuch was reading aloud and what was he reading? Isaiah 53:7,8. A prophecy about Jesus! Phillip overheard him, saw an opportunity to witness and asked, "Do you understand what you're reading?"

To me, the miracle in this chapter, apart from the salvation of the eunuch, is the precise timing with which God put a man with a need and a man with the ability to meet that need together. A miracle is a natural or supernatural event accompanied by precise timing to give glory to God. What are recorded here in Acts 8 are multiple examples of *precise timing*.

### **Acts 8:29 Prayer**

The key word in verse 29 is prayer. I can hear some of you saying, "But pastor, the word prayer isn't mentioned here." You're right. But there are two kinds of prayer: personal prayer and intercessory prayer.

### **Personal Prayer**

At it's best, personal prayer is 90% auto-suggestion. By that I mean, as I wrote in my book [Why Prayers Are Unanswered](#), prayer is not designed to change God's mind because God's mind doesn't need changing. Prayer changes *things*. The *things* in our life which are out of focus and

put us *out* of God's will. If we deal with them, then we will be *in* God's will in a place where he is free to bless us and use us. In the strictest sense of the term, personal prayer is 90% auto-suggestion. It is the process of getting turned on and tuned in.

Let me show you what I mean. Right now this room is filled with sounds and pictures, but we can't hear those sounds or see those pictures. Why? Because we don't have a television set. If we had a television set sitting in front of the pulpit we still couldn't hear those sounds and see those pictures unless the TV was turned on. And even if the TV was turned on, there is no guarantee we'd get good quality sound and a good quality picture unless the TV was properly tuned. And yet, at this very moment, there is a television station on the summit of Mount Breckenridge beaming sounds and pictures into this room with over a million watts of power. But none of us is receiving those impulses because we don't have a receiver turned on and tuned in.

Personal prayer is the process of getting turned on and tuned in. The Spirit of God is beaming his blessings in our direction with the unlimited power of heaven. He is literally bathing us with blessings and directions which could direct and shape our lives. But we cannot receive those blessings and those directions unless we are turned on and tuned in; unless we are sensitized to what God wants to say to us. Personal prayer is direct communication between the Lord and you in which *you* allow *him* to change those things in your life which keep you from being a turned-on, tuned-in child of his. Have you got it? Please say, yes.

### **Intercessory Prayer**

Intercessory prayer is more difficult to grasp, at least for me. It is more difficult to explain. In fact, I don't really understand *how* it works. I only know it *does* work! Frank Laubach, a great prayer warrior and prayer teacher, believed intercessory prayer was a spiritual force God uses to bring blessing to a point of need. To help people visualize this in prayer conferences, Dr. Laubach would have his group form a funnel. Then he would point this human funnel in the direction of a person in need. Each of the people forming the funnel turned toward the person in need and prayed for his or her need. When they moved to a broader application of intercessory prayer, for example, praying for the president of our country, they directed the funnel toward Washington, D.C. and visualized themselves as the means by which God could direct corporate intercessory prayers to *that* point of need.

As I said, I don't know *how* intercessory prayer works, I only know it *does* work. I can best get hold of it -- and I speak as a man with no awareness of being guided by the Holy Spirit -- when I think of us living in a sea of positive and negative influences. One reason we must guard our lips is because our speech can inject negative impulses into the atmosphere which contribute to its downgrading. On the other hand, when we pray in the Spirit, we dump positive impulses into the atmosphere. For example, over here is a man with a need. Let's call him Bill. Over here, separated from Bill by a great distance, is me. The Holy Spirit burdens me to pray for Bill. I am not directly involved with Bill. I may not know what his need is, but I obey the Spirit's prompting and lift a prayer to heaven on Bill's behalf.

In Bill's town are many people. Some of them are turned on spiritually and some of them are not. Some of them are turned on *and* tuned in, and some of them are not. My prayer ascends to

the throne of grace and God beams it back to where Bill lives. Many of the people around him don't receive an impulse to act because they are not turned on. Others receive a vague impulse because they are not tuned in. But someone near Bill is *both* turned on *and* tuned in. When the Lord says, "Minister to Bill. Write Bill a letter. Give Bill a phone call. Pay Bill a visit," and that person responds positively to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, my prayer for Bill is answered. Not by me, but by someone I don't even know whom God was able to touch, because they were turned on and tuned in. That may, or may not, be how intercessory prayer works. As I said, I don't know *how* it works, I *only* know it *does* work, because I've been blessed by intercessory prayer over and over again.

In the particular instance recorded in our text, the *apostles* in Jerusalem had been praying for the salvation of the world. They had been commissioned to be "witnesses in Jerusalem and all Judea, Samaria *and to the ends of the earth.*" They were wondering how that could be done. Well, years earlier God-fearing Jews had shared their belief in one God with the eunuch. He was attracted to that God. He found the moral teachings of that God appealing and began lending his mind, emotions and will to know more about him. Circumstances put him in Jerusalem and he took the opportunity to worship at the temple. But he wasn't satisfied by the experience. He felt like an outsider. He secured the book of Isaiah and read it aloud as he headed toward home. Phillip heard him reading the prophecies of Jesus and asked, "Do you understand what you're reading?" The rest is history. What a beautiful example of how intercessory prayer works and *that's* why I used the word "prayer" as my memory tool for Acts 8:29.

### **Acts 8:30-34 Problem**

The key word for verses 30-34 is problem. "So Phillip ran to him, and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' And he said, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' and he invited Phillip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of the scripture he was reading was this. 'As a sheep led to the slaughter or a lamb before its shearer is dumb, so he opened not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life was taken up from the earth' (Isaiah 53:7,8). And the eunuch said to Phillip, 'About whom, pray, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?'" (Acts 8:30-34)

The eunuch had a problem. He had notoriety without acceptance. He had knowledge without understanding. He had need without satisfaction. He was a high achiever. He was a prominent person in his country. He had committed himself to the concept of one God. As a eunuch he was excluded from the camp of Israel. When he got to Jerusalem, instead of being invited into the inner circle of those who were worshipping, he was kept on the outer fringe.

Somehow he heard the book of Isaiah had a passage which softened that ruling in Deuteronomy which excluded eunuchs suggesting, perhaps, eunuchs may be included in God's love for all people. He got a copy of Isaiah and began to read. He had religion without relationship. He had knowledge without understanding. He had a need without redemption.

He read Isaiah, searching for further insight. The more he read the more confused he was. In response to Phillip's question, "Do you understand what you're reading?" he said, "How can I understand, unless someone guides me?" In Romans 10:13-15 there is this powerful statement:

“For everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved, but how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed. And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher, and how can men preach unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news.’”

Phillip might not have been so ready to share the Good News to a total pagan, but *this* man was not a total pagan. He was a non-Jew, yes. He was a black man, yes. He was a eunuch, yes. But he was a God-fearing man. He was *needy* and *open*. So the Holy Spirit told Phillip to witness to him, and in that simple act of obedience Phillip opened a wedge for spreading the gospel “*to the ends of the earth.*” Awesome!

### **Acts 8:35 Plain**

Alongside Acts 8:35 I wrote the word plain. Verse 34 poses the \$64,000 question. It was on everyone’s lips. Everywhere people were asking what do Isaiah, chapters 42 through 53, mean? It had been debated in Israel for a long time. Some said these chapters refer to the Messiah. Some said to Isaiah. Some said they refer to a faithful remnant within Israel, while others said, no, they refer to Israel herself.

Dr. William Leseur, Old Testament professor at Fuller Seminary writes, “All of them were right, because to best understand chapters 42 through 53 of Isaiah, you need to think of a pyramid. Along the base of the pyramid the reference is to Israel. As the figure begins to narrow, the reference is to a faithful remnant within Israel. Then, as the triangle reaches its apex, it centers down to a person: the Messiah.” I like that.

So when the eunuch asked the \$64,000 question, Phillip’s answer was plain. Isaiah was referring to Jesus. In the Old Testament Jesus is concealed. In the New Testament Jesus is revealed. But the eunuch didn’t have a New Testament. All he had was the Old Testament and even then he didn’t have all of it. He had one little slice, the book of Isaiah. *But it was enough.* “(For) Phillip opened his mouth, and beginning with this scripture he told him the good news of Jesus” (Acts 8:35).

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit this layman made the gospel plain, as in simple! The hidden was made known. The obscure was made clear. The general was made personal. I can almost hear Phillip as he moved through Isaiah 53 saying, “‘As a sheep was led to the slaughter,’ what a shameful way our Lord was treated. And as ‘a lamb before he is sheared is dumb, so he opens not his mouth.’ Through the horrendous experience of his phony trial and tragic death Jesus never attacked those who were mistreating him. He prayed for them.”

As Phillip continued his testimony about Jesus, I can almost hear him say, “Sir, there was a miscarriage of justice done that night. ‘In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation?’ Who were *they*, the guilty, to judge the innocent and put *him* to death? ‘For his life was taken up from the earth.’”

What is *said* in our text is that Phillip spoke of the life and death of Jesus. What is *implied* by looking at what happened immediately thereafter, is that Phillip went on from the life and death of Jesus to the resurrection, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the need to be born-again and to openly



declare one *is* born again by being baptized. This is a beautiful example of the saying: “The most effective sermon is one in which one man is the preacher and one man is the audience.”

### **Acts 8:36-40 Presented**

Phillip presented the eunuch to Jesus to be saved. The eunuch presented himself to Phillip to be baptized. And through Luke, the author of the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit presented *both* Phillip *and* the Eunuch to the church as an example of how God wants to reach the world through willing and available people. “As they went along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, ‘See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?’” (8:36). Notice, please, it isn’t Phillip who encouraged baptism this time. Looking back at his experience in Samaria he probably realized he had baptized the Samaritans prematurely. *This* time it is the man himself who requested this opportunity to give public witness of his faith in Jesus.

Maybe your Bible, like mine, treats verse 37 as a footnote with a notation that other ancient manuscripts add all or most of verse 37: “And Phillip said, ‘If you believe with all your heart you may,’ and he replied, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God.’” I’m convinced verse 37 belongs in the main text for two reasons. Irenaeus, one of the church fathers, quotes this verse in the second century long before the best manuscripts were written. It may have been part of the early church’s confession of faith in baptism. Second, because of the false conversion of Simon in Samaria, I believe Phillip was careful to make sure *this* man who was making a public confession of faith in Christ through baptism *knew* Christ *personally*!

At any rate, Phillip baptized him, and oh the joy that must have brought to the eunuch’s heart. He had been *excluded* by Judaism, he was *included* by Jesus. He was kept *out* of the camp of Jews, he was welcomed *in* to the fellowship of believers by Jesus. No wonder he went on his way rejoicing. “When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught up Phillip; and the eunuch saw him no more, and *went on his way rejoicing*. But Phillip was found at Azotus (which is the old Philistine city of Ashdod) and passing on he preached the gospel to all the towns till he came to Caesarea” (8:39,40).

### **The meaning of this to the eunuch.**

The eunuch was suddenly aware Phillip was gone. God would not allow him to develop a dependence on the messenger now that he had the message! He had no need for the evangelist now that he had the evangel. He had no reason to cling to his spiritual obstetrician because he had life everlasting! And he “went on his way rejoicing.” He was a VIP in his part of Africa and his life had been transformed. Using his status in the royal court for Jesus, this first African convert to Christ began planting seeds of faith where he lived. Tradition says Queen Candace was one of his first converts, and through her influence the African continent was opened to the Gospel. Incredible!

### **The Meaning of this to Phillip**

What was the meaning of all this for Phillip? Our text says the Spirit caught him up and he found himself 20 miles away (Acts 8:40). The Greek word translated “caught up” is the same word translated “rapture” elsewhere, referring to a future “catching up” of the church. There are some who say in a miraculous way the Spirit “caught him up,” carried him 20 miles and set him down in another environment. That’s possible. However, this is the *same* Greek word Paul uses

when he says he knows of a man who was “caught up” in the Spirit to the third heaven, and “caught up” into paradise, “Whether in the body or out of the body, I don’t know, God knows” (2 Corinthians 12:2,3).

The Greek text does not require that we put the more spectacular meaning on this event. Personally, I don’t like to inject the supernatural when scripture leaves it out any more than I want to leave it out when scripture puts it in. For me it is enough to think of Phillip being “caught up” in a spiritual elation so wonderful he was totally oblivious to what was going on about him and was unaware of where he was going ‘til he got there!

Has that ever happened to you? It has to me. There have been times of such intense communion with the Lord I lost track of time, of where I was and of where I was going until I got there. There have been a few times when I didn’t get there at all because, as the hymn writer put it, I was “lost in wonder, love and praise!”

At any rate, Phillip went up the coast of the Mediterranean to Caesarea. In Acts 21:8 we see him settled down in one place and his ministry is with his family. In the first part of Acts 8 we see Phillip doing mass evangelism. In the latter part of chapter 8 we see him doing personal evangelism. In Acts 21 we see him at home working with his four daughters who have the gift of prophecy. Through *them* he continues to communicate the faith.

Phillip was a man “of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.” Everything about him illustrates the baptizing quality of a Spirit-filled life as he bore the fruit of the Spirit in his activities and in his contacts with people. He was obedient to the voice of God when it didn’t make sense. He left a city, but he gained a continent for Christ! I wonder what Phillip must feel today as he looks down from heaven and sees Africa with tens of thousands of believing Christians and hundreds of Christian villages in that “dark continent” whose knowledge of Jesus can be traced back to that day Phillip heard God tell him to “go to a desert place, to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” *And he went!* Excuse me, but hallelujah!

### **Response**

We’re through. But a meaningful encounter with God not only involves our knowing and feeling his presence, it also involves doing his will. I want you to put feet on this teaching.

Take a registration slip from the rack in front of you and on the back make a list of the first names of the people you know who are *needy*, that is, people who are unsaved. Then select one person from that list who is not only *needy*, but *open*. Remember: God’s Spirit moves us to apply our faith to a *needy* and *open* world.

If you can’t identify someone on your list who is both *needy and open*, expand your list until you can. Circle the name of that person who is *both needy and open* and commit yourself right now to *begin* praying for the salvation of that person, *and to keep on praying until God touches him or her for Jesus!* As you pray your *intercessory* prayer for that *needy, open* person, let there also be times of *personal* prayer that you be so turned on and tuned in, so sensitized to the Holy Spirit, you will know if *you* are to be the person through whom God answers your prayer. God’s Spirit moves us to apply our faith to a *needy and open* world.

## The Church Scattered - Part 3

Acts 9:1-19

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Key Truth: Despite a shady past, response to God's unexpected choices results in blessing for all.

Attribute: God is Chooser

The book of Acts records a number of incredible events not the least of which is recorded here in Acts 9: the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. Some would say his conversion is the most important event since Pentecost. Whether or not that's a bit extravagant is something for the Lord to determine. But in terms of sheer human influence upon the Kingdom of God, it would be difficult to imagine a conversion with greater consequences than that which is recorded in our text.

We probably know more about Saul of Tarsus than any other person in the New Testament, except Jesus himself. A good share of that information comes from the pen of Saint Paul when he writes about his pre-Christian life as sinner Saul. In Philippians 3:5,6 Paul lists seven marks of distinction which indicate Saul of Tarsus was a remarkable young man.

### Saul's National Credentials

First, Saul was "circumcised on the eighth day" (Philippians 3:5a). That isn't terribly significant to us, but to the people of Paul's day it had tremendous meaning. It indicated Saul was not a convert to Judaism. He was a genuine Jew. He was a Jew by birth. Having been "circumcised on the eighth day" indicates he was a special part of Abraham's seed. He was *not* an Ishmaelite!

Abraham had a son by Hagar, Sarah's handmaid, and named him Ishmael. Abraham later had a son by Sarah and named him Isaac. Ishmael was circumcised at age 13 (Genesis 17:25), and thereafter when Ishmaelite boys turned 13 they were circumcised. Isaac was circumcised on the eighth day (Genesis 21:4) and that became the pattern for male Jewish babies. When Paul said, as Saul he was "circumcised on the eighth day," he was asserting a *national* distinction. "I'm a genuine Jew."

### Saul's Racial Credentials

Second, he was "of the people of Israel" (Philippians 3:5b). Along with his *national* uniqueness he enjoyed *racial* purity. Now, think with me for a moment. God entered into covenant with Abraham and that covenant continued through Isaac. Isaac had two sons, Esau and Jacob, but it was Jacob through whom the covenant continued. So we have Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Genesis 32 contains the story of a great wrestling match after which Jacob said to God, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." It was then that God changed his name from Jacob to Israel and Israel became the covenant name of God's people, Jacob's descendants. When Paul uses the phrase, "of the people of Israel" he is saying, "As Saul I was not only a true Jew, I was a true, blue Jew! There was no strange blood in my veins to dilute my *racial* integrity."

The Ishmaelites could trace their origin back to Abraham through Hagar. The Edomites could

trace their origin back to Abraham through Esau. Only the Israelites could trace their origin back to Abraham through *Jacob*! So Paul was saying, “As Saul, my credentials were impeccable. I had *national* integrity and I had *racial* purity.”

### **Saul’s Social Credentials**

Third, Saul was “of the tribe of Benjamin” (Philippians 3:5c). Paul was referring to Saul’s *social* distinction. Benjamin was one of the two sons of Jacob and Rachael. Rachael was Jacob’s first love and true love. Jacob’s twelve sons came to be known as the Patriarchs, and Benjamin was the only one of them who was actually born in the promised land. While Benjamin was one of the smaller tribes and their land allotment was one of the smaller areas, tremendous things had been accomplished through the tribe of Benjamin.

It was the tribe of Benjamin which gave Israel her first king, Saul, from whom Paul got his pre-Christian name. It was in Benjamin’s province that Jerusalem, the holy city, was located and where the temple was constructed. So, when Paul says, Saul was “of the tribe of Benjamin,” he was pointing out that Saul was not only a bonafide and full-blooded Jew, he was part of the Aristocracy of Israel. A member of the socially elite. The four hundred. The Hoi Polloi. The nobility of Jewish citizens.

### **Saul’s Parental Credentials**

Fourth, Paul calls Saul, “a Hebrew born of Hebrews” (Philippians 3:5d). Along with his *national*, *racial* and *social* marks of distinction, Saul had cause for *parental* pride. He was a child of the dispersion.

During the dispersion the children of Israel came to be known by two names. Some were called Jews and others, Hebrews. What was the difference? *Jews* had Jewish parents, but their mom and dad chose to fit into the environment in which they found themselves. *Hebrews* were not only Jews by *birth*, but Jews by choice. *Their* parents saw to it that their children did *not* fit into the environment in which they grew up. Hebrews raised their kids with a deep awareness of, and commitment to, the culture, customs, traditions and language of Israel.

Paul claims a *parental* benefit on behalf of Saul. He spoke Greek, the universal language of the day, but he also spoke Hebrew. Saul was “a Hebrew born of Hebrews,” which was a real status symbol in his day.

### **Saul’s Ecclesiastical Credentials**

Fifth, Paul refers to Saul as one who “as to the law (was) a Pharisee” (Philippians 3:5e). Until now, everything Paul has said about his life as Saul of Tarsus was something Saul’s *parents* made possible. When it comes to the record of his personal achievement Paul looks back and says, “As Saul, I did everything right. I joined the most demanding, most devoted party in Judaism. I chose to be a Pharisee.”

Pharisees have been badly misunderstood. They were fine people. There were only 6,000 Pharisees in all of Israel and they were what we might call the All Stars of Judaism. They were really committed. Were it not for their history of rigid legalism, most pastors would love to have a church full of Pharisees. You could count on them. They were committed. They believed and demonstrated their belief by their actions. Paul was saying, “As Saul, I was a Pharisee. I meant business. I devoted my whole life to the rigorous, unbending defense and practice of the law.”

His *ecclesiastical* distinction lay in the fact he was a Pharisee, *by choice!*

### **Saul's Political Credentials**

Sixth, Paul says of Saul, "as to zeal (he was) a persecutor of the church" (Philippians 3:6a). That was his mark of *political* distinction. He wasn't satisfied to *just* be a Pharisee. He had to be a *zealous* Pharisee. Saul was a conscientious, relentless, persecutor of those whom he thought were enemies of God.

Paul mentions Saul's *political* distinction, but I think he wasn't proud of it. After Saul gave his heart to Jesus and became known as Paul, I believe there came a time when he looked back on the things he had done as a pre-Christian and was deeply grieved. He had done a good thing in the wrong way. I think God heard his confession and said, "Paul, I loved your motive, but I hated your method. You were standing up for what you believed about me and I love that in my children. But you can't do good things in the wrong way and have my blessing. You are forgiven. But from now on teach my children to do the right thing in the right way. Teach them to do what they do in love!" Is that why Paul wrote, in Romans 5:20, "Where sin did abound, grace did all the more abound"? I think so. He had experienced first hand the radical grace of God!

### **Saul's Moral Credentials**

Seventh, in Philippians 3:6b Paul concludes this striking list of Saul's credentials with these words, "as to righteousness under the law, blameless." What a tremendous thing to be able to say. I couldn't say it. I don't think any of us could. Paul didn't say Saul was *faultless*. Paul knew there are none righteous when it comes to the sins of commission. Saul was *blameless*. He was not guilty of any sin of omission. He followed the letter of the law, exactly. Whatever the law required of him, Saul did. He had impeccable *moral* credentials.

Now think about these seven assertions for a moment. Saul of Tarsus was a remarkable young man. We'd probably call him "a pillar of the church." He could easily have been elected "Man of the Year." In terms of his personal pedigree -- his *national, racial, social, parental, ecclesiastical, political* and *moral* credentials -- he was impeccable. This is not the inventory of an ordinary Jew. This was a young man who could well be called a saint. A man to be admired. To be honored. And yet, despite all of Saul's wonderful qualities, in verse 7 Paul writes, "Whatever gain I had as Saul, as Paul, I count as loss."

What happened to change his view of himself and his value system? To learn *that*, we return to Acts 9:1. "But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogue at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, (that was the code name used to identify followers of Jesus) men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' and he said, 'Who are you, Lord?' and (the voice) said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting'" (Acts 9:1-5).

Saul met Jesus! *That's* what happened. *That's* what produced the change. He replaced his commitment to some *thing*, his religious tradition, with a commitment to some *one*, the living Lord Jesus. In the process he entered into a personal, intimate relationship with God unlike anything he had known before.

### **Sudden Conversion or Sudden Surrender?**

Two or three things demand our attention. One is *the difference between sudden surrender and sudden conversion*. The man we know as St. Paul did not experience a sudden conversion. *That* miracle of grace did not happen overnight. God had been moving in the life of young Saul for a considerable period of time. There had been a long period of incubation which ultimately expressed itself in sudden surrender, but Saul's conversion was hardly sudden.

### **Dull Legalism Instead of Living Glory**

For instance, there was his growing awareness of *the difference between the dead legalism of his religion and the living joy of Christians*. He looked about him, he saw the joy and love they shared with one another as well as the exuberance with which they went about their service for the Lord Jesus. Saul compared that to the dull, dead legalism of his tradition and sensed something was missing. *They* had something he wanted. The New Testament suggests some of his closest friends, maybe even family members, had become Christians. Their testimonies and joy also tugged at his heart.

### **Fear Masked as Anger**

Then there was *the debilitating side effects of fear masked as anger*. Saul was filled with anger at what he considered to be an attack on Jehovah. Whenever you find anger, look long enough and you'll find fear. Fear wears many masks, one of which is anger. What were some of Saul's fears? He was afraid that those crazy Christians were *right* and he was wrong! That Jesus really *was* alive instead of lying in a secret tomb somewhere! That the Messiah really *had* come and he had missed him! These and other fears gripped his guts in their icy fingers and exploded in anger and violence against the people and things he feared.

How angry was he? He *walked* from Jerusalem to Damascus on his mission of destruction. *That* ought to tell us something! There were two ways to get from Jerusalem to Damascus. One was 140 miles, the other 200 miles. We don't know which route he took, but we do know he went by "shank's pony." He *walked!* *That's* the lengths to which this zealot, who was motivated by fear expressed in anger, was prepared to go to defend his God.

### **His Memories of Stephen**

Another factor in Saul's sudden surrender was *the powerful, positive, lingering influences of a Godly life*. Saul simply could not get away from Stephen. The memory of that young man kneeling and praying for the people who hurled stones at him haunted Saul. This guy Stephen, who was about his own age, was praying God would touch the lives and forgive the people who were killing him. As long as he lived, Saul would never get away from his memories of him.

So, you see, while there was sudden *surrender*, Saul's *conversion* was not sudden. As I think about it, I can't remember any sudden conversions. To say there are none would be presumptuous. Every conversion I've known anything about was the result of a *process* in which God worked slowly, patiently, quietly and persistently in the life of someone, to prepare them for a moment of personal confrontation when they would have to make a decision

### **A Model for All Twice-born People**

Saul is a model for all twice-born people who came to that moment of surrender. His experience proves that regardless of the Godly influences in our lives, regardless of the religious training we may receive, regardless of the intensity and sincerity of our commitment to a grand idea, for each

of us there comes a moment when, as individuals, we must be born again. And when new birth *occurs*, it marks a dividing line between our life before, and our life after, Jesus.

Again, look at Saul. *Before* his new birth he was a ferocious persecutor of the faithful. *After* his new birth he was a fearless propagator of the faith. *Before* his conversion he was increasingly crippled by guilt. *After* his conversion he was increasingly crowned with grace and glory. *Before* Christ he was spiritually dead. *After* Christ he was spiritually alive. Saul stands as a model for all people who, despite the positive and powerful Godly influences in their lives, must be born again.

### **To Wound Christ's Body is Wound Christ Himself**

Saul also learned that to wound the body of Christ is to wound Christ himself. Later in his life he would write two letters to the church at Corinth. In the first of these letters he speaks of the body of Christ and the importance of its oneness. Later he wrote a letter to the church in Ephesus. In it he speaks of the unity of the body with Christ as the head of the body. Jesus and his body on earth, the church, cannot be separated.

His burden for maintaining unity in the body can be traced to that moment on the road to Damascus when a voice out of heaven said, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" *Not* why do you persecute the church? *Not* why do you persecute Christians? *Not* why do you persecute those who take me seriously? "Why do you persecute *me*?" Saul asked, "Who *are* you?" And the voice replied, "I am *Jesus* whom you are persecuting."

On the Damascus road Saul got hold of the great truth that Christ and the church are one! He not only discovered Jesus was alive, he also discovered Jesus and his body, the church, are one. It was as if Jesus said to him, "Saul, when you caused *people* to suffer in my name you caused *me* to suffer. When you put chains on them you put chains on *me*. The stones that ripped at the flesh of Stephen were stones that reached *me* and hurt *me*. Saul, whatever you do to mine affects *me*. I and my body are one."

If you and I ever get hold of that truth it will express itself in new love for *all* our brothers and sisters in Christ regardless of their denominational blood-type. We are so casual in our attitude toward fellow believers. We sluff off our indifference toward them as if it were of no consequence. But the body and the head of the body are one. Jesus and his church are one. What we do to the body we do to him. The negative, critical, cutting wounds we inflict upon our fellow Christians are negative, critical, cutting wounds we inflict on Jesus.

### **Saul: a Chosen Instrument**

Despite everything bad Saul had said and done to wound Christ and his body, *he was the chosen of the Lord!* Acts 9:15, "But the Lord said to (Ananias), 'Go, for he is *a chosen instrument* of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel.'" What a beautiful thing for God to say! "This one who has been a savage oppressor of my people, 'is a chosen instrument of mine.' Despite everything he has said and done, I want him working for me." Wow!

What hope that should inspire in us today. All of us have, at some time or other, been a thorn in the side of Christ. All of us have, at some time and in some way, been an obstruction to the body of Christ. Whether it was through our miffed little attitudes or our offensive spirit, all of us have

done things on earth which have been felt in heaven. And yet, despite all that, God wants us to go to work for him.

Look at our key truth: *Despite a shady past, response to God's unexpected choices result in blessing for all.* That Saul had a shady past is without question. That he was an unexpected choice is equally obvious. None of us would have thought this young man who was leading the oppression and persecution of the church would be one of whom God would say, "He's my man! I want to use him to do a great work in the world." But that's exactly what God did. He reached out to Saul and made him a blessing to us all.

Look at the end of verse 15 where it says Saul is "to carry my name before the Gentiles." That includes *us*, folks! Your salvation and mine were in God's mind when he tapped Saul on the shoulder and said, "You're my man." *Despite a shady past, the response to God's unexpected choices results in blessings for all.*

### **A Fuller Description of Saul's Conversion**

Acts 22:9 fills in some of the details about Saul's conversion. "Now those who were with (Saul) stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank." Sadly, this young man who had, with such ferocity, attacked the body of Christ was led meekly into Damascus where he would take the next step in his walk with God.

### **Ananias Acts 9:10-19**

Leaving Saul for a moment, let's take a look at the down-to-earth, rank-and-file follower of Jesus whom God chose to minister to a new convert who would one day be a giant of the faith. "Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' and he said, 'Here I am, Lord.' and the Lord said to him, 'Rise and go to the street called straight, and inquire in the house of Judas for a man of Tarsus named Saul; for behold, he is praying, and he has seen a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight. But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man and the evil he has done to the saints at Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call upon thy name.' But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.' So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came, has sent me that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized, took food and was strengthened" (Acts 9:10-19).

### **Nine Characteristics of the Man God Chose to Use**

Ananias was a remarkable human being. He was remarkable in his ordinary-ness. He was also remarkable in the extraordinary task God told him to perform. There are nine characteristics about Ananias worth noting and I've gathered them under three headings: He was ready. He was willing. He was able.

### **He Was Ready**



Ananias was ready for three reasons. First, he was a disciple (Acts 9:10). Christian service is not just a matter of doing, it is a matter of being. We must *be something* before we can *do anything*. Ananias was “a disciple.”

Second, he was spiritually qualified. Acts 22:12 tells us he was “a devout man according to the law.” That is, he did the obvious. He obeyed the law. By doing the obvious he became spiritually perceptive. Acts 9:11 reports he had a vision and sensed God’s leading in that vision. The spiritual gift of wisdom descended on him and he saw *how*, with the blessing of the Holy Spirit, something great could be done. He was spiritually qualified.

Third, he was a man of good reputation. Acts 22:12 informs us he was “well spoken of by all the Jews who lived (in Damascus).” Ananias was not a Johnny-come-lately evangelist. He was not a headline maker who, based upon the bad things he had done, became a Christian celebrity and overnight became a reputable evangelist. He was a quiet, steady, respectable follower of Jesus. He was ready. He was a disciple. He was spiritually qualified. He was a man of good reputation.

### **Ananias Was Willing**

Fourth, he was human. In Acts 9:13,14 we see this ordinary, Joe-blow-type of guy expressing some very ordinary, Joe-blow-types of feelings. *God* said, “Go see Saul.” *Ananias* responded, “Who, me? *Me* go see *Saul*? You’ve got to be kidding. I’ve heard terrible things about this fellow. His reputation has preceded him. I’ve been told he has official papers giving him the right to put any Christians he finds in prison. Not me, Lord, I don’t want to witness to *Saul*.” Can you identify with his response? I sure can.

Fifth, he was courageous. I think it’s our willingness to courageously confront our humanity, our natural reserve, our fear of failure, and other foibles that qualify us for ministry. It isn’t until we’re ready to face our fear of what others might do to us, or say about us, that we’re ready for the ministry God wants us to enjoy. We must face our sense of inadequacy. We must face our fear of rejection. We must face the fact that we’re often more concerned with what *people* say and do, than we are with what *God* says and does.

To his credit, Ananias, did that. He said, “Lord, I’m scared to death. I don’t want to do this.” In love, God *affirmed* him and *informed* him. This man is “a chosen instrument of (mine).” And he went to the street called Straight. Assuming the Holy Spirit’s preparation, get this in verse 17, “(Ananias) *touched* him and said, ‘*brother Saul*’” What a beautiful way of drawing a circle that took Saul in. Saul had drawn a circle that shut certain people out. Agape love drew a circle that took him in. “(Ananias) *touched* him and said, ‘*brother Saul*.”

Sixth, he was humble. Ananias said, “The *Lord, even Jesus*, has sent me.” He didn’t take the credit. He didn’t say, “Look at me, I’ve got a blessing for you.” He said, “Look at Jesus, *He’s* got a blessing for you”

### **Ananias Was Able**

Seventh, he was thorough. I’m impressed by the fact that Ananias immediately introduced Saul to the full gospel. He wasn’t satisfied with just a ministry to his body, but assuming God’s forgiveness of Saul’s sins, Ananias introduced Saul to the ministry of the Holy Spirit. “Saul, there is a new Power Source available to help you live your new life in Christ. In the past you

were controlled by hate and madness and restlessness. Jesus wants you to be controlled by love and joy and peace. Until now, you've been filled with fury and violence and rage. Jesus wants you to be filled with patience and kindness and goodness. In the name of law, Saul, you were lawless and arrogant. Jesus wants you to be faithful and meek. *That's* the *new* way God wants you to do his work in the world, Saul. It's the way of love. "Be filled with the Holy Spirit."

Eighth, he was obedient. Like Phillip who just *went*, Ananias *departed*. He went where he was directed and did what he was told. He may have been slow to "get it," but when he "got it," he served God's purpose.

Ninth, this ordinary fellow did something extraordinary. Out of all those whom God *might* have chosen for this job, Ananias was the guy God picked to get Saul off to a good start. When Ananias was through with him, Saul was ready to begin preparing for a ministry which would touch the world, *including* you and me! Prior to this morning, most of us couldn't spell his name. But we owe a huge debt to Ananias who was ready, willing and able.

### **A Final Thought**

Being able starts with being ready. How about you? Have you made your initial commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior? Are you spiritually prepared? Do you honor Jesus as Lord? Are you filled with the Holy Spirit on a moment by moment, day by day basis? Are you obedient? Not always understanding what God asks you to do, but doing it anyway?

May I also ask, have you been a thorn in the side of the body? Does anything come to mind that alerts you to ways you have been an obstruction to Jesus? Let me share how God alerted me to my guilt in that regard. Several years ago, I learned the best way to adore Jesus was to begin my prayers with confession. I had been taught to start my prayers with adoration. But my worship was stiff and studied, devoid of any spontaneity. It didn't bubble up like a spring of living water from within me. So one day I decided to change the process and begin with confession to see if that might lead to more heartfelt adoration. I went to my office, locked the door, put my head down on my desk and I said, "Lord, I want to confess . . . let's see . . . I want to confess . . ." and believe it or not, I couldn't think of anything to confess.

Slowly, but surely, my arrogance and spiritual blindness overwhelmed me. "Lord, I want to confess I'm so spiritually out of tune I can't think of anything to confess." That was like pulling a cork out of a bottle. Insight after insight came to me. For instance, I saw how I had been praying *at* people instead of *for* people, trying to use prayer to manipulate them. Other sins were revealed to me. Subtle stuff, but sinful stuff none the less. An hour later -- an *hour* later -- I heard myself say, "God, I love you. I love you I love you." My adoration was spontaneous.

When I asked a moment ago, "Are you a thorn in the side of the body?" Maybe nothing came to mind. May I suggest you do as I did. Confess the fact you can't think of anything to confess. After the first service someone came to me and said, "I'm an abscess in the ear of the body! I can't hear what God is saying to me. I want to confess that." Wow! Are you a thorn in the side of the body? Are you an obstruction to the church? Face it. Confess it. Relinquish it. And then remember: it is just such people as you, people like Saul of Tarsus, whom God chooses to be instruments of his blessing.

## **The Church Scattered - Part 4**

Acts 9:20-31

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Key Truth: To be God's person requires a hot heart and a cool head,  
plus patience to acquire, blend and balance both.

Attribute: God is Preparer

### **Saul had a New Power Source**

When we left Saul he was enjoying his new-found faith and experiencing the quiet wonder a Spirit-filled life. Under the ministry of Ananias, Saul had been introduced to what some call the "full gospel." That is, one must not *only* receive Jesus as Savior, but may also invite Jesus to be Lord. That happens when a born again follower of Jesus voluntarily and deliberately chooses to put himself or herself under the control of the Holy Spirit.

That's what it means to "be filled with the Spirit." Control of the self by the *self* is replaced with control of the self by the *Spirit*. Self-control becomes self-controlled. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit which occurs when one is born again and, in fact, makes new birth possible, is released by a born again follower of Jesus to function as a new Power Source enabling him or her to more effectively follow Jesus

That happened to Saul of Tarsus under the tutelage of Ananias. He released the Spirit who dwelt *in* him to take control *of* him and we would expect things to get "gooder and gooder," as my Dad would say. They didn't. Saul's situation went from bad to worse. But he was plugged in to a new Power Source which enabled him to ultimately win the battle. Something worth remembering as we experience the realities of a Spirit-filled life. Contrary to popular opinion, a Spirit-filled life is not trouble free. But, like Saul, we too, have an internal Power Source to empower us to be "more than conquerors" (Romans 8:37).

The main thing to remember about "walking in the Spirit" is that while it's delightfully spiritual, and thoroughly Biblical, it's also wonderfully practical. Did you notice that immediately after water baptism and being filled with the Holy Spirit, Saul ate a good meal. True, he'd been on a fast for three days and probably was ready. But I think the Holy Spirit inspired Luke to include this incident in his record of the Acts of the Apostles so we will realize a Spirit-filled life is not just a spiritual high. It is also being keenly aware of the necessities of *this* life and having the freedom to enjoy what God prepares for us as we take care of his temple.

### **The Hunter Became the Hunted.**

Instead of being warmly received as a spokesman for the Savior, Saul ran into trouble. The persecutor became the persecuted. The hunter became the hunted. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Let's pick up his story in verse 20 to see exactly what was going on in the life of this man whom God is preparing to use in such a mighty way. "For several days he (Saul) was with the disciples at Damascus. And in the synagogues immediately he proclaimed Jesus, saying, 'He is the son of God.' and all who heard him were amazed, and said, 'Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called on this name? And he has come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests'" (Acts 9:20-22).

### **Saul had a Hot Heart**

Notice, first of all, Saul had a hot heart. Verse 20 says, "*Immediately* he began to proclaim

Christ.” With the same vigor which motivated him in his pre-Christian years, Saul *immediately* (verse 20a) began to share the exciting things he had discovered on the road to Damascus. He proclaimed, that is, he heralded, he broadcast, he interrupted the flow of their ongoing life, and made an announcement: “Jesus Christ is the son of God” (verse 20c). As a practicing Pharisee Saul thought Jesus was dead and gone. But in that magnificent moment on the road to Damascus Saul discovered Jesus is alive and he began *immediately* to proclaim that Jesus is the Christ (verse 20b) and, “The people who heard him were amazed” (verse 21).

It doesn't say they were convinced. It doesn't say they were impressed. It doesn't say they were converted. It simply says they were “amazed.” They gave him the ultimate snub. They questioned his integrity. His first attempt at witnessing was a bomb.

I'll never forget the first sermon I preached. I was 19. My father ran a rescue mission on Skid Row in Oakland, California and he invited me to preach there, I put together everything I knew about the gospel, got up and preached it. When I finished I looked at my watch. Five minutes had passed.

The audience wasn't terribly observant, so I preached it a second time -- a little more slowly -- it took seven minutes. Dad had told me to preach 20 minutes and I was in a state of panic. I couldn't quit after only twelve minutes. So I preached it a third time throwing in some memory verses I learned in Sunday School. I gave a simple invitation, but nobody came forward so I sat down. I was totally depressed. The only saving factor was that the whole audience was drunk and they hadn't heard the sermon the first time, second time or third time. But I remember leaving the mission, getting in my car and saying, “Lord, I will never be able to preach. I'll do anything for you, God, but please don't ask me to be a preacher. I just can't stand that kind of failure and rejection again.”

*That's* the feeling tone I want you to catch in Saul's walk with the Lord. With great enthusiasm this hot-hearted young man went out to witness and the result was dismal. Then, there's a change in the feeling tone: “But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by *proving* that Jesus was the Christ. When many days had passed the Jews plotted to kill him” (Acts 9:22-23).

Here is a totally different atmosphere. Somewhere along the line Saul acquired a cool head to go with his hot heart. His ability to communicate the gospel increased dramatically. He “confounded the Jews.” His logic was irrefutable. He *proved* Jesus was the Messiah. He had a whole new awareness of who Jesus is. Not just the son of God, but the *Messiah*, the promised one of Israel. And *this* time he isn't snubbed. Instead of ignoring him, they plot to kill him.

### **Saul had a New Perspective**

What happened between his first attempt at witnessing which was a dismal failure, and his second attempt which resulted in many coming to Christ? To find that out, turn to Galatians 1. Keep your finger here in Acts 9 and also in Galatians 1. We'll be going back and forth between these two passages this morning. Luke, the author of the book of Acts, was concerned with detailing the growth of the church. The development of the body of Christ. So he hit the high points, leaving out the details.

Paul, on the other hand, in writing to the Galatians, was concerned with sharing what God had

done in *his* life, and what God wanted to do in *their* lives. He is much more precise and fills in some of the blanks. For instance, in Galatians 1:15 he writes, "But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia."

Several interesting statements here. This young man who had experienced the blessings of higher education in the Hellenist world in which he was reared, who had been privileged to study at the feet of Gamaleal the great Hebrew teacher, does *not* turn to flesh and blood for further instruction. Nor does he rush down to Jerusalem to have his conversion and his call affirmed. He goes to Arabia for some one-on-one discipling with the Holy Spirit as the teacher, and himself as the student..

Why did he go to Arabia to be taught by the Lord? Think about his background. By heredity he was a Jew, a Hebrew of the Hebrews. By environment he was a Greek, a Hellenist. A Jew of the the dispersion. Saul had been exposed to the legalism of Judaism, but he had also been stimulated by the liberty of Hellenism. He could see the strengths and weaknesses in both. As a child, he had been taught by his parents. As a boy attended Synagogue School. As a young adult he sat at the feet of Gamaleal. All this required that he stop and think through what he had been taught, in the light of his recent revelation.

Until that heart-stopping moment on the Damascus road when he met Jesus, Saul thought he had it all together. After that life-changing encounter, everything he believed intellectually was being challenged by the reality of what he had experienced spiritually. He needed time to sort it all out. To rethink his theology. To examine what he had known of the Old Testament in the light of what he now knew about Jesus.

So, with Old Testament scrolls in hand, Saul marched off to Arabia to be taught by the Holy Spirit. He was there for three years. During that time, as Saul worked his way through the Old Testament literature with fresh insight, I believe he saw Jesus on every "page."

In Genesis Saul saw Jesus as the Lord of creation and the seed of the woman.

In Exodus he saw him as the Passover lamb and the Great Deliverer.

In Leviticus he saw him as the High Priest who sacrificed *himself* for the sins of the world.

In Numbers Saul saw Jesus as the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night leading God's people in the way they should go.

In Deuteronomy he saw Jesus as a teacher greater, even, than Moses.

In Joshua he saw him as the captain of his salvation.

In Judges he saw him as the righteous judge.

In Ruth he saw him as his kinsman -- his redeemer.

In 1st and 2nd Samuel Saul saw Jesus as the true prophet.

In Kings and Chronicles he saw him as reigning king.

In Ezra he saw him as the faithful scribe.

In Nehemiah he saw him as the one who rebuilds the walls of a broken down life.

In Esther he saw Jesus as his Mordecai.

In Job he saw him as the One who makes all things new.

In Psalms he saw him as the Lord his Shepard.

In Proverbs and Ecclesiastics he saw him as the source of all wisdom.  
In the Songs of Solomon Saul saw Jesus as the perfect lover.  
In Isaiah as the prince of peace, and in Jeremiah as the righteous branch.  
In Lamentations he saw him as the weeping prophet.  
In Ezekial as the wonderful four-faced man.  
In Daniel as the One who stood with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace.  
In Hosea Saul saw Jesus as the husband who lovingly reaches out to a wandering bride  
In Joel he saw him as the baptizer with Spirit and fire.  
In Amos as his burden-bearer.  
In Obediah as the One who is mighty to save.  
In Jonah as the model missionary who goes out to serve, not to be served.  
In Micah Saul surely saw Jesus as the Messenger with beautiful feet.  
In Nahum he saw him as the Avenger of God's elect.  
In Habakkuk as the evangelist pleading for revival.  
In Zephaniah as Savior.  
In Haggai as the restorer of God's remnant.  
In Zechariah as a fountain open to all in need of cleansing.  
And in Malachi as the righteous One arising with healing in his wings.

As Saul went through the Old Testament scriptures I believe he saw Jesus on every "page." No wonder he came back to Damascus three years later able to cry convincingly: *Jesus is the Messiah! The promised one of Israel!* He had a new perspective on the person and work of Jesus.

### **Saul had a New Sense of Inner Peace**

He had peace *with* God. Later, in Romans 5:1, he makes this tremendous statement: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace *with* God through our Lord Jesus Christ." It is a peace which brings us into harmony with God, harmony with our self and harmony with our circumstances. So Paul was able to write, "We rejoice in our sufferings knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given unto us" (Romans 5:3-5).

### **Saul had a New Purpose**

Saul had a new Power Source *in* the Holy Spirit, a new perspective *about* the person of Jesus and a new peace *with* God through the Lord Jesus Christ. Out of these three came a new purpose. Instead of being driven by hate, Saul was now motivated by love. In 1st Corinthians 13 he will one day write about what love does: "Now abides faith, hope and love, but the greatest of these is love." He had discovered hate destroys, but love builds.

### **Saul was a New Person**

No wonder he could speak with such conviction. He was a *new person!* And someday in his second letter to the church in Corinth he will write, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he (or she) is a *new creation*, the old has passed away, and behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

### **The Persecutor is Persecuted**

On the basis of all that, wouldn't we expect the tide to turn in his favor? In a measure it did. He was convincing, and there were conversions. But, while old enemies became allies, old allies

became enemies! The Jewish leaders, together with the authorities, planned to kill him. He discovered this and we're told: "When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night, to kill him; but his disciples took him by night and let him down over the wall, lowering him in a basket."

This man who had a personal encounter with Jesus, who had been filled with the Holy Spirit, who had a hot heart and a cool head, became a basket case. Again, a very important reality to remember. Our walk with the Savior is a day by day, moment by moment matter. The more serious we get about him, the more severe will be the attack of the enemy. Carnal Christians are relatively safe. Anytime. Spirit-filled Christians are never safe. Anywhere. We need to *know* that. If, in the midst of wholehearted, energetic, enthusiastic Spirit-filled dedication and ministry to the Lord you find yourself oppressed, don't despair. It goes with the territory.

Saul is an excellent example. He wound up "a basket case." Later he will say it was one of the lowest moments in his life. But, as he learned, the Lord was prepared to meet him in his weakness and make him strong.

Let's see how that comes about. "And when he had come to Jerusalem he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus" (9:26-27)

Galatians 1:18 adds a few details. "Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas, (that's Peter) and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother."

Saul had come to Jerusalem seeking affirmation for his call and an opportunity to fellowship with the brethren. He was hungry for *koinonia*. He had experienced rejection, was a fugitive in flight, and had come to Jerusalem to bond with his brothers and sisters in Christ. Instead, he meets further rejection. This time from *within* the body. The disciples remember his past. They remember what he had been and what he had done. They had heard reports of a conversion experience on the road to Damascus, but three years had passed and they were wondering, was it a hoax? Was this a wolf in sheep's clothing? Was he trying to infiltrate the body of Christ so he can destroy it from within? Their fears, you see, were reasonable. They couldn't forget his past.

Enter Barnabas who spoke the right word, in the right way, at the right time to produce the right results. Saul was accepted. And you and I can praise God for Barnabas. Had it not been for him only God knows what would have become of Saul and his ministry.

### **Barnabas was a Tested Man**

In Acts 4 we saw Barnabas, a man filled with the Holy Spirit, concerned about the needs of the body. If it meant selling some of his real estate, he would do that. And he did! He brought the proceeds to the treasury of the church to take care of the needs of fellow followers of Jesus who were suffering. Barnabas put his money where his mouth was, and earned the right to be heard.

### **Barnabas was a Tuned-in Man**

Because he was also a tuned-in man sensitive to what the Holy Spirit was doing through the church, Barnabas was able to discern what God had done in the life of Saul. He was able to say the right thing, at the right time, in the right way and his argument was: brothers, there's been a change in Saul's life, because there's been a change in Saul's heart. He met Jesus! And nothing's been the same. Compare what he was and used to do with what he is and is now doing. Saul is no longer persecuting Christians, he is proclaiming Christ!

### **The Persuasive Power of a Changed Life**

There is no greater testimony, no more persuasive bit of evidence to the reality of Christ's presence in someone's life, than a changed life. It isn't enough to walk down the aisle and take a preacher by the hand. It isn't enough to be baptized. It isn't even enough to be filled with the Holy Spirit. You must go on *being* filled. Day by day. Moment by moment. In each and every situation there must be a conscious, deliberate decision to put yourself under the Holy Spirit's control.

### **Barnabas was a Trusted Man**

Yes, Barnabas was tested and tuned-in. He was also a trusted. A little later in our study of Acts we will see him again. He is the one sent by the leaders of the church in Jerusalem to check out the revival in Antioch. A mighty movement of God was taking place and a strong, steady hand was needed to oversee it. The man they send was Barnabas. On another occasion, when word reached the apostles in Jerusalem of a famine affecting the church in Judea, it was Barnabas who took up a collection, and along with Saul, brought badly needed assistance to people in need.

Praise God for Barnabas. Praise God for a man who knew it's better to give someone a chance and lose, than lose someone because you didn't give him or her a chance. And our part of the body of Christ must look away from what people *were*, or even what people *are*, and learn to see them for what they can *become*. For God is in the business of changing lives. Of saving sinners. Of making all things new.

### **Saul's Need for Further Seasoning**

Saul couldn't sit still and his hyperactivity got him into trouble. "So he went in and out among them at *Jerusalem* preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists; but they were seeking to kill him. And when the brethren knew it, they brought him down to Caesarea, and sent him off to Tarsus" (Acts 9:28-30).

Saul loved the Lord Jesus. But he also loved his own people and had a deep longing in his heart to tell his *old* friends about his *new* friend. To introduce those with whom he had expressed his *anger* to the *love* God had placed in his heart as a result of his meeting Jesus. He went back to the same synagogue where Stephen had tried to witness. Apparently, Saul forgot what those folks did to Stephen. Because what they *did* to *Stephen*, they threatened to do to Saul. But God warned him to get out of town while the getting was good. "When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance and saw him saying to me, 'Make haste and get quickly out of Jerusalem, because *they* will not accept *your* testimony about *me*'" (Acts 22:17).

Paul's response was: "(But) Lord, they themselves know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believed in thee. And when the blood of Stephen thy witness was shed, I also was standing by and approving, and keeping the garments of those who killed them" (22:18-20). Lord, *I* am more fit to deal with these people than anybody on earth. *I* am one *of* them. *I*



know how they *think*. I went to school where *they* went to school. I understand their culture and lifestyle. I can do this better than anybody else.

And God said, “Get.” Well, that’s not exactly right. Acts 22:21 has the Lord saying, “Depart.” It means the same thing. God was saying, Brother Saul, you’ve got a hot heart, and I *love* that. And now you’ve got a cool head, and I love *that*. But Saul, you haven’t learned to blend and balance the two. *To be (my) person requires a hot heart and a cool head, plus patience to acquire, blend, and balance both.* Go home, Saul, there’s more growing to do.

So Saul went to Tarsus to mellow, to grow in wisdom and in favor and in stature with God and man. To develop his gift of exhortation. To learn a little more about the fruit of the Spirit, and be a little less concerned about the gifts of the Spirit. To realize it’s the *fruit* of the Spirit which is tangible, measurable, external evidence people can see in us which makes Christ real to them.

Ten years passed before Barnabas called him into service in Antioch. During those ten years Saul, whose name was changed to Paul, learned to blend a hot heart and a cool head which would enable him to win many to Jesus. The bible is silent about what happened during those ten years, but when we see him again, Barnabas, who was building a leadership team with which he could work, asks for Saul. “Send me Saul, he’s the man I want ministering with me.”

Our key truth says, *To be God’s person requires a hot heart and a cool head, plus patience to acquire, blend and balance both.* It was *after* Saul became “a basket case,” *after* he became a fugitive, *after* he became a reject and was sent home to mature, *after* Saul finally got it together with God that he could write, “Now, I will all the more gladly boast in my weakness that the power of Christ may rest upon me, for the sake of Christ then I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities; for when I am weak then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9b-10).

### **Acts 9:31**

Ever so quickly look at verse 31 and we’re through. There are two noteworthy clauses in this powerful statement. “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up . . . (that’s clause “a”) . . . and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit it was multiplied.” (that’s clause “b”).

#### **Clause “a”**

Notice please, clause “a” doesn’t say the church “of” Judea, the church “of” Galilee, and the church “of” Samaria. It says the church “*throughout* all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up.” Do you remember the hostilities that existed between these two groups of people? The suspicions which were so deeply-rooted and centuries old? The roots of bitterness that had taken hold of them? Had there been churches *of* Judea, and churches *of* Galilee, and churches *of* Samaria, they would have fostered those differences and kept a spirit of conflict alive.

But “the church throughout,” the *one* church, with *one* Spirit, and *one* message, God used to bridge the differences which had divided and to bring peace to the body. And it “was built up.” The Greek describes continuous action. It was *being* built up. And as *we* move from church as building to church as body . . . where we live . . . where we work . . . where we are . . . it will continue to be “built up.”

**Clause “b”**

Notice the reference to *walking*. What is described is not aimless meandering or undirected wandering. The word in Greek means “purpose.” It means: “going God’s way with a sense of direction and reverential awe, the church enjoyed the *comfort* of the Holy Spirit.”

The word “comfort” leaves a bit to be desired, unless we fully understand the ministry of the Spirit. Jesus called the Holy Spirit the Paraclete, the one who comes alongside to “comfort” us. But the Holy Spirit also “exhorts” us. The church throughout the world will dwell “in peace” and be “built up” when we heed the exhortations of the Holy Spirit and walk in reverential awe before the Lord. *That* kind of church will be multiplied. Anywhere. Anytime. Including *our* time. But remember all this began with two things: a conversion and a filling. The job is not complete without both. First, Saul was born again and *received* the Holy Spirit. Second, he made Jesus Lord of his life and was *filled* with the Holy Spirit.

In 1923 the New York Giants and Washington Senators were playing in the World Series. It was a close series and at the end of six games it was three games a piece. Like the others, game seven was very close. At the end of the eighth inning the score was 1 to 1. As the visiting team, the New York Giants were up in the top of the ninth and went down one, two, three.

It was the bottom of the ninth inning with the game and world series on the line. The Senators first batter flew out. The second batter, a man by the name of “Goose” Gosling, took his stance. The pitcher threw a curve and “Goose” took it for a strike. The pitcher wound up and threw a fast ball over the heart of the plate where “Goose” could hit it with the sweet spot. Wham! The ball sailed over the infielders, up and over the outfielders. It looked like it was going out of the park when the wind caught it. The ball hit the top of the fence and dropped inside the playing field.

“Goose” Gosling was around second base heading for third when the outfielder picked up the ball and threw it to the shortstop. “Goose” was around third heading for home when the shortstop threw it to the catcher. The ball and runner arrived simultaneously, but “Goose” slid under the throw and the home plate umpire called him safe.

The Washington fans went wild. They hollered and screamed and slapped each other on the back. “Goose” Gosling was a hero. But the Giant’s catcher threw the ball to the first baseman who touched the bag. The first base umpire ran to home where he and the home plate umpire had a conference. After conferring with the other umpires, the home plate umpire raised his hands for silence and said, “The runner is out!”

The Washington fans went crazy. “Kill the umpire,” they yelled. There was bedlam for a moment until the umpire got control of the crowd and said, “The runner is out because he failed to touch first base!”

There will come a time, Jesus said, when people will stand before me and say, “Lord, Lord, we did all these things in your name.” But I will say to them, “Depart from me, I never knew you.” You failed to touch first base!

## The Church Scattered - Part 5

Acts 9:32-10:23

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Key Truth: Even instruments of miracles need to be the object of miracles.

Attribute: God is Healer

In the ninth chapter of Acts we have the thrilling story of the incredible conversion of the primary persecutor of the church, Saul of Tarsus. We have seen him instructed in the “full gospel” that one must not only be born again but also be filled with, or controlled by, the Holy Spirit to live effectively for Jesus. We have also seen the multiple failures of Saul until finally God set him aside for a period of additional preparation. At this point Peter once again takes a prominent place in the New Testament story-line.

It was Peter to whom God gave the keys of the Kingdom following his great confession: “Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God.” To which Jesus replied, “Upon this confession I will build my church, and I give to you the keys of the Kingdom” (Matthew 16:16,19). Peter exercised those keys in the witness “in Jerusalem.” He exercised those keys in unlocking the door to “all Samaria and Judea” by giving official approval to the ministry of Phillip in Samaria in the towns and cities along the coast of the Mediterranean. And before Paul can fulfill the ministry God has for *him*, Peter must once again exercise the keys of the Kingdom by giving official sanction to God’s witness “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8)..

To show you how slowly Peter got the big picture, many commentators say at least six years passed between Pentecost (Acts 2) and the events recorded in our text (Acts 9:32–10:23). All of which makes it clear that the people the Lord had to work with were exactly that: people. Human beings with their limitations and frailties. They were terribly human. Among other things, Peter suffered from what we might call the barnacles of lifelong prejudices and misconceptions.

On the plane yesterday I read an article about barnacles. They are interesting little critters. They are about the size of a walnut. They have six legs and originally had eyes and a couple of feelers to help them move through the water to gain food. They discovered that if they stayed in one place, or attached themselves to something stable, food stuff would come floating by. So barnacles began to attach themselves to ships and rocks. They grow so fast that in less than a year thirty tons of barnacles can fasten themselves to a ship, impeding its progress and dramatically increasing its fuel consumption. It’s interesting to note that when barnacles “stopped working for a living” they lost their ability to see and became a serious incumbrance to the progress of that to which they became attached.

When God set forth the principle of separation, he did so for a very special reason. He wanted to protect Israel, the womb out of which the Messiah would be born, from the influences of pagan ideas and practices. It was separation for a purpose. Over the years Israel forgot what separation was for. Instead of it being a means to an end, separation became an end in itself. And Peter, who was a product of his time, was encumbered by the barnacles of prejudice against people who were different than himself. So what happened in our text is incredibly important. It marks the freeing of Peter and the church from the barnacles which were slowing down its progress.

In the balance of chapter 9 and chapters 10 - 12, we’re going to see what amounts to Peter’s

swan song. The ministry to “all Judea and Samaria” will be completed, and through Paul and the church the gospel will be extended “to the ends of the earth.”

### **The Clustering of Miracles**

There are a number of miracles reported in our text. You may have noticed that the miracles reported in the Bible are clustered together.

There were miracles during the time of Abraham, when God selected him to begin a people whom God would call “my people” (2 Chron. 7:14).

There were miracles during the period of Moses, when God delivered his people and took them to the promised land.

There were miracles surrounding the time of Joshua and the actual conquest of that land.

There were miracles during the period of the Judges when God attempted to protect his people from the ugliness and wretchedness of the earth-religions of Canaan.

There were miracles during the era of the prophets when God sought to preserve the destiny of his people.

And of course, there were miracles during the life of Jesus when God said, “Look, I am now making myself as clear as possible in the person of my son.”

There were other miracles clustered around the ministry of the Holy Spirit like the miracle of tongues when the disciples spoke languages they had never learned on Pentecost. God was calling for the attention of the world to the new thing he was doing.

There were miracles clustered around the expansion of the church. In Jerusalem. In Samaria. Down in Judea. All in preparation for the most mind-boggling thought of all: God was extending his love to *Gentiles!*

### **The Miracles in our Text**

Ever so quickly let’s review the miracles reported in our text.

In Acts 9:32-35 there is the healing of Aeneas, a man who was unable to reach his full potential because he was paralyzed by muscular dystrophy or some such disease.

In Acts 9:36-42 there is the quickening of Dorcas who was physically dead.

In Acts 9:43 there is what looks like a throwaway line, until we realize it describes one of the most amazing miracles of all. We’ll come back to it in a moment.

In Acts 10:1-8 there is the enlightenment of Cornelius who was spiritually dead.

In Acts 10:9- 23 there is Peter’s personal healing. This giant of a man was paralyzed by prejudice and could not reach his full potential for the Kingdom of God. Even though he was born again and filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter was in the grip of ancient ideas and prejudices.

Before God could open the world to the gospel, a miracle of healing had to occur in Peter's heart..

Ever so quickly, lets see how these miracles fit together to reveal the lovely truth God wants us to see by the clustering of these.

### **The Healing of Aeneas**

“Now as Peter went here and there among them all, he came down also to the saints that lived at Lydia. There he found a man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden for eight years and was paralyzed. And Peter said to him, ‘Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed.’ And immediately he rose” (Acts 9:32-35).

The *problem* was a paralyzed man. The *prognosis* was very poor. For eight years he had experienced a gradual incapacitation through Parkinson's disease, or MS, or some such paralyzing illness. The *procedure* Peter used to bring healing to this man is the simple *proclamation*: “Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you” (Acts 9:34).

There's no evidence Aeneas was a Christian. Or asked to be healed. Or had faith to believe he could be healed. As I thought about that, my mind went back to the second chapter of Mark where Jesus is ministering to a group of people crowded into a house. Four men had a friend who was paralyzed and they wanted Jesus to heal him. They couldn't get through the crowd, so they went up on the roof, rolled back the covering of a hole which was a kind of first century air conditioning system, and lowered their friend into the presence of Jesus. Scripture says, “When Jesus saw *their* faith, he said, to the *man*, ‘Rise up and walk’” (Mark 2:1-12). Nowhere in *that* story is there evidence the man himself had faith. He didn't ask to be healed. But “when Jesus saw *their* faith he said to the *man* . . . ”

That led me to think a sobering thought: is it possible that in helping people in need, God will honor *our* faithfulness in the absence of *their* faith? Knowing people are often encumbered by things which make it difficult for them to believe he could be interested in them, does God honor *our* faithfulness in the absence of faith on *their* part? That seems to be what happened in Mark 2. “When he saw *their* faith he said to the *man*, ‘Get up and walk.’” That also seems to be what happened here in Acts 9. Aeneas, himself, made no request for healing. Or expressed any faith. But *Peter* said, “Jesus Christ heals you.”

If that's true, are *you* being faithful? What about those names you wrote on that registration slip a couple of weeks ago? Names of people within your sphere of influence who are open and needy. What about the *one* name you circled and committed yourself to a ministry of prayer on behalf of that person? Have you been faithful to that commitment? In the absence of faith on his or her part maybe God wants to honor *your* faithfulness! But he can't do that if *you* aren't faithful.

But when *you are* faithful, miracles happen. Last Sunday a man told me he had written down several names. As he reviewed them one name stood out as being especially needy and open. There and then, in this building, he prayed for the salvation of that man. Within 20 minutes he ran into him at the post office, shared Jesus with him, and in less than a half hour after he prayed for that man's salvation his friend was saved. Hallelujah! Go ahead and say it! Hallelujah! We're a bunch of dried up Baptists, but praise God! The Lord honored the faithfulness of a

friend who committed himself to pray, and was open to being the means by which God would answer his own prayer!

*Our* responsibility is to go. To plant. To water. To cultivate. *God's* responsibility is to bring the harvest. But are we being faithful? Are you being faithful? Peter was, and a whole town was touched for Jesus. "And *all* the residents of Lydia and Sharon saw him (the man whom he healed) and they turned to the Lord" (Acts 9:35). Wow!

### **The Quickening of Dorcas**

In verse 36 we come to the second of these several miracles: the raising of a dead person. "Now there was at Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which means Dorcas or Gazelle. She was full of good works and acts of charity. In those day she fell sick and died; and when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room. Since Lydia was near Joppa, the disciples, hearing that Peter was there, sent two men to him entreating him, 'Please come to us without delay.'" And Peter came (Acts 9:36- 42).

I want you to notice several things about this woman. "She was full of good works and acts of love" (9:36). We've talked about being filled with the Holy Spirit, and bearing the fruit of the Spirit, which is love. Here was a woman who was dominated, directed and controlled by love and expressed her love by ministering to others. How different from many contemporary Christians, even those who say they're interested in a deeper walk with Christ, whose lives reflect a turned-in-ness. They are concern about being *blessed*, not about *being* a blessing!

Harry Ironside, who for many years was pastor of the great Moody Church in Chicago said, "Anyone constantly occupied with his own spiritual experience will not have a spiritual experience worth being occupied with." Tough words! But truly Spirit-filled people rest in the finished work of Jesus to have their needs met. That frees them to be concerned about the needs of others. We're saved to serve, not saved to be served. Dorcas, a seamstress by trade, understood that and dedicated her needle to Jesus. As a result, when Peter arrived, the people in the room were teary-eyed. One of them may have said, "Peter, look what she made me. It was cold last winter and Dorcas made me this coat." Another one may have added, "I didn't have a thing to provide for my children and she made a whole wardrobe for my little girl and boy." Verse 39 says, they displayed her handiwork, the product of her ministry of helps.

Notice the similarity between this miracle and the miracle of Jesus raising the daughter of Jarvis, recorded in Luke 8, whose family and friends said, "she's dead." Jesus knew God couldn't do his best work in an atmosphere of doubt and negativism, so he asked everyone in the room to leave except Peter, James, John and the parents of the little girl. Then Jesus said, "Maid, rise. And she opened her eyes, and sat up" (Luke 8:54). I wonder if Jesus knew a day would come when Peter would need to perform a similar ministry and prepared Peter by having him observe this ministry to a child who was physically dead.

While you're at it, notice our Lord's practical concern for God's temple. Jesus said, "Give her something to eat" (Luke 8:55). It's important to take care of God's temple.

Here are two marvelous miracles: the healing of a man unable to achieve his full potential because he was paralyzed, and the raising of a woman who was dead. What could be greater than that?

### **Peter's Healing**

Look at Acts 9:43. It's a "one-liner" and you may have missed the miracle. "And he (Peter) stayed in Joppa for many days with one Simon, a tanner."

What's miraculous about that? To a Jew, a tanner was a social misfit. No respectable Jew would have anything to do with a tanner because, by profession, he handled dead bodies all the time. Touching dead things was an anathema to a true blue Jew. A tanner's house had to be at least 50 cubits outside the city limits. If he became engaged to a young woman who didn't know he was a tanner, when she found out what he did for a living, her engagement or marriage could be nullified.

A tanner was low man on the totem pole, and yet Peter stayed with a tanner. He experienced a healing in his attitude toward social outcasts. To me that's a greater miracle than the healing of the paralytic or the raising of the dead child. It involved Peter's will! The other two miracles involved the manipulation of atoms and genes and chromosomes: the stuff of which we are made physically. This third miracle involved the royalty of human *will*. When Peter experienced a healing in the area of his attitudes and surrendered his will, that involved something more than a supernatural act on God's part. It involved Peter's personal participation. When Jesus said, "Greater things than these shall you do," I believe he was referring to the wonder of a soul set free by a change of heart, and a surrendering of his or her will, such as occurred in Peter's heart that day.

### **The Enlightenment of Cornelius**

The next miracle is recorded in Acts 10:1-8. "At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a Centurion of what was known as the Italian cohort, a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms liberally to the people, and prayed constantly to God."

Cornelius was an interesting man. He was a military leader. The Roman army was organized into legions consisting of 6000 soldiers. They were divided into cohorts consisting of 600 soldiers. The cohorts were divided into companies consisting of 100 soldiers. The man in charge of 100 soldiers was called a Centurion.

Cornelius was a military leader. A good man. A God-fearing man. He had been drawn to the idea of one God and the ethical teachings of Judaism which were appealing to him when compared to the paganism of the polytheist religions in vogue at that time. He was a devout man. He had a positive influence on his household. He was a man of prayer.

In the process of his seeking to know more about God, a miracle happened: God answered his prayer. The miracle is *not* that God answered and a messenger came, it was what the messenger *said*: "Cornelius, your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. And now send men to Joppa, and bring one Simon who is called Peter, he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside" (Acts 10: 4).

Cornelius was not only a good man, he was a man of action. He immediately sent two of his servants and a devout soldier to Joppa to get Peter. I was interested in the specific directions God's messenger gave to Cornelius. He told him exactly who to see, and exactly where to find him. God not only numbers the hairs of your head, my friend, he knows the number of the house in which you live! "Go to this house, seek this man, he has the answer you are seeking."

There's a question we all wrestle with at times: what happens to people who never have a chance to hear the gospel? In the early chapters of Romans, Paul gives us a good answer. He explains that God has revealed himself to people in many ways. He has given everyone a measure of light, in some form. If people are obedient to the light they have, they will be judged accordingly.

Cornelius is an example of that principle. He received a certain measure of light. Amid the darkness of polytheism, the great light of monotheism shined into his life, and he obeyed that light. As a consequence, God gave him more light. God quickened his spirit and saved his soul.

### **The Miracle of Peter's Healing Acts 10:9-23**

While God was doing that for Cornelius, something else was going on in Peter. Acts 10:9–23 reports the story of Peter's healing. Peter was not living up to his full potential because he, too, was paralyzed. He didn't suffer from Parkinson's or polio. He was paralyzed by the prejudices inherent in his Jewish tradition.

Like Saul, Peter was proud to be a Jew. It was his pride in his Jewishness which God had to heal. Before the gospel could be carried to the Gentile world, a miracle had to occur in the heart of Peter. He held the keys to the kingdom! There could be no breakthrough "to the ends of the earth," until there was a breakthrough in Peter's heart!

It's difficult for us to grasp the feeling tone of this passage unless we think back to some of the racial issues with which we wrestled during the past decade or two. The feelings between the races in our country were small compared to the intense feelings of the Jews toward non-Jews. Jewish people saw themselves as a special people, hand picked by God, and nobody, anywhere, of any race, color, or creed, was equal to them.

When Philip went to Samaria and ministered there, it was a big hurdle for Peter to get over. He was able to handle it because the Samaritans were half-brothers. But *now* he was being confronted with the possibility that blue-eyed, blond-haired, fair-skinned Gentiles were also included in the circle of God's love. Self-respecting Jews believed Gentiles were less than human, they called them "dogs" and the keys of the kingdom were in the hands of Peter who was paralyzed by prejudice. God had to bring healing to Peter so he could use those keys one more time to unlock this door of opportunity and begin the spreading the gospel "to the ends of the earth."

What happened? It was noon. If you've been in the Middle East you know everything stops at noon and people take a siesta. But Peter was also hungry. While lunch was being prepared he went up on the roof of the tanners house on the coast to take a quick nap. He was half awake and half asleep. In a kind of reverie he saw a great sheet being lowered from heaven. In it were all kinds of creatures. "And Peter saw the heaven open, and something descending, like a great sheet, let down by four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And then came a voice to him, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' But Peter said, 'No, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.' And the voice came to him a second time. 'What God has called clean, you must not call common.' This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven" (Acts 10:11-16).

Peter was hungry and in this dream-like state he saw all kinds of things to eat! The Lord said



“Kill and eat.” Peter replied, “No, Lord.” Now you can’t be a Spirit-filled person and put those two words together. You can say, “no,” or you can say, “Lord,” but you can’t say, “No, Lord.” For a moment Peter “fell from grace” and began listing his good works. “Look, Lord, I’m a true-blue Jew. I’ve been obedient to all the Levitical laws. I have never eaten or touched anything that was unclean.” And then it dawned on Peter. The previous limitations and provisions were being set-aside because they had fulfilled their purpose. God was teaching him a new thing: that which God calls “clean” no one should call “unclean.”

While Peter was pondering this, the factor of precise timing kicked in. Remember: “a miracle is a natural or supernatural event *accompanied by precise* timing to bring glory to God.” The three messengers from Cornelius arrived at the gate. “Is this the house of Simon, the tanner?” “Yes.” “Is there a man here by the name of Peter?” “Yes.” While they were asking, God spoke to Peter: “There are three men downstairs asking to see you. Don’t be afraid. I have sent them to you.” Peter went downstairs and said, ‘I am the one you are looking for. What do you want?’ And they said, ‘Cornelius, the centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house, and to hear what you have to say’” (Acts 10:17-22).

Suddenly Peter understood the meaning of the events through which he had just gone. God had healed a paralytic who was unable to measure up to his full capacity because he was *physically* paralyzed. Peter realized he was not measuring up to his full capacity either because he, too, was *spiritually* paralyzed: by *prejudice*! Furthermore, if God could raise a dead person like Dorcas, God could give life to a man like Cornelius who was *spiritually* dead.

Suddenly Peter got the big picture. He saw the meaning of the cluster of miracles through which God had attracted his attention. God was saying, “Peter, I’m about to do a brand new thing. The witness ‘in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria is about over. Now I want my church to extend its reach ‘to the ends of the earth.’” And as if to say, “Father, I understand,” Peter did an unheard of thing. “He called them in to be his guests” (Acts 10:23).

For a Jew to fraternize with a Gentile was unthinkable. It just didn’t happen. But that’s what *did* happen. To paraphrase Edwin Markham’s famous poem: “Pride drew a circle and shut them out, heretics, rebels, things to flout, but (God) in love had the wit to win, (he) drew a circle and took them in.”

And thus the stage was set for the most wonderful miracle of all. It is a miracle so far-reaching it touches you and me today. For when Peter exercised that last key on his ring and opened the door to the Gentile world, the possibility of God reaching out to you and me with the gift of eternal life was realized. Excuse me, but hallelujah!

### **Putting it All Together**

In the clustering of these miracles we discover the lovely truth God wants to teach us today: *Even instruments of miracles need to be objects of miracles.*

Flying in from Iowa yesterday, I asked the flight attendant to seat me alone if possible. I had to put these thoughts on paper and didn’t want to be distracted. Unfortunately, there were too many passengers on board and I couldn’t have three seats to myself. However, there was a seat between me and the passenger by the window and I got to work.

Unfortunately, she was very talkative and wanted to visit. “Who was I?” “What was I doing with all those papers?” “I’m a minister and I’m preparing my sermon for tomorrow morning.” She wanted to know what it was about. I told her and she said, “Are you about through?” “Yes, except for the ‘so what?’ element.”

I went on to explain, “It’s my feeling the cardinal sin a preacher can make is to waste the people’s time by telling them things which are true, without showing them how those truths apply to their lives today. Without the ‘so what?’ element a sermon isn’t complete,” I said.

“Isn’t it enough that you give them a sense of history?” she asked. “You’re telling them about one of the greatest miracles of all time when Christianity ceased to be a local sect of Judaism and became a world religion. Isn’t that enough?” “No,” I answered, “it really isn’t enough. I’ve got to find something to make it live for them today!”

When I got off the flight from Iowa and started to board the plane for Bakersfield I pulled out what I thought was my itinerary and gave it to the stewardess. She looked at it and said, “I don’t think we are going to have time between here in Bakersfield.” I didn’t know what she meant until I turned the paper over and read, “God loves you and I want to!” It was the title of the first chapter of a new book I’m writing. I turned every color of the rainbow!

When I got home I worked till midnight, went to bed and woke up about 5 o’clock this morning. The first words out of my mouth were, “Lord, what do you want me to say to your people this morning? These things are true. They all happened. They are wonderful. But so what?” The Lord spoke three things into my spirit.

First, “John, there are people in this church I cannot use because they are burdened with barnacles. Their minds, emotions and wills are crusted with unbiblical prejudices, priorities and values. I cannot use them until they are clean. Tell them I want to clean them up this morning.” So I’m telling you: God wants to clean you up this morning, and you know who you are.

The second thing the Lord said was, “John, there are people in the congregation I can’t do anything with because they are calling ‘unclean’ what I have called ‘clean.’ They’ve made mistakes in the past. They’ve sinned. They’ve come to me and asked for my forgiveness and I have forgiven them. But they keep calling themselves ‘unclean’ when I have called them ‘clean’ through the blood of Jesus. Tell them it’s time for them to forgive themselves.” So I’m telling you: it’s time for you to forgive yourself this morning, and you know who you are.

The third thing God said was, “John, there will be people in church this morning like Cornelius. Good people. Nice people. Moral people. God-fearing people. Devout people. People who live by the golden rule. People who treat others as they would like to be treated. But John, they are lost because, like Cornelius, they don’t have Jesus. Tell them Jesus died for good people as well as bad people. Tell them being nice won’t get them into heaven. The only thing that matters is, do they know my son?”

So I’m telling you: Jesus died for good people as well as bad people. Being nice won’t get you into heaven. The only thing that matters is, do you know God’s son, Jesus?” Are you like Cornelius? A good person. A God-fearing person. Living an ethical life, but lost because you don’t know Jesus? I invite you to receive Jesus as your personal savior this morning, so you can

be saved from sin, ransomed from ruin and delivered from death.

## The Church Scattered - Part 6

Acts 10:23b-11:18

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Key Truth: New spheres of ministry open to those who see what God sees.

Attribute: God is Impartial.

Five key words beginning with the letter “e” will help you catch a sense of the content and the movement of our text.

The first word: “enquiry” applies to Acts 10:23-29. The key verse is 29.

The second word: “explanation” applies to Acts 10:30-33. The key verse is 33.

The third word: “evangel” applies to Acts 10:34-43. The key verse is 43.

The fourth word: “evidence” applies to Acts 10:44-47. The key verse is 47.

The fifth word: “enlargement” applies to Acts 10:48 -- Acts 11:18. The key verse is 18.

These five words break down our text and give you some handles with which to get hold of it. By linking the five key verses together, you get a snap shot picture of this beautiful passage of scripture which records an incredible collection of Epoch-making events.

Verse 29 -- the enquiry. “I ask then why you sent for me?”

Verse 33 -- the explanation. “Now therefore we are all here present in the sight of God, to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.”

Verse 43 -- the evangel. “Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Verse 47 -- the evidence. “Can anyone forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”

Chapter 11, verse 18 -- the enlargement. “And they glorified God, saying, ‘then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life.’”

Five key verses which, when linked together, give you in capsule form an incredible collection of Epoch-making events.

Last Sunday I shared with you part of a conversation I had with a fellow passenger on a flight from Des Moines to Los Angeles. When I explained I was a minister and was preparing a sermon, she wanted to know all about it. I described the process. The text. The content. The *telos*, or goal, toward which a sermon should point. She was a history buff and as far as she was concerned a simple declaration of the historical fact that God had transformed Christianity from a Jewish sect into a living religion was enough. I explained to her it isn’t enough for me to just give you a history lesson, that I must also include a “so-what” element.

I’ve thought more about that conversation and while it isn’t enough to settle for *just* a sense of history, neither is it enough for us to *miss* a sense of history. In the text before us, and the one we studied last week, God gives us an awareness of our roots. *Who* our spiritual grandsire was. *How* a Gentile came to be included in the body of Christ. *Why* this acceptance as a Gentile into full church membership by the apostles is so important to us today. *What* we must do to experience the grace of God in our lives.

### Our Roots

We’re concerned about our roots. We want to know where we came from. We want to know

about those events in history which made us what we are and gave us the opportunities we have. We are not alone in this interest. *God* is also concerned about our roots, and in moving the pen of Luke to write the history of the early church, the Holy Spirit saw to it that Luke gave *more* than half as much space to the conversion of Cornelius, as he did to the conversion of Saul!

When you realize how important Saul, who became Paul, was to the work of Christ in the world, you begin to understand the importance God attached to the conversion of Cornelius. His conversion and acceptance into full membership in the body of Christ was an Epoch! It was a memorable moment in history to which you and I, as Gentile Christians, can look and from which we can trace *our* roots. Awesome!

I was talking about this with my daughter, Julie, yesterday. Whenever possible I spend a little time with her on Saturday morning going over the sermon. She helps me put “the cookies” on the lowest possible shelf. We talk about various practical applications and even though she’s only seventeen, she’s one of the best teachers of preachers I know.

“Julie, what do you think would have happened if Cornelius and Peter had not been obedient to the heavenly vision? Suppose they had not been faithful to the impulse of the Spirit of God upon their life. Do you suppose that you and I might never have had a chance to become a part of the Kingdom of God as Gentiles?” She thought about it a few moments and then said, “Oh, no! God has never left himself without a witness, daddy. He may have been down to just one witness. There may have just been one Abraham, or one Noah, or one Elijah, but there was always *one* witness God could count on. If it hadn’t been Cornelius, it would have been somebody else. If it hadn’t been Peter, God would have had another person ready to open the gate to the Gentile world for Jesus.” Not bad for a seventeen year old. Don’t you think?

Then she shared some personal insights which had come during her devotional study of the book of Esther. She pointed out there was one sentence in the book where Mordecai, Esther’s uncle, says to her, “Maybe your relationship with the king is not how God intends to save the Jews, but maybe he has put you in this place for *just such a need as this*.” Julie shared how she had begun to see God’s deeper purpose in our relationships. The casual experiences through which we pass, and the brushing of our life on the lives of others, are not without significance. God has a deeper purpose in our relationships and we need to be open to that deeper purpose.

Well, praise the Lord, Cornelius and Peter were sensitive to the impulse of the Spirit. As a result, we know who we are! We know our spiritual grandsire was Cornelius. We know he became a part of the body of Christ through a personal relationship with Jesus. We know he provided an opening of the door of the church to Gentiles. And we know that means you and I do not have to become Jewish proselytes. We do not have to go through the rite of circumcision. We do not have to submit to other provisions of the law. We do not have to become Jews before we can become Christians, because *Cornelius* was accepted into full membership in the church as a non-Jew! Therefore we, as non-Jews, are accepted as full members of the church.

As we move along this morning I want you to get a sense of history, but I also want you to do some thinking about God’s deeper purpose for *your* relationships, for as our key truth says: *New spheres of ministry open to those who see what God sees*.

The great events recorded in scripture are surrounded by clusters of miracles. Whenever God

was about to make a breakthrough in his out-reach to the world, his concern was accompanied by a flurry of miracles. It was as if God were saying, “Your attention, please! I’m about to do something important and I want you to see it, hear it and be a part of it.”

The cluster of miracles reported in our text include two visions. One involved Cornelius, a Gentile, who was praying at the ninth hour, one of the appointed hours of prayer. The second vision involved Peter who was praying at noon which was *not* one of the appointed hours of prayer. Peter was enjoying a little a quiet time with the Lord, but out of it came one of the great moments in history.

### **Acts 9:23-29 - Enquiry**

Let’s take a closer look at the five sections of our text. The first is Acts 9:23-29 and the “e” word is *enquiry*. “The next day he rose and went off with them and some of the brethren from Joppa accompanied him.” In chapter 11 we’re going to learn Peter had the foresight to take six Jewish Christians along as witnesses. He had been told to go without fear, but he had not been told to go without foresight! Somehow he knew this journey would make a dynamic difference in how the world would be reached for Christ and Peter wisely took six witnesses along to observe and record what happened.

“And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his kinsmen and close friends. When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him” (Acts 10:24). Even though this was a middle eastern way of showing respect to someone of importance, verse 25 tells us “Peter lifted him up, saying, ‘Stand up; I, too, am a man.’”

That little phrase, “I, too, am a man,” is of incredible significance. It shows the expanding awareness on the part of Peter that he was involved in something bigger than himself. This was something *God* was doing! The Jews had long looked upon Gentiles as something less than human. They called them “dogs.” When he said, “I, too, am a man” he was not only making a statement about himself: that he was not a god and should not be made an object of adulation. He was also making a statement about Cornelius. “I, too, am a man” meant *Cornelius* was a man as well! Peter was saying, I understand that. I accept that. I welcome you into the family of human beings.

One of the marks of a great man is his willingness to spend time with so-called “little people.” I praise God for the great men who spent time with me. As a young pastor I was in New York City one day and had the audacity to phone Norman Vincent Peale and ask if this man who was minister to millions would spend five minutes with me. He graciously granted me what turned into an hour long conference during which he shared his enthusiasm for what I, a young preacher, was doing. Out of that encounter came his visit to Bakersfield several years ago when he stood behind this pulpit to preach the gospel of Christ.

When I felt led to consider a ministry of refreshing to Europe after the war, I needed someone of stature to verify my calling as a young evangelist. C. Oscar Johnson, president of the Baptist World Alliance, “Mr. Baptist,” the most prominent of over thirty million Baptists in the world, inconvenienced himself to spend an hour with me exploring what God was doing in my life. A couple of years later his personal blessing led to my being the first American evangelist ever sponsored by the BWA to do ministry overseas. Praise the Lord for the great men who were

caring enough to spend time with a little man, me! And praise God for the greatness and graciousness of Peter who grasped this opportunity to extend love and compassion, concern and acceptance to a Gentile whom his Jewish brothers and sisters devalued.

Often we find our self saying, “I want you to know where I’m coming from.” It’s our way of indicating we’d like to build a bridge of understanding between ourself and someone else. Well, Peter wanted everyone to know where he was coming from. The Gentiles, yes. But also his Jewish companions. “And as (Peter) talked with (Cornelius), he went in and found many persons gathered; and (Peter) said to them, ‘You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation; but God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean’” (Acts 10:27,28).

Peter made an intuitive leap from the revelation that *food* God calls clean Peter should not call unclean, applied to *people* as well as food! In his vision (Acts 10:9-16), Peter saw reptiles and animals and birds which God called “clean.” Peter made a leap from God’s concern for animals to God’s concern for people. “I (now) know no man is to be called common or unclean. So when I was sent for I came without objection.” Then comes “e” word number one: Peter’s *enquiry*, “I ask then, why you sent for me?”

### **Acts 10:30-33 - Explanation**

Cornelius also wanted Peter to know where *he* was coming from. So in his *explanation* which is “e” word number two, Cornelius says, “Four days ago, about this hour, I was keeping the ninth hour of prayer in my house; and behold, a man stood before me in bright apparel, saying, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter: he is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the seaside. ‘So I sent to you at once, and you have been kind enough to come’” (Acts 10:30-33a).

Three things capture our attention in these few verses: a vision, a voice and a venture. If you have any sense of the excitement of preaching, you know I’m licking my chops and am trying to resist the temptation to spend the next 45 minutes talking about the “so-what” significance of the *vision* God uses to let us know he cares about us, and the *voice* through which God speaks to communicate his love to us, and the *venture* God invites us to embark on so we experience his best of us. But I’m going to resist that temptation and simply say: Cornelius had a vision, heard a voice and embarked on a venture. That is to say, Cornelius *did* something about what he had seen and heard.

Did you notice God did not communicate the gospel to Cornelius through an angel? Why? Because angels never felt the joy that our salvation brings! No angel could ever effectively communicate the Good News of forgiveness because *angels have never sinned*. It took a hard core, saved by grace, sinner named Peter to communicate the gospel.

Cornelius had the wisdom to realize it wasn’t enough to see a vision and hear a voice, he had to venture forth in faith if he was going to experience what God had for him. So he wound up his explanation by saying, “Now, therefore we are all here (and you can almost see him gesturing to the room full of people) in the sight of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord” (Acts 10:33b).

**Acts 10:34-43 - Evangel**

The next section of our text covers “e” word number three: the evangel. The good news. The gospel. “And Peter opened his mouth and said: ‘Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality’” (Acts 10:34).

In four words Peter tossed out 1400 years of Jewish tradition in which they believed with all their heart that God *was* partial! That *they* were his pets! That his concern was directed exclusively to *them*, or at least primarily to *them*. And in one fell swoop Peter threw all of that out the window. It’s as if Peter said, “I perceive that God doesn’t look at faces, at the external stuff people use to measure *other* people, ‘But in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him’” (Acts 10:35).

If there is one word in this whole section of scripture which ought to make you stand up and shout “Hallelujah,” it’s the word: *acceptable*. It means *you* have a place in God’s plan! When Peter used the word “acceptable” he did not shut the door to the need of personal salvation on the part of Cornelius. In chapter 11 he will remind Cornelius the angel told him to send for Peter who would tell him *how* to be saved. So he didn’t minimize the necessity of salvation. Cornelius was a good man. A praying man. A generous man. A religious man. But he was also a lost man in need of a personal touch from the Lord.

But while Peter did *not* shut the door to the *necessity* of personal salvation, when he used the word “acceptable” he *did* open the door to the *possibility* of salvation for *all* who choose to be saved. *That’s* why the word “acceptable” is a word of hope for you and me. Satan, our adversary, is a clever liar. He knows exactly what buttons to push to make us feel worthless, hopeless, and outside the circle of God’s love and concern. He knows exactly how to make us feel God could not possibly care about us. That his love could not possibly be directed toward us.

But based on this word in verse 35, it’s clear God has not written you off. You are *acceptable* to him. And if *you* accept your acceptability, if *you* accept the fact that God loves you and wants to spend eternity with you, and if *you* will *act* on your awareness of your acceptability as Cornelius did, *you will be saved!* What a wonderful word: *acceptable!*

Peter had the marvelous gift of brevity. In five verses he told Cornelius the whole story. In verse 36a he shared the “good news of peace (through) Jesus Christ.” In verse 36b Peter declared the Lordship of Jesus: “he is Lord of all.” In verses 37-39 he detailed the deity and death of Jesus. In verse 40a the resurrection of Jesus, and in verses 40b, 41, he covers the reality of the *living* Jesus.

This is not some hallucination we’ve had, Peter said. This not a fantasy or figment of our imagination. We were *with* him! We *ate* with him. We *drank* with him. We *spent time* with him. We *know* Jesus is alive because *we were with him!* And *that’s* the strong word of witness the world needs today! It needs to hear us say, “We *know* Jesus lives because he lives within our heart.” Desperate, hurting, searching people need to hear us declare with keen assurance:

“He lives, He lives, Christ Jesus lives today. He walks with me, He talks with me along life’s narrow way; He lives, He lives, salvation to impart; you ask me how I know He lives, *He lives within my heart!*”

*That’s* the message I give to you today: the reality of the *living* Jesus! We don’t worship a wooden Christ upon a wooden cross. We worship one who has risen from the dead. One who



lives today in the hearts of us who know him as our personal Lord and savior.

Peter went on (verse 42), to share the universal judgeship of Jesus who will “be judge of the living and the dead.” That’s interesting. Not just *a* judge sitting on a future throne in some distant time and place. Not just the judge of the dead. The “judge of the living *and* the dead.” And then the *piece de resistance*! The gospel. The good news. The evangel. “*Everyone* who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43b).

### **Acts 10:44-47 - Evidence**

Peter gave them something to believe and they believed it. Every last one of them was born again. Jesus is not only “Lord of all,” and “judge of (all),” he is also Savior of all! *Evidence* of that is given in verses 44-47. “While Peter was still saying this, the Holy Spirit fell on *all* who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised (Jews) who came with Peter were amazed because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling (praising) God.”

I have two cassette messages on the subject of tongues. One is: “The Purpose and Place of Tongues in Biblical Times.” The other is: “The Purpose and Place of Tongues in the Lives of Believers Today.” Those two messages consume an hour and a half of teaching time and are part of an 8 cassette album: “The Holy Spirit -- Now.” Obviously I cannot tell you in the limited time available this morning what it took an hour and a half to say on two other occasions. If you do not have those cassettes, may I urge you to get them and study them. God has blessed them mightily in helping people understand and benefit from the person and work of the Holy Spirit

Let me say this by way of quick review: the book of Acts records three occasions when the *miracle* of tongues occur: Acts 2, Acts 10 (which we’re looking at today), and Acts 19. In Acts 2 God’s concern was for the Jews. In Acts 10 God’s concern was for the Romans. In Acts 19 God’s concern was for the Greeks. The *miracle* of tongues recorded in these three chapters of Acts relate to God’s concern for the three major groups of people at that time.

To get a handle on the subject of tongues it’s important to distinguish between the *miracle* of tongues reported in Acts and the *gift* of tongues revealed in First Corinthians. Peter provided some insight in his report to the Church leaders in Jerusalem. They had heard about the Gentiles coming to Jesus and Peter explained: “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them *just as on us* at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’” (Acts 11:15).

The words, “just as on us at the beginning” are *evidence* that what was exercised in our text was not the *gift* of tongues, but the *miracle* of tongues. At Pentecost the disciples spoke known languages they had never learned. It was a *miracle*. The Spirit of God took control of their speech mechanism and they spoke the various languages of the people present, each of whom heard the gospel in his or her own tongue.

The same thing appears to have occurred here. Another *miracle* of tongues occurs. These were *Romans*. Their native language was Latin. There were six *Jewish* observers present, plus Peter, all of whom spoke Aramaic or Hebrew. *They* heard Gentiles speaking Aramaic or Hebrew, languages they had never learned, because the Jewish observers heard them glorifying God. Peter linked this with the baptism of the Holy Spirit which occurs when people are born again.

Water baptism is an outward expression of an inward reality. It doesn't *make* you a Christian, it simply declares you *are* a Christian. Spirit baptism as *evidence* does the same thing. In this case, it provided external, tangible, measurable, recognizable *evidence* these Gentiles had been born again and were filled with the Holy Spirit *in the same way* Jews had been on the day of Pentecost.

Now that's far too little to say about so important a subject, but it's all I have time today. I urge you to secure the cassette album: "The Holy Spirit -- Now" and spend time in a personal study of this very important matter. (Editor's note: This album can be ordered by contacting us at [www.winsome.org](http://www.winsome.org)).

### **Acts 10:48 -- 11:18 - Enlargement**

We come, then, to the enlargement of the church's place in the work of God in the world. "And he (Peter) commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. And then they asked him to remain for some days" (Acts 10:48).

This was an enlargement of the Gentiles comprehension of who Jesus was, what Jesus did and what Jesus could mean to them. They were new born. They wanted to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. They asked Peter to stay and disciple them.

Along with this enlargement of the Gentiles understanding of what it meant to be part of the body of Christ, Acts 11:1-18 also describe an enlargement of the church's view of itself. "Now, the apostles and the brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?'"

Isn't that interesting? They were not at all excited about the fact that a bunch of Gentiles had been born again. That those who were spiritually dead were alive in Christ. That those who were spiritually blind were able to see. It didn't excite them that God had broken through the barriers people had put up and had enlarged the scope of his kingdom to include the Gentiles. The only thing they seemed to care about was that Peter had broken one of the traditions of the Jews and had not only socialized, but believe it or not, had actually eaten with Gentiles. Big deal! But over just such nonsense as *that*, the body of Christ has been divided from the very start. Again and again the church has allowed its religion to get in the way of the reality of God's work in the world, and has let prejudices and preconceptions impede the church's ability to spread the gospel.

The manner in which Peter replied reveals a lot about how much he had grown. Can't you imagine how, in earlier years, he would have replied in the flesh. Out with the sword! Off with the ear! Instead, filled with the Holy Spirit, he replied with the best of all responses: a simple telling of what God had done. What God had done in the life of Cornelius. What God had done in his own life. How God had brought the two of them together. How God had ministered through him to Cornelius.

In verse 17 he provided the clincher. "If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?" His logic was irrefutable. The hand of God in this was unmistakable and verse 18 records the enlargement of the church's view of itself. "When they (the leaders of the church) heard this they were

silenced. And they glorified God saying, ‘Then to the Gentiles *also* God has granted repentance unto life.’”

What a nice note to end on this morning, but I must tell you that’s *not* how the story ends. The legalists will rear their ugly heads. The traditionalists will insist the church stick with its tradition. The Judeizers will try to add a dab of Judaism here, a touch of legalism there. The circumcision party will continue to be a thorn in the side of Paul flesh dies slowly. That was why the Jerusalem conference about which we read in Acts 15 was held. Legalism and tradition are much more comfortable than freedom in the Spirit, and letting God do what he wants to do, the way, when, why and how he wants to do it. And the problem lives on.

We still have our hang-ups. We still have our problems. I don’t know how many of you are struggling with the fact that tonight a Roman Catholic priest will stand behind this pulpit and a Roman Catholic sister will lead us in a service of praise. I don’t know how many of you have a problem with that, but I say, “Praise the Lord.” We are one in the Spirit. We are one in the Lord. And we hope to teach them a thing or two because we’re going to have baptism by immersion tonight! But it’s a tragedy that we insist upon clinging to our religion instead of the *reality* of God, and insist on putting our prejudices and preconceptions in the way of the *power* of God.

On September 22, 1862 Abraham Lincoln issued the great Emancipation Proclamation. That night a small group of black people in a southern town decided to celebrate their new found freedom. They got a casket and dug a grave. They put whips, branding irons, handcuffs, ankle fetters, slave garments and all the other paraphernalia which had been part of their enslavement in that casket. As the clock on the city hall tower began tolling the hour of twelve, their preacher said, “The monster is dying.” With each additional tolling of the hour he said, “The monster is dying. The monster is dying.” With the twelfth strike of the gong, he said, “The monster is dead.” They closed the casket, nailed the lid shut, lowered it in the grave, covered it with dirt and said, “Let’s celebrate our freedom. The monster’s dead.”

But it wasn’t dead. It isn’t dead today. The old monster of racism lives on. There are still people who insist upon judging folk by the color of their skin, or their ethnic background. And just as the monster of racism lives on, so does the monster of carnality. The flesh does not die easily. It lives on. It keeps rearing its ugly head to harass us and bug us and quench and grieve the Holy Spirit who dwells in us. But let us claim by faith that the monster of our flesh *is* dying. Let’s obey the Spirit of God rather than surrender to our baser instincts so we will be *in* God’s will and stay *out* of his way. And that’s what you really want isn’t it?

## The Church Scattered - Part 7

Acts 11:19-30

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Key Truth: God exhorts His people to expand their horizons.

Attribute: God is Exhorted.

It was one thing for the Samaritans to turn to Jesus. They were part Jewish and shared many Jewish traditions. It was another thing for a lonely Ethiopian on the road to Gaza to turn to Jesus. And yet another thing for Cornelius, a Gentile, and his household to turn to Jesus. But *nothing* is comparable to what we have before us today: “a great number of *Greeks* turned to Jesus in Antioch” (Acts 11:21b).

There is an interesting connection between Acts 8:4 and Acts 11:19-20. Acts 8:4 says: “those who were *scattered* went about *preaching* the word.” Acts 11:19 says: “those who were *scattered*... skipping down to the end of verse 20...”*spoke* the word.” Both texts refer to the followers of Jesus being “scattered”. In Acts 8:4 the scattering resulted in “preaching.” In Acts 11:19 the scattering resulted in “speaking.” We’ll discuss the lovely difference between these two methods of communicating the gospel in a moment.

By now it should be clear that what Luke has given us in the book of Acts is not a consecutive record of events. Nor is it a precise statement of history. Rather, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Luke was moved to share a series of vignettes illustrating how and why The Church Established “in Jerusalem” (Acts 1-7), became The Church Scattered “to all Judea and Samaria” (Acts 8-12), in preparation for The Church Extended “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 13-28).

In our text for today we see how, by using the right *means* and the right *man*, with the right *message* and right *ministry*, employing the right *mode*, God was able to produce the right *manifestation*: a demonstration of the unity of the body of Christ as it continued to be scattered. Or, as our key truth puts it: *God exhorts His people to expand their horizons.*

### The Right Means

In Acts 11:19-21 we are introduced to *the right means* God used to achieve his purpose. Webster defines *means* as “that through which, or by the help of which, an end or goal is attained.” In these three verses we discover several of the right means God used to reach the goal of expanding the ministry of the church.

*The first right means* is found in the little word *scattered*. We talked about that word a couple of weeks ago, and I pointed out that this scattering was not a careless, willy-nilly, disorderly activity like the wind blowing leaves about in a storm. Rather, it was a careful, orderly, designed activity like that of a farmer scattering seed carefully, and by design, over a prepared area in order to expand and enlarge his harvest. Such was the scattering of the church. It was a careful, orderly, planned activity guided by God.

*The second right means* by which God accomplished his purpose was *persecution*. From a

human point of view, persecution hardly seems like an appropriate suitable means of attaining a goal. But that's precisely the means God used. I was talking with some friends yesterday about life as we live it on this planet, and I was commenting about the unfairness of certain things. Someone said, "But this world *is* unfair. Satan is the prince of this world and he doesn't want anything to be fair." That's true. But God uses the circumstances Satan manipulates to achieve God's purpose. When Satan instigated the persecution of the church, God said, "All right, I'll use persecution to achieve my purpose, which is to scatter the church." The church wasn't scattered *because* of persecution, but *in spite of* persecution!

Isaiah 55:8 records a statement we often use out of context: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Most of us have thought of that as a kind of *general* description of the thinking and working processes of God. In the context, however, it's clear this is a *specific* description of God's attitude toward *sinners*. Isaiah 55:6, 7 reads as follows "Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on him. And to our God for he will abundantly pardon." Then comes verse 8, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." The Father is saying, *you* would reject and shut out those who violate *your* love. But your ways are not *my* ways. Your thoughts are not *my* thoughts. *I* invite and welcome those who violate my love, who ignore my will, and *I will pardon* all who turn to me! *That's* what the verse means in context. It is a specific description of the radical grace of God.

But there is a *general* application of the verse which is equally true: God thinks and works in ways which to us seem unthinkable and unworkable. Several recently graduated college students met in our home at Christmas time. Each of these young people was facing a different kind of crisis in his or her life. In the course of the conversation, I suggested they test the power of praise. That they begin praising God *for* their circumstances. *For* their problems. *For* their unmanageable, apparently impossible situations because Romans 8:28 says God uses *everything* for good. I quoted 2 Thessalonians 5:18- "*In* everything give thanks for *this* is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus." Not that everything is the will of God, but that *in* everything it *is* God's will that we be thankful *because* he has promised to use everything for *good*. One of them said "I can't do that." I replied, "What you means is that you *won't* do that because it doesn't make sense to praise God for an unthinkable, unworkable situation. But God is prepared to take your difficult circumstances and use them for your good, *if* you free him to do so by thanking him *in advance* for doing so."

Has that not been true with you? Think about your own life experience. Is it not true that there were times when self, or Satan, or circumstances, worked you into a blind alley? But God met you there, didn't he? Yes! God turned that blind alley into a passageway to greater blessing. It became the means whereby you experienced things in your Christian life you could not have experienced in any other way.

Perhaps you're in such a blind alley this morning. Self, or Satan, or circumstances have worked you into a corner, and you're stuck there. May I commend to you the principle of praise. May I remind you of Genesis 50:20, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good." May I remind you of Romans 8:28, "But *we* know (we who are the children of God) that in everything God works for good with those who love him." Think about Acts 11:19-20 for a moment, "Now those who were scattered because of the persecution . . . *spoke* the good news." Part of their *speaking* included praising God for what he was doing in their lives. I commend the same to you. By praising God, you give him the freedom to use the very circumstance, the very blind alley, the very corner or cul de sac in which you find yourself today, as a means of blessing you.

*The third right means* God used is found in Acts 11:19-20, "*spoke* the word." In Acts 8:4, they were "*preaching*" the word. They were announcing, heralding, proclaiming. They were saying, "We interrupt your daily events to tell you some good news." But the Greek word in Acts 11:20 is "*laleo*" which means "telling, chatting about, talking to." In other words, *everyday conversation* became a means of sharing the gospel..

This is a beautiful illustration of God's patience. The great commission had been to send the gospel to the Jew first. The king and the kingdom had been offered to Israel twice, and had been rejected twice. In their first refusal, the Jews conspired to kill *him*. In their second refusal, they actually began to kill and persecute those who *followed* him. But even though Israel's rejection of Jesus had been *official*, God's concern for each Jewish *individual* never ceased. If any of them would come to him *personally*, they would be received. Many did and many still are. Praise the Lord!

But the official party line out of Jerusalem was anti-Christ. Anti-Jesus. He was an imposter they said. So the *preaching*, that is, the public declaration of the word to the Jews became less effective than *speaking*, or casual sharing between friends. So, as these followers of Jesus who were scattered because of persecution went to their new homes and began to settle in their new neighborhoods, they began to drop a word for Jesus here. And say a word for Jesus there. In a casual, comfortable, everyday way they explained to their new Jewish neighbors how Jesus was the fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophecies and provisions.

But, while the Lord never lost his concern for individual Jews, neither did he lose sight of his larger purpose in the scattering of the church. Verse 20 says, "But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, (Cyprus was an island and Cyrene was an area down in Africa.) who on coming to Antioch (Antioch was about 15 miles inland on the Aranti river) spoke to the Greeks also preaching the Lord Jesus." We have a saying, "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread." I praise God for those sweet, dear, trusting people of simple faith who didn't know "it" couldn't be done and became the means through whom God did "it." And what was "it"? Sharing the gospel with non-Jews! These folks from Cyprus and Cyrene didn't know they weren't supposed to share the gospel with their Greek friends, and they "*spoke*." The Greek word is *laleo*. Meaning: in their *daily conversations* they talked about Jesus!

Did you notice that while these people play a major role in one of the greatest breakthroughs in the history of Christendom, we don't know their names? They are just "men of Cyprus and Cyrene." We have another saying: "Great things can be done if we don't care who gets the

credit.” Praise God for these people who were committed to anonymity. Who were prepared to be what God wanted them to be where they were. Who did the right thing, for the right reason, in the right place, and in the right way, without any concern for credit! In their daily conversation, they *spoke* a word about “the *Lord Jesus*,” and the response was electric. The Greeks sat up and listened. The more they talked about “the *Lord Jesus*” in this casual way, the more enthusiastic became the response.

“Jesus Christ is *Lord*” was a very appealing message to the Greeks who were always looking for the *ultimate*. The *ultimate* truth. The *ultimate* secret of life. The *ultimate* deity. In Athens the Greeks had an idol to The Unknown God. These simple, trusting, believing Christians said, “We know his *name*! His name is Jesus. He is the *ultimate* truth. He is the *ultimate* secret of life. He is the *ultimate* deity. Jesus Christ is *Lord*!” When they were with their *Jewish* neighbors and friends they casually chatted about the *word*: what God was doing to fulfill all the Old Testament prophecies. When they were with their *Greek* neighbors and friends they casually chatted about the *Lord*: the One who meets and satisfies the deepest need of the human heart.

*The fourth right means* God used to spread the gospel was using the right *place*. Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire, behind Rome and Alexandria, with 800,000 people. It was divided into quarters. The Jewish quarter. The Syrian quarter. The Greek quarter. And so on. In the middle of Antioch was a broad road, four miles long, lined on either side with beautiful columns. Antioch was a magnificent city. Cosmopolitan in its views. Open to a mix of ideas and philosophies of life.

Down the road were the groves of Daphne. She was a Pagan goddess in whose name the Greeks had mixed together sexuality and religion. There was not only a lot of intellectual and social fervor in Antioch, but sensuality pervaded the atmosphere. It was a city full of sin which was also aware of the dead-end nature of paganism. What a great place to plant a church with its message: Jesus Christ is *Lord*!

*The fifth right means* is explained in Acts 11:21. “And the *hand of the Lord* was with them (which is to say all of this was part of God’s plan and he empowered them to carry it out it effectively), and a great number of those who believed *turned* to the Lord.” Here we have the right means of *salvation*. There’s a big difference, you see, between believing and *turning*. The Christian life is not lived merely in the intellect, though it is intellectually satisfying. It is not lived in the area of the emotions, though it is emotionally stimulating. True Christianity is lived in the area of the will when we *decide*, based upon what we believe, to *turn* away from that which is destructive.

In the 1940's I was stuck down by a malady called the flying bug. I just had to learn how to fly. I read about flying. I talked about flying. I ate, slept and drank flying. Finally, I convinced Lucille (we’d been married a little over a year at the time) it was really important for me to learn how to fly. With customary pragmatism, she said, “How much will it cost?” I picked up the phone, called the Flight School, told the flight instructor I had been bitten by the flying bug and just *had* to learn how fly. “How much will it cost?” I asked. He told me \$200 and I was *instantly* cured. (That was a long time ago when \$200 was a lot of money.) “How much does it cost to take a ride?” I asked. “\$2.00.” I could afford that, so I went.

Now, I believed in that airplane. I knew from my study of the laws of aerodynamics that the construction of the wing, the size of the engine, and the other characteristics of the airplane made it certain to fly. I knew the pilot could fly it. I saw his war record on the wall and had chatted with him about the many people he had taught to fly. I had absolute intellectual confidence in that plane and in that pilot. And I was emotionally involved. I was excited about the possibility of flying. But, despite my intellectual and emotional involvement, it wasn't until I climbed into the airplane that I got off the ground. I had to add action to my conviction before I could fly.

It's the same with you. You know your need. When the Bible says, "*All* have sinned and come short of the glory of God," you are not surprised. You know your need. You may even feel it deeply. And you believe in Jesus. The evidence for him is beyond question. For 2,000 years the searchlight of inquiry has been focused on Jesus and sceptics have not found one scintilla of weakness, or sin in him. You know Jesus is the answer to your need. You are intellectually and emotionally involved. You are a believer. You are an enlightened soul. But you continue to be spiritually dead *until* you put action to your conviction and become a quickened spirit! Alive in Christ forevermore. *That's* what these people did. How about you? Have you put action to your conviction based on what you believe? Are you prepared to *turn* to Jesus who is "the way, the truth and the life"?

Acts 11:22-24 tell us what transpired: "News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw the poured out grace of God, he was glad, and exhorted them to "remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose."

How the time line works out here is not exactly clear. Acts 8:4 and Acts 11:19 both refer to those who were "scattered." Between these two "scatterings" we have the ministry of Philip to the Samaritans, as well as to the Ethiopian on the road to Gaza. We have the conversion of Saul, and we have Peter's ministry in Judea and also in Caesarea where he touched the lives of Cornelius and his household.

While all of that was going on, Acts 11:20-21 describes what was taking place in Antioch. In casual conversations "men from Cyprus and Cyrene . . . *spoke* (to their Greek friends) about the good news." The response was incredible. People came to Jesus by the dozens. Peter's vision and his experience with Cornelius, a Gentile, in Caesarea had been reported to the church in Jerusalem. The leaders of the mother church responded positively. Their vision of ministry was enlarged so they were free to joyfully receive word of the great thing God was doing among the Greeks in Antioch. So they sent Barnabas to evaluate and oversee what God was doing there.

### **The Right Man**

In addition to using the right *means*, God used the right *man*: Barnabas. Acts 11:24 says of him, "(Barnabas) was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith." Barnabas did not trust his flesh to live a Christian life. He chose to be controlled by the Holy Spirit – *daily*. He was not only "*being filled*" with the Holy Spirit," he was "*full* of the Holy Spirit." It was his lifestyle. It was the way he lived. Every moment of every day he was moved, used, blessed and guided by the Holy Spirit. As a consequence, Luke could describe him as "a *good* man."

Not only was Barnabas the right man because of his spiritual qualities, but also because of his



personal credentials. He was from Cyprus, where the “fools (who had rushed) in where angels fear to tread” *spoke* in casual conversations to the Greeks. He understood his fellow Cypriots. He was a broad-minded man. He was the first to accept Saul into the body of Christ and gave his blessing to him in Jerusalem. He was a generous man. A non-judgmental man. All of which made him the *right* man. “When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad” (Acts 11:23). No mention of the *gifts* of the Holy Spirit, but the *gift* of the Holy Spirit was clearly present.

Barnabas saw it, and it blessed him.

Let me give you a statement I hope will become part of our verbiage as a local church learning to move freely in the Spirit. It is a statement of who and what we are as a people of God. “We believe in the baptism of the Holy Spirit according to Galatians 5:22-23.” Let me repeat: “*We believe in the baptism of the Holy Spirit according to Galatians 5:22-23.*” This means we believe the baptism of the Holy Spirit is the *outer*, tangible, measurable evidence of the Holy Spirit dwelling *in* us, made credible to others by the presence of the *fruit* of the Spirit borne *through* us.

Barnabas saw “the grace of God” in the folks at Antioch expressed in “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23). The *fruit* of the Spirit was obvious and it excited him!

### **The Right Message**

God also gave Barnabas the *right message*. “He exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose” (Acts 11:23b). To remain faithful. To *grow* in the Lord. Not just start, but continue. Not just be born again, but develop in the faith. And do so with “steadfast purpose.” Through thick or thin. Through good days and bad. When they felt like it and when they didn’t feel like it. We can almost hear him say, Grow, Christian, grow! Grow when you feel like it because it would be a sin to miss such an opportunity. And grow when you don’t feel like it because it’s dangerous to be in such a state. “Remain faithful to the Lord with *steadfast purpose*” (Acts 11:23b).

### **The Right Ministry**

God’s grand design involved the right *means* and the right *man* with the right *message*. It also included the right *ministry*. Our purpose as the First Baptist Church of Bakersfield is to “win the lost and disciple them.” *That’s* our reason for being. It comes right out of the book of Acts where we find a mix of evangelism and teaching. *Evangelism*, or Spiritual Obstetrics is bringing people to spiritual birth. *Teaching*, or Spiritual Pediatrics (and yes, in the case of some of us who are slow to grow, Spiritual *Geriatrics*), is bringing them to maturity. That was the mix of ministries Barnabas put in place at Antioch. It’s the mix of ministries we use here in Bakersfield.

“A large company was added to the Lord. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year *they* (as partners in ministry) met with the church and taught a large company of people; and in Antioch the disciples were for the first time called Christians” (Acts 11:25,26).

What a large hearted fellow Barnabas was. What a great spirit. Big enough to realize his own limitations. Big enough to reach out and get a truly gifted helper. One measure of a man is the kind of people with whom he surrounds himself. Harmony, if there is harmony, involves at least two. And if it's a good harmony, the one who plays second fiddle must play as well as, if not better than, the person who plays first fiddle. Barnabas knew what it takes to make good harmony. He was big enough to recognize his limitations, and big enough to reach out and get strong people around him. He began with Saul. Barnabas was also big enough, as we're going to see later on, to step aside when Saul, the second fiddler, had grown in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord to where he was ready to play first fiddle himself.

The latter part of verse 24 says, "a large company were added to the Lord." The exhorted in Barnabas knew they needed to grow. He also knew he couldn't disciple them alone. So he looked around for someone to help him and the Spirit of God laid the name of Saul on his heart. Saul was exactly right for the job. Saul was a Hebrew of Hebrews, so he understood the Old Testament background out of which the gospel came. But, more than that, he was a Hellenist Jew by birth, and a Greek by education. He understood the Greek mind. He was beautifully equipped to show how Jesus was the *Messiah* for the Jews, and *Lord* for the Greeks.

Not knowing precisely where Saul was, Barnabas set out to find him. Again, Barnabas was big enough to take time to do it right. Imagine the turmoil he must have gone through thinking of leaving that wonderful church in Antioch. Great things were happening there. People were coming to Jesus by the dozens. But he understands the need to do it right, and *he took the time* to go and find the helper he needed.

When he found Saul, Barnabas shared God's vision for Antioch and the church at large. He explained how Saul's 7 to 10 year period of "set-a-part-ness" was to prepare him for just such a moment as *this* moment. How he could bear much fruit in Antioch. Saul was convinced and they went to Antioch where they "taught a large company of people."

And what a job they did! Antioch became the center of Christian activity. The sphere of influence shifted from Jerusalem to Antioch. While Jerusalem continued to play its part, Antioch was the springboard from which the world-wide mission of the church embarked. It was in Antioch that the followers of Jesus "were first called Christian" (Acts 11:26). Scholars love to debate where that name came from. We haven't time to do that today, so let me say I'm convinced the name came from their neighbors and wasn't meant to be a putdown. It was an unconscious *affirmation* made by people talking together. "How about that man! How about that woman! Have you ever seen anyone like them? They are amazing. They are always ministering to the people around them. Serving, caring, sharing." "Who are they?" "Oh, they're *Christians*."

How did their neighbors come to that conclusion? Yesterday, we had a service of praise in celebration of the life of our sister Judy Shaw. Lucille told me about a visit she had with Judy. "How do you do it, Judy? How do you handle it? The cancer. The inevitability of death. The constant pain and struggle. How do you do it with such courage?" Judy said, "I don't. I don't have it in me. What you see is *Jesus* expressing *his* life through me." I believe that's what happened in Antioch. I believe their neighbors looked at those folk and said, "They're

*Christians!*” They saw Christ in them!

President Jimmy Carter is quoted as saying the things that turned his life around was the question, “If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” He examined his life and decided there would *not* be enough evidence and made a change. He became what he calls, and what we understand to be, a born-again Christian.

I put the question to you. If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Would any of your neighbors be led to say spontaneously, as a kind of unrecognized affirmation, “He’s a *Christian*. She’s a *Christian*.” Because they see Christ in you.

If it was a nickname, it was a honey. It met the needs of the Hebrews, the Greeks, and the Romans. In Hebrew the word *Christ* means messiah. In Greek *Kristos Kurios* means Christ is *Lord*. In Roman the suffix *ians* means little ones, or by extension, little Christs. Thus the name *Christians* spoke to the universality of the Gospel.

### **The Right Mode**

Ever so quickly lets look at the right *mode* and right *manifestation*. “Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world; and this took place in the days of Claudius” (Acts 11:27,28).

Why do I call it the right *mode*? Because “mode” refers to a manner or method of doing something. What was right about God’s mode is his use of Agabus, an ordinary, rank and file *layman* to whom God had previously given the Spiritual Ministry Gift of prophecy, to introduce the church in Antioch to the supernatural? It helped them realize God’s work in the world is only possible because he never asks us ordinary people to do extraordinary things for him without *first* providing us with the gifts needed to do it. Agabus was not just a talented man. He was a spiritually gifted man!

In Ephesians 4:11,12 prophets are listed along with apostles, evangelists, pastors and teachers as people gifted by God to prepare others for the work of the ministry. Prophets have a God-given ability to proclaim, or *tell forth*, the good news. In addition, because of their sensitivity to the Spirit, from time to time prophets also *foretell* that which is from the Spirit. The neat thing about the gift of prophecy is that it’s so easy to test. A true prophet must be right all the time. Not 99% of the time. *All* the time. And, in this particular instance, the prophecy proved to be true. During the reign of Claudius, there was in the Roman world a series of droughts and famines that beset the people. God, in his foreknowledge, knew a famine was coming and wanted to alert his people so there might be safety as well as unity in the body.

### **The Right Manifestation**

“And the disciples determined, each according to his ability, to send relief to the brethren who lived in Judea, and they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul” (Acts 11:29,30)

The right *manifestation* involved three principles. First, the principle of personal responsibility. *Each* disciple determined his or her response to this need. They knew how tough it was to be a Christian in Jerusalem under the best of circumstances. It was tough to get a job. The followers of Jesus were socially ostracized. The effect of the famine on Jerusalem Christians was devastating. The Christians in Antioch sensed this and acted collectively based upon their individual ability. I am responsible for me. You are responsible for you. But both of us must have our spiritual feelers out so together we are sensitive to the needs of the members of the body around us.

Second, there was a principle of proportionate giving. Each one gave according to his or her ability. “Of him to whom much has been given,” Jesus said, “much will be required.” We love to think in terms of doing “my share,” but doing “my share” is *not* a matter of doing what everybody else does. Doing *my* share is doing what *I* am capable of. When *each* of us follows the principle of proportionate giving, the *body* has more than enough to meet the demands of its ministries.

Third, there was the principle of “bread cast upon water.” Acts 11:18 reports how Jews in Jerusalem met and their vision of ministry was enlarged to include the Gentiles. Acts 11:30 reports how the Gentiles to whom they had reached out, and had included in, were the same people God used to bless *them*. The bread *they* cast upon the waters – the bread of love, acceptance and equality – came back to bless *them* “pressed down, shaken up and running over.” *Their* needs were met.

All of which revealed the unity of the body. Wherever the church was scattered: “in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth,” the church was one. And soon they were no longer Jews or Gentiles. They were just . . . *Christians!*

## The Church Scattered - Part 8

Acts 12:1-25

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Key Truth: God's people need to recognize miracles when they see them.

Attribute: God is deliverer.

God's purpose in inspiring Luke to write the book of Acts -- and the Bible must always be interpreted in the light of the plan and purpose of its' Author -- was not to give us a minute, detailed history of the early church. But a carefully selected collection of events which, when put together, provide us with a beautiful explanation of three destiny determining developments.

First, *how* the church was established "in Jerusalem." In our study of Acts 1-7 we learned the church was established in Jerusalem through the gift of the Holy Spirit, was authenticated by the disciples eagerness to grow in their knowledge of the person and work of the Spirit.

Second, *why* the church was scattered "in Judea and Samaria." Our current study of Acts 8-12 has helped us see how, by this scattering, God brought about an orderly shift in the center of influence from Jerusalem to Antioch. In Jerusalem there had been, and would continue to be, severe opposition. In Antioch there was an opportunity to shift from presenting Jesus exclusively to Jews, to presenting Jesus to Gentiles as well.

Third, *where* the ministry of the church was extended as it reached out "to the ends of the earth." We will learn more about that in our study of Acts 13-28 under the title: The Church Extended.

As we conclude our look at the middle section of the book of Acts, I want you to notice seven things, after which, I will draw an application which is intensely personal, and existential, in its relationship to *this* church, at *this* time.

### Acts 12:1-3 The Persecution of the Church

First of all, notice how persecution of the church shifted from religious to political leaders. "About that time Herod the King, laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. He killed James, the brother of John, with the sword; and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also" (Acts 12:1-3).

Up till now, oppression to the church has come primarily from religious factions within Judaism. The Sadducees. The Pharisees. The Sanhedrin and the like. *Now* opposition comes from the puppet government of Rome, headed by Herod the King.

*This* Herod, known as Agrippa the First by historians, was the grandson of Herod the Great who sat on the throne when Jesus was born. It was Herod the Great who ordered all boy babies under the age of two be killed in order to thwart what he thought was an attempt to overthrow his throne. Like his grandfather, *this* Herod also acted in a violent way. His fears for his personal well being caused him to "lay violent hands upon some who belong to the church," and he beheaded James, the brother of John. Why? To please the Jews.

Herod, like his grandfather, was a consummate politician. When Christianity reached out to

include Gentiles, the Jewish community was unnerved. As long as The Way, as it was called by some, was a small Jewish sect they could contain and hope it would go away someday. Its intrusion into the Gentile world was a devastating and fearful development. So the Jews were pleased when, out of self preservation, Herod moved against the church. When *he* saw that Jews were happy with the beheading of James, he mustered up the courage to take the next step and imprisoned Peter, the leading apostle.

### **Acts 12:4-5a, 6,10 The Precautions the King**

Second, look at the extra-ordinary precautions Herod took to make sure Peter *stayed* in jail. “This was during the days of unleavened bread. And when (Herod) had seized (Peter) he put him in prison and delivered him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people. So Peter was kept in prison . . .” (Acts 12:4-5a).

Think for a moment about the extreme care with which Herod guarded his special prisoner: four squads of four Roman soldiers each! Verse 6 tells us Peter was bound by chains and forced to sleep between two soldiers with sentries guarding the door of his cell. Verse 10 further informs us that his cell was in the inner prison. To escape, a prisoner had to go through the door of his inner cell and a first set of guards, a second door and second set of guards, then finally he had to get through a locked iron gate also guarded by sentries at the main entrance of the prison.

Peter was chained to guards 24 hours a day. Four squads of four soldiers each served six hours a shift making sure he was never alone. They ate with him. Slept with him. Lived with him. They knew if he escaped they would be put to death. Peter was in an inner cell with several doors or gates to go through before escape was possible. It was in an impossible situation. He was immobilized. And if anyone ever needed a miracle, it was Peter.

### **Acts 12:56 The Prayers of God’s People**

Third, not only notice the persecution of the church and the precautions of the king, but the prayers of God’s people. “But earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church” (Acts 12:5b).

The brevity of this sentence – just twelve words, almost a throw-away line –articulates our perplexity about prayer. How can prayer help when confronted with a well guarded prison? What good will it do to pray under such conditions? This half sentence raises some of the deep thoughts we are almost fearful of facing: our questions about the validity and value of prayer in apparently “impossible” situations.

At the same time, its brevity provides us with some answers. It faces us with the fact that, “Satan trembles when he sees the humblest saint upon his knees.” And it must be said, as I did in my little book “Why Prayers Are Unanswered”, “It is not the rhetoric of our prayers -- how eloquent they are. Nor the geometry of our prayers -- how long they are. Nor the arithmetic of our prayers -- how many they are. Nor the logic of our prayers -- how argumentative they are. Nor the decibel of our prayers -- how loud they are. It is a fervency of spirit which matters. The Bible says, ‘The effectual fervent (or earnest) prayers of righteous man availeth much.’”

This little word “fervent” speaks of people praying with passion plus persistence. It means they

“stretched out” their prayers. They “stretched out” to Peter in a prison cell. They “stretched out” to the God of heaven and earth in concern for their brother. They prayed fervent, earnest, “gut level” prayers. In the sermon on the mount Jesus said, “Ask and ye shall receive. Seek and ye shall find. Knock and it shall be opened unto you.” There’s earnestness in that. It’s as if Jesus said, “Seek and *go on* seeking. Ask and *go on* asking. Knock and *go on* knocking. For the one who asks and *keeps on* asking will receive. The one who seeks and *keeps on* seeking will find. The one who knocks and *keeps on* knocking will have the door of opportunity open to him.” God wants his people to pray earnestly.

The grandfather of Roland Hayes, the great black singer, once said, “The problem with most prayers is, “They ain’t got no suction.” A plain way of saying they lack persistence. They lack passion. And therefore, they lack power. But the people in our text prayed fervently. Earnestly.

### **Acts 12:6 -12 The Phenomenon of Peters’ Escape**

Fourth, not only notice the persecution of the church, the precautions of the king and the prayers of God’s people, but the phenomenon of Peter’s escape. “The *very night* when Herod was about to bring him out, (that is, on the eve of his execution) Peter was sleeping between two soldiers bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison; and behold, an angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, ‘Get up quickly.’ And the chains fell off his hands. And the angel said to him, ‘Dress yourself and put on your sandals.’ and he did so. And he said to him, ‘Wrap your mantle around you and follow me. . . .’” (Acts 12:6-8).

A beautiful articulation of this wonderful truth: *God will do everything we can’t do, but he will do nothing we can do.* He sent an angel to free Peter, but Peter had to get up, get dressed and get out of there. “And he went out and followed him; he did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened to them of its own accord, and they went out and passed on through one street; and immediately the angel left him.” (Acts 12:9 - 10)

Mr. Webster defines a phenomenon as “an exceptional or abnormal occurrence.” An old country preacher gave an even better definition. After his sermon he was greeted at the door by one of his deacons. “Pastor, I really appreciated that sermon today because I could understand almost everything you said. There was only one word I didn’t understand. What does ‘phenomenon’ mean?” The pastor cogitated for a moment and said, “Well, deacon, do you remember on your way to church this morning you walked down a country road and came to a green pasture surrounded by a white fence?” “Yes.” “Well, that was no phenomenon. Then did you noticed that in the pasture there was a black cow eating green grass?” “Yes.” “Well, that was no phenomenon either. Then did you notice that in the corner of that green pasture there was a brown thistle with a bluebird sitting on it, chirping away?” “Yes.” “That, too, was not a phenomenon. But,” the preacher added, “Deacon, if some Sunday morning on your way to church you walk down that country road, past that green pasture surrounded by that white fence, and you see that black cow sitting on that brown thistle chirping like that bluebird, *that’s* a phenomenon!”

We are all confronted with the inexplicable at times. The Lavender's have a phenomenon that happens our house with regularity. I simply cannot understand how: every week I wear seven different pairs of socks perfectly matched, take them off, put them in the laundry hamper after which Lucille puts them in the washing machine, then the dryer, brings them upstairs, puts them on my bed and at least one of them doesn't have a partner! This past week we reached an all-time high. She's been doing some refurbishing and let the wash go for two weeks. I had *seven* unmatched socks, and they never left the house!

I should say my socks are *usually* matched. One Sunday I wore a blue suit and was sitting over there with my legs crossed. I said to myself, "Self, you woke up early enough to wear a pair of blue socks to go with your blue suit." But when I crossed my legs the other way I thought, "That's strange, I have on black socks." It turns out I had on one black sock and one blue sock. That happens, but when the socks are maroon or grey or brown, how can you lose one of them? I suppose it has something to do with static electricity and one day I'll slip on my shorts, find a blue sock, and wonder how it got there.

The miracle that freed Peter was *supernatural* from beginning to end. "An angel of the Lord appeared." The word "angel" in Greek can mean a natural or supernatural person. For example, the seven "angels" linked to the seven churches in the first three chapters of Revelation are the pastors of those churches. But *this* "angel" was *not* a human messenger. The word used here is the same word used to announce the birth of Jesus. Luke 2:9 says, "And an *angel of the Lord* appeared and the glory of the Lord shown round about them." Acts 12:7 says, "An *angel of the Lord* appeared and a light shone in the cell." The glory of God was there even as it had been on that hillside near Bethlehem

What did the angel do? He *shook* Peter awake. That says something about Peter's spiritual resources. Here he was, on the eve of his execution, sleeping so soundly the angel had to *shake* Peter to wake him up. It is also a beautiful example of what a Christian's attitude *should* be toward the reality and imminence of death.

The angel shook him awake and said, "Get up." When he did so, the two chains fell off. The angel told Peter to get dressed and then, without waking the two soldiers on either side of him, they proceeded through the door, past the sentries, through the second door and a second set of sentries, until they come to the iron gate which led outdoors to the city. It opens automatically, they walked one block and the angel disappeared.

A miracle is: "A natural or supernatural event accompanied by precise timing to give glory to God." From time to time I've talked about some of the natural things recorded in the Bible and how the factor of precise timing which brought glory to God made them a miracle. Let tell you about a natural event which turn out to be a miracle for me. I was in Oregon preaching. When my assignment was over, I was invited by a young minister to ride with him to the airport. In the short span of thirty minutes a miracle happened. I had been searching for resources we could use to help our people come to grips with our responsibilities to the family, the church and the world. Without knowing it that young preacher participated in a miracle. In the thirty minutes we spent together he said a half dozen things I wrote down. He mentioned two books which were exactly what we needed, exactly when we needed them.



The *precise timing* with which that simple conversation occurred made it a miracle because it brought glory to God. But the events recorded here in Acts 12 were *not* natural. Everything about Peter's escape was *supernatural*. God sovereignly and miraculously delivered his servant from an impossible situation.

### **Acts 12:11-17 The Proof of Answered Prayer**

Fifth, notice the proof of answered prayer. "And Peter came to himself." (Acts 12:11a). That is to say, he woke up. The night air hit him and suddenly he realized, I'm not dreaming. I'm free! And he said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting" (Acts 12:11b), referring to his immanent execution.

"When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John, whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a maid named Rhoda came to answer. Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and told them that Peter was standing at the gate. They said to her, 'You are mad,' but she insisted that it was so. They said, 'It is his angel!' But Peter continued knocking; and when they opened, they saw him and were *amazed*" (Acts 12:11-16). That's the Bible's decorous way of saying, they just about fell over dead! "And motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, 'tell this to James and to the brethren.' Then he departed and went to another place" (Acts 12:11 - 17).

Let me retell the story. Peter discovered he wasn't having a dream. This had really happened. He was free. He was also a fugitive from justice. There was a price on his head. He wondered, where can I go? The most obvious place was the house of Mary which was a prominent place of meeting for the Jerusalem church. Some scholars suggest Mary's house was the site of the Last Supper as well as the place where the saints were gathered on Pentecost when the gift of the Holy Spirit was received.

At any rate, it was a prominent meeting place and Peter went there. He began knocking on the door. Not too loud. He didn't want to wake up the whole neighborhood, but loud enough to be heard. Rhoda, a maid who knew Peter, recognized his voice. "It's me, Peter." She was so overwhelmed she rushed in to tell them their prayers were answered. "You're crazy, honey. Peter's in prison. We're praying for him. Come, kneel with us and pray for Peter's freedom." "But he *is* free! He's knocking on the door." "It's his angel. Herod must have killed him in private and his angel has come to visit us." All the time Peter was knocking away.

Finally, (because angels don't knock!) they went to the door and when they saw him they "were amazed." They were dumbfounded! Peter shushed them and then described how the Lord had brought him out. "Tell this to James and to the brethren." A reference to the brother of Jesus. If you study the reaction of Jesus' brothers to his ministry, you'll discover they had a problem with him prior to the resurrection. They were sure he was a bit flaky. When he was killed, they suffered the same heartaches any family would experience. But when he arose from the dead, they were transformed. The James mentioned here was a doubter who had been changed by the resurrection of Jesus and had become pastor of the Jerusalem church. A beautiful illustration of

“the power of his resurrection” to change the lives and attitudes of people.

### **Acts 12:18-23 The Price of Unmitigated Pride**

Sixth, notice the price of unmitigated pride when one takes glory to himself which rightfully belongs to God. “Now when the day came, there was no small stir among the soldiers over what had become of Peter” (Acts 12:18). That’s got to be the understatement of the day! “And when Herod had sought for him and could not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death.” (Acts 12:19) The sentence of the one they were guarding, became their sentence.

“Then (Herod) went from Judea to Caesarea, and remained there. Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon (we don’t know why, a bit of petulance on his part, I suppose) and they came to him in a body, and having persuaded Blastus, the King’s chamberlain (one of his personal attendants) they asked for peace, because their country (Phoenicia) depended on the King’s country (Galilee) for food. On an appointed day – a day of special festivity – Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and made an oration to them” (Acts 12:20 - 21).

Josephus was a famous Jewish historian who lived at the time of Jesus. He has recorded with great accuracy many of the events that took place, and is a source of our knowledge of Bible times. He explains, in a rather thorough record of this event, how Herod was wearing a robe made of silver thread. When he stood on his throne in gleaming sunlight, his silver robe glistened and he took on an unearthly appearance. When the people saw that and heard him speak, they shouted, “The voice of God, and not of man! Immediately an angel of the Lord smote him, because he did not give God the glory; and he was eaten by worms and died” (Acts 12:21-23). Josephus explains that Herod was struck by severe abdominal pains and in seven days was gone. Not because he persecuted the church. Not because he beheaded James. Not because he imprisoned Peter. But because he took to himself glory which belongs to God alone.

Herod was half Jewish and a fond follower of Jewish ways. Josephus says if it were not for his untimely death he may have become one of the greatest kings in Jewish history. Of all people, Herod must have known God will not share his glory with another. But he acquiesced to the flattery of the people. He allowed them to think of him as a god. A result, he died. A clear warning, I believe, to avoid flattery and as quickly as possible turn the affirmations we receive from time to time to the Lord to whom they are due.

Each of you is involved in quiet ministries of kindness, care and consideration. You are always serving someone, in some way. Often those whom you serve can only pay you with words of praise. Well, let me say to you, as I do *myself*, pass it on to the Lord. They need to give you their affirmation, but let the glory go to the Lord to whom it is due. Flattery is a curse and we must learn to say, “To *God* be the glory, great things *he* has done.”

### **Acts 12: 24 - 25 The Popularity of the Gospel**

Seventh, notice the concluding statement in this transitional section of Acts which speaks to the popularity of the Gospel. “But the word of God grew and multiplied. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their mission, bringing with them John whose other name was Mark.” (Acts 12:24 - 25)

“The word of God grew and multiplied.” Despite opposition, oppression and persecution God moved the church forward resolutely in fulfillment of the prophetic command of Jesus: “You shall receive power after the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The center of influence shifted from Jerusalem to Antioch, and the church had a launching pad from which to reach the world.

### **The “So What?” Element**

What application does this have for us today? Our key truth says: *God’s people need to recognize miracles when they see them.* Our church needs a miracle. In fact, we have never been in so tight a situation as we are right now. We need a miracle, and like the New Testament church, we have evidence of God’s miraculous activity in our midst.

Let me review for you a few of the miracles God has already wrought, not the least of which is our being together as Pastor and people. When the Lord called me to Bakersfield I had the same reaction some of you had when he called *you* here. “Bakersfield? You’ve got to be kidding.” The first letter I received from a fellow pastor said, “Welcome to the valley of Gehenna!” But by God’s grace I’m here, in spite of everything my flesh would say.

Then there is the miracle of our renewal. It is not unusual for a church to *start* right by trying to be a New Testament church. Scattered across the landscape are many churches which *started* with the intention of being a Spirit-filled New Testament church. *We* made that decision when we were 85 years old! As an octogenarian, we began to read the New Testament with new eyes. We began challenging our traditions and prejudices and presuppositions. We discovered there is a way God wants his church to be shaped and we committed ourselves to being shaped like that. We did so with a minimum of dislocation, which is a miracle when you consider how hard it is to change when you’re old.

Now we’re faced with leaving this beautiful building. It is full of wonderful memories for many of us. But our ministries are being limited by manmade walls of stone and steel and colored glass and we decided we must not allow these manmade walls to determine our ministry. We faced up to that and God gave us a miracle. With a minimum of dissension we decided to *not* cling to this wonderful old building any more.

We pointed our eyes southwest. We struggled to make our southwest property work. After a year the building council came before us and said, “The southwest property won’t allow us to do what we feel God wants us to do. We must sell it.” We accepted their report with a minimum of despair and God worked another miracle. He turned our eyes to Olive Drive. Against everything that made sense from a human point of view, by faith we were led to buy it. At the exact moment of our need, God provided the money needed to make the down payment. But all year long I have shared some my apprehensions about that location. It wasn’t until a month ago that God gave me a clear green light. I can stand before you this morning and say, “As sure as my name is John Lavender, I am sure Olive Drive is where God wants the Bakersfield Christian Life Center.” Someday, if you wish, I’ll tell you why I am so sure.

Then we embarked upon a plan. We spent months working on that plan. We got it down on

paper. We submitted it to an estimator. It represented the fulfillment of all our dreams. When the estimate came back we discovered to our dismay it would cost nine and a half million dollars to build. Our dream was shattered like bits of broken rainbow at our feet. Some of us said, “God, how could you possibly have let us be so wrong?” And then a miracle happened.

I had promised to give the month of August to help a friend build an extension on her place of business. I was looking forward to spending my vacation doing something completely different from what I normally do. Then, just before August, my friend told me the building could not be built. I was left with vacation time, no place to go and no money to go anywhere. Assuming we would be staying home Lucille and I had given our vacation money to the Expect-A-Miracle fund.

The very next Sunday one of our members came to me and said, “We have a cabin. It isn’t going to be used. The Lord has told me to offer it to you.” Wow! Lucille and I spent a month in Santa Cruz. Every Sunday we went to the same church. I had been there when Jeff and I made a little hasty survey of exciting churches in Northern California. That brief look hadn’t really turned me on. But when I was there for an extended period of time, with a free, rested mind, I was able to see the sheer genius and magnificence in the simplicity of those buildings.

I got the plans, brought them back, and said to the staff, “If we had this facility, could we make it work?” They got excited and began figuring ways they could do ministry in a facility like that. We took it to the architect and he drew a plan which is lovely in its simplicity. Now we have the plans almost done, but we don’t have any money with which to build it. We’ve paid off the property, the architect, the engineers. We don’t owe anybody anything, but we don’t any money, either. We need a miracle. Like Peter, we are immobilized.

But, as the poet said,

It’s great to be out where the fight is strong,  
Out where the heaviest troops belong  
In this fight with God for man.

It sears the body and wracks the brain,  
It pierces the heart till man’s friend is pain  
Does this fight with God for man.

But it’s great to be out where the fight is strong,  
Out where the heaviest troops belong  
In this fight with God for man.

I’m believing God for a miracle. Wesley once said, “Give me 200 men who fear nothing but sin, who love nothing but God, who are filled with nothing but the Holy Spirit, and I’ll set the British Empire on fire.” Well, there are many more than 200 of us here today. The question is: Do we fear nothing but sin? Do we love nothing but God? Are we filled with nothing but the Holy Spirit? If so, the answer to our need in this room and we will, to the glory of God, build a center in this city which will represent our commitment to world missions and community outreach. And, to the glory of God, we will build it *without going into debt!*

**Editors note.** It took ten years to complete, but a new 35 acre campus with eleven buildings including Celebration Hall, a worship center seating 1400, was built and dedicated *debt free*. “To God be the glory, great things *he* has done!”