

# **Acts – A Study of Passion**

**by**

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### PREFACE

I want to begin this study on Acts with a word on the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah. Life seemed unfair to Jeremiah. A willing and available servant of the Lord should not have to suffer this way. If there is a protective shield for God's servant, his seemed to have the cracks of a worn unused vessel. Told to go to the Potters house (Jer. 18:1-6), Jeremiah takes the lesson from God and begins to preach it with fervency. The message involved God's desire and need to place Israel on the potter's wheel to shape something new from her marred condition.

Jeremiah is not well received. People do not like the message and do not appreciate Jeremiah either. Jeremiah faithfully preaches God's word, exactly as he was told, and suffers for it. (See Jeremiah 20:1-2 for the extent of that suffering.) It did not take long for Jeremiah to question the justice of this. He takes his case to the Lord. *"O Lord you deceived me, and I was deceived... I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me ... the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long"* (20:7-8).

It doesn't make sense to Jeremiah that this should be the reward for faithful service. *"Come on God,"* he must have cried. *"Is this what happens to those of us who willingly place themselves in your hands? Lord I have given my life to serve you - and is this the reward? Lord I want to serve you but does it have to hurt?"* Jeremiah's pain, however, becomes a breeding ground for the making of passion. His suffering becomes the context for a renewed longing to serve. Pressed, pressured from every side, broken and hurt, Jeremiah discovers how much God really means to him. Listen to what he is led to believe and express:

*"But if I say I will not mention him or speak anymore in his name his word is like fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed I cannot"* (20:9).

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This study in Acts comes at a time in my life when the longing to serve God has come through the fires of pain. I have watched my wife slowly recover this past year from a brain tumor operation which took away her ability to speak, read, and write. And then I stood back and watched helplessly as my oldest son died after a nine month struggle with brain cancer. Like Jeremiah I have cried out, *is this how God rewards his faithful servants?* As missionaries for six years in England, God seemed to have done so much through our ministry, so humanly what he was asking us to go through now did not make sense.

I began this study on Acts only days before my son was led into the presence of God. This interruption in my life in the past year has become a breeding ground for renewed passion to serve God. I can no longer hold it in. This is what has led me to undergo a personal study on Passion from the record of Acts. Acts is the story of men and women who, following the resurrection and ascension of Christ, moved on with passion to serve their Lord. It is a wonderful story of what God will do to people and through people who willingly place their lives on the potter's wheel.

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### (Introduction)

Several years ago a friend asked my advice regarding the prospect of marriage. He had been courting a girl for some time and both knew the relationship needed to go somewhere. He wanted to know of me whether or not they should marry. I wasn't quite sure why my input on the matter was so valuable, but, nevertheless, my response seemed to strike a nerve in his confusion. My response was simple and direct. *"Are you passionately in love with her? If yes, then by all means marry her. If not, don't."*

Apparently my friend was not passionately in love as the relationship stalled for some years. I just heard though that they have since gotten married. I assume in the meantime, if he took my advice, he fell passionately in love with her.

My advice that he first be passionately in love presumed that the relationship could only stand under predictable hardships if there was a willingness to suffer together and remain in love through the suffering. We don't often link passion with suffering. Passion to most of us is a feel good emotion, a deep affection that is blinded to reality. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The book of Acts is a book about passion but a passion that far surpasses what we would equate as passion is merely a deep effectual love for someone or something. The word passion occurs only once in Acts, and when it does it is speaking of the suffering of Jesus. In fact in the context suffering and passion are synonymous. *"After he had suffered he showed himself to these men..."* (Acts 1:4) Interestingly older translations substitute *suffering* with the word *passion*, thus reading; *"After his passion he showed himself to these men..."* According to David Schroeder in a book entitled The Broken God, the passion of Jesus emerged from a life of suffering. Schroeder helps us better understand what biblical passion is. He says, *"The root word for both Passover and suffer is the basis for our word, passion. When we speak about passion of our Lord Jesus, we are talking about his suffering. He was most eager for his followers to understand his*

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*suffering in light of the Passover, which had enabled the Jewish people to be delivered (saved) out of their dire situation" (The Broken God, p.27).*

I would define passion like this; Godly passion is a longing to serve Jesus with a willingness to die for him. The Apostle Paul's life was summed up by this sort of passion. *"For to me, to live is Christ, to die is gain... I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far, but it is more necessary that I remain with you"* (Phil. 1:21-23). Because of Paul's passion for Jesus, living, dying, suffering meant nothing as long as he had Christ. That is passion.

Do you have passion? Do you possess such a love for Jesus that you are willing to even die for him? You see, that is the story of Acts. It is a study on passion; men and women so full of love for Jesus that their entire life was consumed by him. This is the story of the Holy Spirit (the book should be entitled the Acts of the Holy Spirit, not Apostles) who fills people with passion. One verse summarizes this zeal. *"For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard"* (Acts 4:20). People filled with passion are simply moving the direction the Holy Spirit takes them. If it is on the front lines, so be it. If it is prison and beatings, then that is accepted. If it means death, there is an eagerness. Passion is marked then by this attitude; *Lord, I am so much yours; I want to be so available to you, I am willing to go through anything for your name's sake.*

You will find in Acts men and women with passion who speak boldly about Jesus. You will meet Peter and John who disregarded the threats from the authority to speak of Jesus. You will encounter a man who had a transformed passion from persecuting Christians to becoming a persecuted Christian himself. You will stand in awe as a dedicated follower of Jesus happily faces death as stones are hurled at him. His pain means nothing compared to the vision he has of Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father ready to receive him. You will notice a church expanding rapidly with passion, a persecuted church that seems to grow faster when the pressure is greater.

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If you are a fan of basketball you will certainly recall the moment not long ago when Michael Jordan announced his retirement from the game. At a press conference he was asked why at the peak of his game he would choose to quit playing. His answer was understandable. He had lost his passion for the game. The road trips were too long. He was tired. His body ached more than in his younger days and took longer to recover. The pressure of stardom did not seem to drive him any longer. *"There is nothing left for me to do,"* Jordan concluded, *"I have done all there is to do."* In short, playing was no longer worth the pain. Michael Jordan lost the passion.

There are many Christians, maybe you are one of them, with great skills and tremendous talent and gifts, who are now tired. These Christians have lost their passion and are tempted to announce their retirement from the game, if we can stretch the analogy that far. Sometimes it hardly seems worth the pain anymore. The aching muscles and long road trips seem too much. You see, the passion is gone.

Remember the story of Acts takes place *"after Jesus suffered these things"* (1:3). If there is an *after suffering* for Jesus there certainly is for us. Jesus' example teaches us that ultimately it is worth the pain but not worth losing the passion. *"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before endured the cross, scorning its shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne and God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart"* (Heb.12:2-3). The story of Acts is about men and women (the church) who continued where Jesus left off; suffering, persecuted, determined, passionate. The Holy Spirit gives fire to those willing to go on. Someday, when it is all over with, we too will sit down. It will be over with. We will take a deep breath, perhaps laugh. The Father, and his Son who sits next to him, will place their arms around us and say, *"It was worth it, wasn't it?"* Yes, it will be worth it all.

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THE REAL GLORY YEARS! (1:1-11)

*"a cloud hid him from their eyes." (vs.9)*

In 1992 my family moved from America to England to begin service as career missionaries with the Christian and Missionary Alliance. We were led there by the

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direction of the Holy Spirit but the human responsibility of getting us there and supervising our work rested on the shoulders of our field director. After several years of working under him, a good friendship developed with him and his wife. We were saddened then to hear one day that he had been selected to serve in the post of regional director over Europe. This would mean he would have to move away from us. I would later appreciate the fact that by moving away, our friend would be in a position to do more for us and our work. There, at the national office, he would have the ear of those who made decisions that directly affected what we did out there on the field. While we preferred to have him with us, we understood that in the bigger scheme of things it was better for him to go.

It is natural for us to assume that the glory years of Jesus were those three years He lived on earth. When most of us think of Jesus, we reflect on the events that took place during that earthly ministry. These were the years when God seemed nearer to us. After all God had taken on flesh and experienced humanity. God was with us. He was Immanuel. We can appreciate then the disciples' sadness in hearing Him say that He was leaving this earth and leaving them, his friends. It was necessary though for him to return to his Father because there, at the national office, he could do more for His disciples than He could here on earth. John was quick to note this in his gospel where he quotes Christ. *"It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you: but if I go, I will send him to you"* (John 16:7). The disciples were meant to understand that while they preferred to have Him physically with them it would be better for them if He went to His Father. There, at the right hand of the Father, He could do more for them than if He stayed with them.

Luke, the writer of Acts, begins his record of the early church, by telling his friend Theophilus that the gospel (Luke) was written to convey what *"Jesus began to do and teach until he was taken to heaven"* (Acts 1:1). The gospels are a record of Jesus' three years of earthly ministry. There we have the testimony of his life with us on this earth. This sequel (Acts) is a record of what happens next. Here is the "rest of the story." Here

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is what happened when Jesus moved on to the national office to reclaim his authority at the right hand of the Father. Acts shows us that Jesus is not finished with His work, rather He is just beginning. His ministry would simply move from earth to heaven.

The book of Acts then is an account of Jesus' continuing ministry but now from heaven. The book of Acts is an account of Spirit filled people who caught the passion of Jesus and who lived as Christ on earth. The gospels show us Christ glorifying God through wonders, teachings, and relationships. Acts shows the Church doing the same thing. It shows what would be just the beginning of the Spirit of God unleashed upon the earth; people doing what Jesus did, *"preaching the good news to the poor. Sent to proclaim freedom for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to released the oppressed"* (Luke 4:16). It is still Jesus doing all this with one difference. He now does it through us, the Church. *"As you sent me into this world, I have sent them into the world"* (John 17:18).

And so we see that Luke begins his record by showing Jesus passing on the baton to His disciples. Acts begins where Luke leaves off; with the Great Commission. For 40 days after His resurrection He appeared to them preparing them for what they will now have to do. They would now be commissioned to do on earth what He began to do and now will continue to do through them. *"He spoke to them about the kingdom of God"* (vs.3). This was His passion on earth or what John Stott refers to as the burden of His message. It would now become their passion and a burden they must carry. He commands them to wait in Jerusalem (vs.4) and to do nothing until they become empowered by the Holy Spirit. This *"gift promised by my father"* was what they would need to have the passion Jesus had. *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and the to the ends of the earth"* (vs.8).

With these words he left them. Not to be alone. No. Now he would be more with them than ever before. The glory years then are not the years Jesus spent on earth but the years

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since. John Stott in his commentary on Acts puts it succinctly. *“This Jesus of history began his ministry on earth; the Christ of glory has been active through his Spirit ever since, according to the promise to be with his people ‘always, to the end of the age.’”*

The promise etched deep in the pages of Acts is the promise of His return. The disciples (vs.11) stared up where he left them perhaps wanting to linger on the memory of Christ’s years with them in as a similar way one would linger at the grave site of a loved one. It took an angel to kick them into action. *“He will come back now get to work”* was their underlining message. Those of us who love Jesus should also not be caught staring nostalgically in the pages of scripture. We too have work to do. The great years of Christ are not the three years on earth but the years that followed. He works most powerfully today, through you and through me, through the Church. Oh, I do look forward to his return when that work will finally be done and I shall be able to see him face to face. Now, that will be glory for me.

Meanwhile I have a task, to spread the message of the Kingdom. That is to be the burden of my message, my passion. Jesus wants to reside as king in the lives of people making them citizens of heaven. That is what should consume us; Jesus’ passion becoming the passion of the Church.

TAG YOUR IT! (1:12-26)

*“One of you must become a witness with us of the resurrection.”*

Several years ago I had the joy of visiting someone in the hospital, this time accompanied by my daughter. Having developed a tender and sensitive heart when her mother was

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hospitalized, she felt comfortable in this setting. Since this particular hospital had several floors, we chose usually to take the elevator rather than struggle up the flight of stairs. We needed of course to save our breath for our visit. We used the small confined space of the elevator to play a game usually reserved for the open space of the outdoor. There in that small moving box my daughter and I played tag. I still laugh picturing my daughter giggling uncontrollably as she chased me around in circles and then calling out, "*Tag! Your it!*"

Sometimes I wish knowing God's will about something was as easy as playing tag in an elevator. But it is not that easy and we will see why.

The disciples took a long walk away from the ascension. Verse 12 tells us it was a Sabbath days' walk from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem which means it was no more than three quarters of a mile. We have to assume that pace was slow and the mood very gloomy. What do you do when your best friend has left you?

Obeying Jesus' instruction the eleven (vs.13) finally settled down in an "*upstairs room where they were staying.*" Once the dust settled in their cluttered minds and the reality of Jesus' departure reached acceptance, there was another more earthly issue that needed to be settled. Replacing Judas. Now, keep in mind it was Jesus who had chosen the twelve and according to Mark's gospel this was purposeful and calculated, not random. "*Jesus called to him those he wanted and they came to him. He appointed twelve - designated them apostles - that they might be (1) with him, (2) that he might send them out to preach, and (3) to have authority to drive out demons*" (Mark 3:13-15). Judas was one of those chosen with purpose and mission by the Lord. His heart had turned black, nevertheless, he had been chosen by Jesus to the special privileges of serving as an apostle. Understandably there is a sense of grief in the room over Judas' rebellion and death. Judas was "*one of our number and shared in our ministry*" (vs.17).

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I am currently being overtaken by the wake of grief over the death of my son. His loss has left a deep vacuum in my heart. Yet deep in my heart I can begin to hear the drum beats of passion to serve Jesus out of this loss increasing in sound. Servants who mourn personal loss must keep serving despite the depth of that loss. This must have been the climate and attitude in that room. There was deep grief, but accompanied by a growing determination to keep going. A dark cloud envelops them as they consider Judas' betrayal and suicide, but it was time to move on. I would urge you to consider this if you have faced a loss. Your greater call is to service for the living King. So serve and allow God to use the loss to serve him more deeply and more faithfully.

The Holy Spirit covers the disciples' grief with a renewed sense of purpose and one objective hangs over these faithful servants. Judas must be replaced. The vacuum in leadership left in Judas' death must be filled by someone who has been there and done that; someone who has been with Jesus from the beginning (vs.21) and someone who has a passion to witness. *"One of these must become a witness with us of the resurrection"* (vs.22). But this would not come about as easily as playing tag in an elevator. It would need to be a "God thing".

The process by which Mathias is chosen offers us a fascinating and clear glimpse of how to know God's will. There is far more to this than the drawing of lots. If you are seeking God's will look at the way God's will is reached here and model this for your life. Taking the events together to reach God's choice, we could say there are four ways to know the will of God. Keep in mind that this situation is another reminder to us that God doesn't often make His will easily known to us. He makes us work for it, not because He plays games, but often it is in the process that we become ready to receive it. Let's review that process then.

1. Waiting - Jesus had instructed the disciples to go to Jerusalem and wait (1:4). Through waiting the disciples would become people ready to receive the Holy Spirit. In waiting they would set aside their own desires and aspirations and be focused on God's. Knowing

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God's will needed to be preceded by a waiting attitude, a desire for God to move in His timing and in His way. I am not very good at waiting. Recently, after what has become a two-year sabbatical from the ministry, the doors are beginning to open again for ministry. Through discussions with leaders from the national office and representatives on the mission field, my heart has begun to stir again with a passion to serve God on the front line. I found myself impatiently trying to determine what course this would take me until I realized I needed to enter this situation as a servant. A servant stands ready until called. A servant is good at waiting. He does nothing differently until called to do so. Meanwhile, he continues faithfully with the task he has been given. David possessed this type of attitude when waiting for God's direction while under pursuit by King Saul. Looking for a place to wait, and hide, David says to the King of Moab; "*Would you let father and mother come and stay with you until I learn what God will do for me?*" (1 Sam.22:3).

2. Looking to the scriptures - Much of God's will is already revealed to us in the scriptures. My wife loves to recall how the scriptures settled an important matter in her life regarding a relationship. She came to Bible College at the age of 17 already wearing an engagement ring given to her by a young man in California who was not a believer. One day the message of the president of the College convicted her heart when he said, "*Why do we wonder what God wants for our lives when he has already told us in the scriptures.*" My wife broke up with her boy friend only to walk right into my path.

Peter was moved to act for a replacement for Judas because of his knowledge of the scriptures on that particular matter. The scriptures actually spoke of that particular moment in history and that particular situation. This was then a specific leading of the scriptures. "*The scriptures had to be fulfilled*" (vs.16) and "*It is written in the book of Psalms*" (vs.20). Both of these statements reveal a strong desire to be obedient to God's voice. When we seek God's will, the first question must be *what has God said about this already?* We will not often find an answer meant directly for that particular moment in time. God deals a lot in general principles that apply to specific issues we face. Our

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responsibility, as it was for the disciples, is to know the scriptures and then be obedient to its prompting.

3. Acting - The casting of lots, I believe, was simply a token response to confirm the decision already made by the Holy Spirit. Like our casting a ballot in an election this procedure brought together man's heart with God's heart. When God's will is revealed, we will know it. I think that is the point of the casting of lots. God's divine purpose is aligned with man's actions. Our hearts beat with God's on the matter involved.

Mathias then becomes Judas' replacement, a man of passion ready to witness about the resurrection. Are you also such a man? If God has tagged you, you're it! Move on with passion. You too are a witness of the resurrection with a vital voice among the witnesses. Keep in mind that the man not chosen, Joseph, although not included in that prominent place, still served with passion. It is not our position that matters, but our hearts. God looks for people willing and ready to serve. Let's follow along in Acts and see what that sort of servant heart means.

### THE BREATH OF GOD! (2:1-3)

*"We hear him declaring the wonders of God" (vs.11).*

The mission in the hands of the apostles was to speak of the message of the Kingdom of God. We saw already in (1:3) that Jesus spent forty days with them speaking to them *"about the Kingdom of God."*

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This mission would require help and that help would come in the power of the Holy Spirit. The pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost would give life and passion to the Church. Without it the church would remain a corpse. You would agree with me that dead people are not very good witnesses for God.

When God made Adam the form of his body was lifeless, and it was useless, I might add, until God breathed into him. Only then did Adam “*become a living being*” (Gen. 2:3). I saw first hand how the breath of God defines life. The moment I saw my son die, I knew he ceased to have identity as a living person. What lay before me was a lifeless body - a corpse. His spirit had left his body and he, the person, who he was with his character and personality, was gone. I became overwhelmed by how the breath of God makes us who we are and when taken from us, life is gone. My immediate reaction was, *that is not my son*. I knew he was no longer there.

The Church in Acts chapter two was a body that needed life. The Church would have no passion, no movement until empowered by the Holy Spirit, who would fill that corpse with the breath of God. This is the wonder of Pentecost. John Stott in his commentary on Acts puts it like this; “*As a body without breath is a corpse so the church without the Spirit is dead.*” How this imparting of this life to the Church came about is fascinating.

First there was the sound that could only be compared to a great mighty or rushing wind. But it was far more than just that. It was the sound of God visiting them. Wind is a symbol of power. The Church, made of the dust of the earth, would now become a living being filled with the breath of God.

Secondly, there was something like tongues of fire resting on each person in that room. Fire is a symbol of purity, and it would rest not as one flame over the whole group but as individual flames over each person. Every person making up this new Church would be purified. They, together, would become a holy priesthood (1 Pet. 2:5) ready to serve God, but they would have to do it in purity in the same way Isaiah’s lips needed to be purified

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by hot coals before he could speak for God. There exists here a great challenge to all servants that they must begin and continue their ministry in purity. Servants of God are set apart for God, therefore set apart from the world. Before God can use us, he must take us from the world and clean us up before sending us back into the world.

Wind and fire came and then each person began to speak in languages unfamiliar to them. Pentecost is best remembered for this. Representatives from all over the modern world were there and they heard the apostles "*declaring the wonders of God in their own tongues*" (vs.11). The breath of God could now be heard as words through the revived body of his church. The confusion of Babel was reversed, and a common language now was spoken, one calling for unity and love. The "*wonder of God,*" or the message of the Kingdom could be heard by all who would open their hearts and listen.

As I write this I can not help but notice God's stethoscope being placed very near my own heart. How much sign of life is God able to detect? Is there that evidence of healthy spiritual breathing that marks me as one who is controlled by the breath of God? Or have I allowed myself like the church at Laodicea to become lifeless - a corpse that might just as well be disposed? It was in 1978 that the Holy Spirit breathed fully the breath of God in me as I made myself fully available to God. I am really not interested in arguing whether or not this was a crisis subsequent to salvation. All I know is that at that moment God consumed me. From that moment on I became aware of God's life in me. He now controlled me. There have been moments when sin has sought to knock that breath out of me and I have become weakened and spiritually faint, but the convicting power of the Holy Spirit has served as supplementary oxygen to renew that life.

Reading Acts 2 has moved me to allow Jesus to live on in me. I want to be consumed by the breath of God. My prayer also for you is that you would become a person of passion completely filled with the life and breath of God, ready to speak before others of the wonders of God. You see this passage is not at all about speaking in tongues, it is about God speaking through us about himself before others. It is about us being so consumed

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by Him that we cannot help but declare His glory before those around us. “*And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who lives in you*” (Ro.8:11).

PULPIT PASSION! (2:14-21)

*“Let me explain this to you.”* (vs.14)

Once the dust of Pentecost settles there is some explaining to do. Some skeptics among the crowd of listeners question the source of this experience, some even blaming this erratic behavior on the influence of wine. It is Peter who is designated by God for this moment to explain. “*Let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I have to say.*” (vs.14) What follows is a sermon as full of the Holy Spirit of God as the experience that preceded it.

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When Peter stood with the eleven other disciples (vs.14) he “*raised his voice*” and filled with the breath of God and with a consuming fire in his heart, preached one of the most dramatic and certainly foundational sermons in all of the scripture. Peter’s sermon is not one that we can replicate, for every sermon breathed out by the Holy Spirit is unique and distinctly tailored for the moment and for a particular audience. It is so powerfully evident here that we have to conclude that it was God who spoke and Peter who served merely as the mouthpiece.

It had been three months since I had preached and the sermon for that particular Sunday was one carved in the craft room of pain and brokenness. I had literally constructed this sermon during the months of sitting at the bedside of my wife as she recovered from her brain tumor operation. My text was Hebrews 2:18 which speaks of the “Sufferings of Christ.” God used this text to construct a platform on which I would stand in those harrowing months and more of family tragedy. For the first time in my fourteen years of preaching, I had an overwhelming sense that God was speaking through me. My first words I remember to open the sermon reflected the awe of this new experience. I said, “*I stand here before you today as though I am preaching my first sermon ever.*” And in many ways I was, for never before was God so much the voice and I was merely the mouth piece as in that moment. Peter claims the same wonder when he says that it is God who “*has poured out what you now see and hear*” (vs.33).

I want to take a moment to look at Peter’s sermon as a model for preaching today. There is nothing fancy here, just two basic principles on effective preaching where God is speaking and we are serving as mouthpieces. Notice the two things Peter takes with him to the pulpit. The Open Bible and the Subject of Jesus. Open the scriptures before you congregation and talk about Jesus as the subject of those scriptures and God will breath through you.

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The Open Bible - I remember visiting a church one Sunday eager to hear the preacher. I had heard he was dynamic. It was a dynamic sermon, filled with humor, moving with illustrations, but sadly not once did the minister open the scriptures.

God speaks only when the scriptures are opened and explained. We speak when the bible remains closed. Peter's sermon was an explanation of the events surrounding Pentecost and he does so by referring to what God said about it in the scriptures. "*This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel,*" (vs.16) and "*David said about him...*" (vs.25) God foretold what the people just witnessed through the prophecy of Joel and by the words of David. Joel offered a sneak preview at the events when he said, "*In the last days God says I will pour out my Spirit on all people.*" (vs.17) The apostles speaking in the many languages represented is exactly what God foretold would happen. That very moment was a fulfillment of the scriptures and Peter, along with the others, knew it. Sons, daughters, young men even servants would hear the word of God, Joel told us (vs.18). Furthermore, what God has to say to his people at that moment will be relevant till the very end when the "*sun will be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood before the coming of the great day of the Lord*" (vs.20). Such is the power of God's word that its echo is heard at the end of the age. But there is more. The open scriptures reveal an invitation that "*everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.*" (vs.21)

Again it is the scriptures that come to Peter's aid when he needs to explain the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Peter does not need his own words to argue the point. The power of the scriptures rest on its own credibility. It was David who spoke of the one who would not be "*abandoned to the grave.*" The *Holy One* would never reach the stage of decay (vs.27). David could not be speaking about himself, Peter argues, because (vs.29) his tomb with his body in it remains in Jerusalem.

You see, Peter did not need his own words to preach because God had already spoken. A good sermon always refers people to the voice of God. If you are a preacher, take your Bible to the pulpit, open it, and let God speak.

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The Subject of Jesus - The subject of Acts is Jesus. The subject of the apostles' lives is Jesus. "*We preach Christ crucified*" Paul's tells us in 1 Cor. 1:23. Even the subject of Joel's message was Jesus. "*And anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.*" (vs.21) "*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to man by which we must be saved*" (Acts 4:12). And the subject of Peter's sermon is fully about Jesus.

Yet as you listen to Peter you notice he was not consumed with relating all that happened during Christ's earthly ministry but rather his present ministry. Peter had walked with Christ and could have impressed his audience by telling anecdotes of his experiences with Christ during those glorious three years. Yet what mattered to Peter should be what matters to us and that is where Jesus is now and what he is doing now. Certainly his earthly life is crucial to understanding salvation, but Jesus' ministry is a present one from his exalted position in heaven. "*Exalted to the right hand of God he has received from the father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear*" (vs.33). What the people saw and heard was happening because of where Jesus is now. The present ministry of Christ is what consumed Peter. Jesus died, rose again, and ascended to the right hand of the father (vs.33-34). There he works for us "*speaking to the father in our defense...*" (1 John 2:1).

What we see happening today in the Church and through the Church is not due to the past memory of his three ministries on earth. That would be religion. Religion embraces the past glory and tries to keep it alive through ritual and tradition. True Christianity is one of relationship. Jesus is now in heaven and there ministers to us and for us.

Peter's delivery of a risen Christ who now lives and serves brings about tremendous results. Three thousand people were "*cut to the heart*". One thing and one thing alone moves this mass to repentance. "*Forgiveness in the name of Jesus*" (vs.38). And "*those who accepted his message were baptized and about three thousand were added to their*

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*number that day*” (vs.44). That was the fruit of a sermon preached with passion, birthed in the open scriptures and solely about Jesus. Go thou and preach likewise my friend. Never go to the pulpit without the open word of God, and speak of nothing but the Lord Jesus Christ.

### THE REAL FACE OF REVIVAL (2:42-47)

*“Everyone was filled with awe.”* (vs.43)

We hear a lot about revival today, but I suspect few of us would know what to do with it if it happened. As a child I grew up on the remote island of Irian Jaya at the time of the Indonesian revivals which swept through that country in the late 60’s and early 70’s. I remember hearing with fascination of unusual events that took place during those revival fires. Dead people were purportedly raised from the dead, rocks turning into food, sick people miraculously healed. The story of one particular revival leader particularly fascinated me because his next stop was our village. One story associated with him especially whetted my appetite to meet him. At one of his outdoor meetings during a

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heavy rain storm he prayed, and an invisible umbrella deflected the rain from falling on the crowd.

Needless to say, I expected some dramatic thing to happen also in our village. But with every meeting nothing unusual took place, unusual in my estimation, at least. Looking back a true revival did take place that week, but it seemed too ordinary, too UN-dramatic. Many burned their fetishes, others renounced spirit worship, while some were set free from lives dominated by fear. The result of that week of meetings was many getting to know God in a real life changing way.

I wonder if revival did come would we either want it, or really be ready for its demands? Would we even recognize it as revival? What are we really expecting when we sing, "*Holy Spirit fall fresh on me*"? or "*Revive us Again*"? and "*Shine Jesus Shine*"?

What followed Pentecost and Peter's riveting sermon is, well, a rather ordinary revival. To witness it as a child, I might have been disappointed; people passing through that Christian community might have noticed rather ordinary things taking place; people sharing what they had together, families meeting and eating together in each other's homes, people helping each other out, widows being cared for, noses stuck in the scriptures,. little prayer groups and bible study groups meeting in various part of town. Nothing really all that dramatic. Nevertheless, this was the fruit of revival. People living ordinary lives but living them passionately for God.

What is revival? The word revival simply means to "restore life," and that is what we have witnessed in Acts 2, a community that was alive with the reality of Jesus' presence. People who lived genuine, generous and godly lives because God had breathed his life into them. Once they were dead but now they are alive. That is revival. Let me review for just a moment some of the marks of this revival. What we will see is that perhaps revival would happen more often if we stopped and considered what we are really asking from it.

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**1. There is a deep hunger for God's word** - *"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teachings"* (vs.42). Steve Camp, a contemporary Christian artist, gave this challenge once to a group of enthusiastic concert goers, *"if you really want to know God this year, lock up all your Christian albums for the year, and spend time alone with God in his word."* Perhaps we are missing out on revival because we are living cluttered lives. People cannot really long for the exclusive privilege of Sunday worship because they are fed all week through Christian radio and listening to Christian music. I really missed Christian radio programming while living in England as well as the easy availability of Christian literature. I realize though that in those years I hungered more for God's word because it was my only access and exposure to God. The worship hour on Sunday was eagerly anticipated because it was the one time in the week to sing praises, fellowship with other Christians and listen to, or in my case, give out the word of God. It was Amy Carmichael who challenged believers to *drink from the well, not from rivers which flow from the well*. A renewed hunger for God's word will often require us to reduce our Christian activities to the ones that only involve God.

These Christians, still reeling from the fires of Pentecost, had a passion to know what God was saying to them. They were so hungry *"everyday they continued to meet together in the temple courts"* (vs.46). Verse 42 adds that they were *devoted* to the teachings of the apostles. A hunger for God's word was backed by obedience, the longing to apply that truth to their lives. The original implies that they diligently worked toward this. Verse 41 tells us where it began. They *"accepted the message"* or eagerly desired to hear from God. That is where a hunger for God's word must begin. A longing for God to speak, but it continues by allowing no other voices to drown out his.

**2. There was a transformation in their character and social life** - *"They devoted themselves to...fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."* OK, I do agree that this revival was characterized by some amazing events. *"Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles"* (vs.43). But while

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the Apostles were performing the awesome miracles, another miracle of sorts was taking place among the common believers, and it was deeper and had lasting significance. Here was the real miracle that took place, the real evidence of God's presence with them. "*All the believers were together and had everything in common*" (vs.44). Furthermore, they sold their possessions and used that money to help the needy (vs.45). Now that was a miracle.

We would all agree that for believers to demonstrate this sort of love and self sacrifice requires a supernatural working of the Holy Spirit. People just don't behave in this way unless God is really at work in their lives, transforming their character and social life. While the healings and signs and wonders brought a deep respect for God the power that had the most transforming impact was the supernatural work within the community of believers. Voltaire asked, "*Show me your redeemed lives and I will believe your redeemer!*" Well, here is an example of lives redeemed. It was not the healings or miracles but the ordinary way by which Christians loved and cared for each other that caught the attention of the unbelieving community. It takes a supernatural work to turn a greedy man into a giver. It takes a supernatural work for believers to lay aside their difference to live in harmony with each other. These were the true marks of revival. The Holy Spirit transforming lives. "*This continued daily as they met with glad and sincere hearts in each others homes*" (vs.46).

**3. Finally, there was a deep commitment to evangelism** - What happened in the community attracted the unbelieving community. The way they lived with each other caused them to enjoy the "*favor of all people*" (vs.47). That word *favor* tells me these Christians did not behave in an odd way before others. The word favor implies acceptability. There was something attractive and appealing about those Christians that brought envy in the hearts of the pagan drawing them towards the believers. Keep in mind that these Christians had the interest of the lost burning in their hearts. They were not an isolated community. They did not live in communes separated from others. They lived out their lives before others. I like the way John Stott words it: "*The first Jerusalem*

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*Christians were not so preoccupied with learning, sharing and worshipping, that they forgot about witnessing.*” From the very beginning this was a witnessing church. The same should be with us. Our meeting together, our helping and encouraging one other and our love, make us to be a healthy church able to reach the lost community around us.

Are you waiting for revival? Perhaps revival has come and God is waiting for you. Too often we plead with God to move while all along God is waiting for us to move. We need nothing more from God. He needs more from us. I do not believe in prayer for revival at least in the context in which it is done today. Revival is a response to what God has already done for us in redeeming us and filling us with the Holy Spirit. Revival happens when God’s people repent of their sins and by doing so allow God to be Himself through us.

### EXALTING JESUS! (3:1-4:22)

*“It is Jesus that has given this complete healing” (vs.16)*

To many the healing of the crippled beggar in chapter three would be the main event of the story. It is not! The healing of the beggar becomes an opportunity for Peter and the apostles to exalt Jesus. The main event then is, again, Peter’s sermon. The healing is the introduction to the sermon.

Through Acts, Luke maintains a pattern of describing an event and then showing how this event provides an open window to reveal the Lord Jesus. In chapter two this event was the Pentecost experience. In the next chapter (4) the arrest of Peter gives Peter another strong opportunity to exalt Jesus. In chapter five the deceit of Ananias and

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Sapphire is an event that serves as a warning of what can happen when Jesus is not kept at the center. The stoning of Stephen in chapter seven becomes another rich event to exalt Christ under the worst of situations even death. You will see this pattern repeated through Acts. Luke describes a situation, a real life story, and then reveals Christ through that event. There are 27 sermons recorded in Acts, each of them composed in the school room of real life ordeals.

Not every situation in Acts has the happy ending of this story. Acts gives us the record of many who did not fare as well as the crippled man, yet Jesus is exalted nonetheless. The death of my son one month ago from my writing this ended the hope and expectation the God would restore him. Months of pleading did not move God's hands the way we wanted. It must sound ludicrous that Jesus is somehow exalted in the death of my son as much as he would be had my Travis been healed. Yet through this crisis I have discovered that Christ being exalted has nothing to do with outcome but in our reaction to the outcome. Stephen for example, did not avert death. He took the full brunt of man's abuse. He responded though to this cruelty by exalting Jesus. We will look at his story later.

In the story of the crippled man, we have to assume that Peter would have preached the same sermon had the man not been healed. Exalting Jesus was not dependent on the outcome. In this particular case his healing provided the audience necessary to hear Peter speak of Christ in the same way the stoning of Stephen provided him with a platform to speaking boldly of his Lord. *"All the people were astonished and came running to them in the place called Solomon's Colonnade."* (vs.11) You see, it really should not matter whether things go your way or not for you to exalt Jesus. Would you exalt Jesus regardless of the outcome? Can you say the same thing of him in sickness as you do in health? Consider for a moment the boldness of Daniel's friends when threatened with the furnace. Their commitment was not based on outcome but on loyalty. *"The God we serve is able to save us from it and will rescue us... But even if he does not we want you to*

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*know, O King, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.” (Daniel 3:17,18)*

I find it fascinating that Peter and Stephen preach an almost identical sermon but again the setting is so different. Peter addresses a crowd of astonished miracle seekers, Stephen speaks to a mob filled with murderous rage.

Let’s take a moment and review what Peter says for doing so will equip us with the necessary content to exalt Jesus whatever the circumstance. As we study the sermon we notice that immediately Peter turns the subject to Jesus. His immediate response to the people’s fascination over the miracle is to refer to Christ. Peter had every opportunity to exalt himself here and the audience would have lapped it up. He even had it at his disposal to market the healing itself. He had the crowd at palm of his hands. Yet his first objection is to steer the attention away from himself to Christ. *“Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk.”* (vs.12) The focus is immediately deflected by this statement, away from the miracle to the one behind the miracle. *“The God of our fathers has glorified his servant Jesus.”* (vs.13)

Several weeks before my son died I had the painful duty of having to put a program together for the funeral. All along it was my desire that the Lord Jesus was honored. This theme was reflected in the heading of the program bulletin. *In memory of Travis Andrew Schultz and in honor of our Lord Jesus Christ.* Jesus was exalted on that day as I have never seen him exalted before.

Our immediate reaction to any situation ought to be *“what can be said about Jesus regarding this?”* This theme singled Paul out as a man driven to promote Christ. *“And whatever you do, whether in word or in deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the father through him.”* (Col.3:17) To the Corinthians Paul said, *“For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified”* (1 Cor. 2:2).

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Secondly, Peter's sermon exalts Jesus by referring to his sacrificial death and his resurrection power as the basis for the healing. *"You handed him over to be killed, you disowned him...You disowned the righteousness one and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life but God raised him from the dead...It is Jesus name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see"* (vs.13-16).

The complete healing Peter refers to here is far more than physical restoration. He is speaking about the complete healing of the man's soul. The man clings to Peter in verse 11 in gratitude for his salvation as much as for the physical healing he has received. Likewise, our message to people in every situation is that Jesus has the power to restore us spiritually. Like Peter we ought to speak of Jesus first, and then share what Jesus can do. He who conquered death has also the power to raise you up and restore you to life. Whether the result is healing (the crippled man) or death (Stephen) both lead to life because Jesus conquered death.

How are you at exalting Jesus? Do you look for every opportunity to refer to him? Are you eager as Peter and Stephen were, to tell of his wonders. Both Peter and Stephen spent a good deal of time reviewing the history of God, speaking of His wonders through the record of Israel's history. You too, can share in less moments what He has done for you. There is no better way to exalt Jesus than to tell others of His record in your life.

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### THE MAKING OF COURAGE! (4:1-22)

*“They took note that these men had been with Jesus” (vs.15)*

You remember the healing of the lame man provided the opportunity to exalt Jesus. We observe now a principle that seems to predictably follow any situation where Jesus takes the glory. We find in such cases that the devil cannot stand for it; he will do all he can to oppose it. The principle is this. When you seek to exalt Jesus, the devil will try to tear you down.

It might appear on the surface that the apostle's adversaries are the priests and Sadducees, but this is only a surface observation. The real adversary is Satan himself who exists to put a damper on any situation where Jesus has been exalted. Consistent though

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with God's ways, what should have been a defeat becomes just another opportunity for further exaltation. Let us move on to see how that happens.

There is probably no better place in Acts that guides us in knowing how to respond to threats against our witness. Who can read about Peter and John's boldness and wit and not feel that they too can face the opposition in their lives? The two apostles are taken by the religious leaders because of their public claim (vs.12) that Jesus was resurrected from the dead and it was by his power that the crippled man was healed. It baffles Peter that "*an act of kindness*" (vs.9) could be perceived as such a threat. It bothered the Sadducees that the name Jesus, even after they thought they had dealt with him, continues to influence and change lives.

Warned to stop speaking in his name (vs.18) Peter and John only resolve to speak more boldly. Right here the theme of Acts seems to be well written in stone. Opposition to the Christian faith only fans the flames of passion further. Does it in your life? What a probing thought this is. Do your petty difficulties, more inconveniences, deepen your determination to serve Jesus with more passion?

I observe several fascinating ways God strengthens his work in the context of opposition. Studying this has served to increase my longing to serve Jesus.

I note first that God's word, like a true sword, is sharpened by opposition. John Stott words it aptly when he says, "*the Sadducees could arrest the Apostles but not the gospel.*" With every strain and pressure recorded in Acts, the imprint of every letter of God's word is fixed more permanently on the tablet of man's heart. Verse 4 explains that "*many who heard believed.*" They believed what? The truth about Jesus. The gospel truth that God's Son is the answer and the only way to life. He is, as the Old Testament puts it, "*the stone you builders rejected which became the capstone*" (vs.11).

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I also notice that the Apostles' courage is strengthened in opposition. Verse 8 informs us that the only source for such courage is the indwelling Holy Spirit. Even those who fought against the apostles concluded that this boldness was uncharacteristic for *“unschooled, ordinary men...”* (vs.13). It was courage from the indwelling Holy Spirit that empowered Peter to accuse the leaders of crucifying Jesus and declaring that it was by his name *“that this man stands before you.”* It was the Spirit initiated courage that gave Peter boldness to make one of the most focused statements in all of Acts. *“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved”* (vs.12). Remember again, this bold declaration was made under duress and threat of death. It was courage that gave the two a fierce determination to proclaim Christ whatever the cost. *“For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”* (vs.20) Now that is passion. A determination rooted in love that sees no option but one: to speak of Jesus.

What we have observed here ought to put each of us to shame in the half hearted way we go about witnessing. I wonder if at times our tendency is to see witnessing as optional. Are we driven by such a love for Jesus, so determined that he becomes the only one we want to speak about? Well, sometimes God will have to press us to bring about such zeal in our lives. Pressures to our faith reveal the real quality of our love for Jesus. Witnessing is merely a by product of that love. I recently spoke at a local church about possessing a burden for the lost. My context was the sovereignty of God. Someone came to me after the service to thank me, commenting that he had been praying that God would give him a burden for the lostness of man. I did not say it, but I thought that such a burden is a product of a deep love for Jesus. One walks away from deep fellowship with Jesus burdened to speak to others about him.

I wonder if Peter and John were caught off guard by their own courage? It certainly thrilled the public who *“were praising God for what had happened”* (vs.21). The way is paved now for the gospel to be demonstrated and declared through the suffering of believers. It becomes the precedent for the rest of the story in Acts. It was the way of

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Christ, and it would become the way for the Church. Are you beginning to see that it is the way for you? God deepens passion through opposition. His word is sharpened through our suffering, and our boldness is strengthened.

### OVERWHELMED WITH GOD (4:23-37)

*“They raised their voices together in prayer to God.”* (vs.24)

I love biographies perhaps because the insight into the mind and heart of people who have undergone unusual experiences fascinate me. No biography fascinated me more than that of Terry Waite who spent five years as a hostage at the hands of Lebanese terrorists. An envoy for the Anglican Church, Waite was captured while on a mission to rescue other hostages.

When I first read the book I expected this religious man to unveil his faith and reveal how a belief in God would carry him through this trial. I was eager to find how his view of God must have sharpened during that experience. To my disappointment I read about a man overwhelmed and disillusioned. The man who wrote this book still felt the fresh

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wounds of having spent five years in isolation. This was a story of a man tormented by loneliness and guilt. It would take Waite years to recover from his experience, and he admitted that the struggle continues. The effects of prison left a lasting mark, it appears.

The experience of prison and persecution seemed to have only one effect on John and Peter. They were overwhelmed not by the painful event, but with God. It only takes two verses for Luke to explain how the two “*reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them*” (vs.23). There was no need to go into great autobiographical depth to explain the conditions and treatments. These two had one goal and that was to praise God; that is exactly what they did during the remainder of the section.

When one enters a crisis, how he overcomes will depend on the view of God he has prior to the crisis. Many believers enter a crisis already struggling with God, so often that struggle will intensify. Of course we know from the scriptures that God often takes us through trials to refine these weak areas, but most often these weak areas become our nemesis. When we face a trial already praising God, we will likely praise God in the trial, and like it was for Peter and John, we will leave the trial still praising God. How often do we enter a trial with the nature and character of God dominating our thinking? That is what happened to Peter and John.

This section unfolds a beautiful prayer containing rich descriptions of God captured in the furnace of pain. It would be good for us even as we are undergoing our crisis to allow this prayer to form the content of our response. Let’s review the prayer.

Think Big about God. The prayer begins with a preoccupation with God as creator. When they raised their voices to praise God, full attention was on God, the maker of heaven and earth. “*Sovereign Lord... You made the heaven and earth and the sea and everything in them.*” (vs.24) The chief priests and elders were reduced to little insignificant figures, puppets in God’s hands, next to this awesome and involved creator. A friend of mine once put it this way once. “*When the problem gets big, God becomes small. But when*

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*God is big, the problem becomes small.*” Whatever you are going through let me encourage you to think big about God.

Tune in to God. As a response to your crisis allow God to speak to you. Let God take advantage of the situation you are in. What I mean by that is this. It is usually in a time of crisis that God has our attention more than any other time. These are moments when we are able to tune in to God as never before. The disciples having been overwhelmed by God as creator, are not overwhelmed by God as the revealer. This is what Peter and John, joined in by the other disciples, say to God. *“You spoke by the Holy Spirit”* (vs.25). It sounds like a cliché to suggest that we should allow God to speak to our situation but to see this applied can produce rich fruit. A review of history shows God speaking most clearly when man was in crisis. No case is more admired than that of David whose Psalms were a journal of God speaking to his suffering. *“You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouths of your servant our father David”* (vs.25). Everything God ever said to David is just as true for us today. One thing seems to dominate the disciples’ praise regarding God’s revelation, and it is this. Those (vs.25,26) who take their stand against God, *“plot in vain”*. God whispers in our pain that the object of the pain is nothing compared to who He is. He is, in fact, greater than our problems.

It has been the truths of God’s word, his revelation, that has carried me through the crisis of my sons death. I have commented to people that many of the truths and principles of God’s word are reserved for times like this. Many of the things God has to say to us are not going to mean much in our moments of ease. It is in suffering, and in loss that God has piques our attention. I can read a manual for a car in the comfort of my living room to understand how my car motor works and gain a good understanding of what to do should something go wrong. Pulling out that manual though, when the car has broken down at the edge of a busy street, will make that manual much more relevant to my situation. The disciples rejoiced that in the moment of their greatest crisis, God spoke to them. Can you rejoice in that to?

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Finally, as a response to your crisis you can be overwhelmed by God's purposes. Nothing He does is without purpose. It has become evident to the followers of Jesus that all the conspiracy and plots of evil men have all along been integral in forming God's purposes. *"Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in the city to conspire against your Holy Servant"* (vs.27). But their efforts failed. God allowed their evil intents to become the very material to build his plan. *"They did what your power and will had decided before hand should happen"* (vs.28).

This is what should overwhelm us about God's purposes. He takes what is meant for harm and turns it into His good. That very thought should bring about a resounding WOW from our lips. If that is so, should we not be eager to trust Him for everything? Joseph thought so. In fact, being overwhelmed by God's purposes motivated Joseph to forgive his brothers rather than lash out at them. *"Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives"* (Gen.50:19-20). Tempted to do so before, Joseph was now not about to question God's purposes. Rather, he was awestruck by how God in his sovereignty could take a completely messed up situation and redeem it for his own purposes. What a God.

Let's go back to the apostles prayer. All this about God, His creation, His revelation and His purposes which form the content of their prayer, give them a greater resolve to speak and serve with boldness. Knowing God is in charge and knowing that nothing slips out of his hands will do that to his servants. *"Enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness"* (vs.29). How could they go wrong with such a God on their side? *"What then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? ... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword... For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, neither angels or demons, neither the present nor the future nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Romans 8:31-39).

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### WHEN GOD BECOMES TOO COMMON (4:37-5:12)

*“Great fear seized the whole church.” (5:v.11)*

I shared with my wife recently my frustration over the Ananias and Sapphira story. What happened to them really doesn't seem very fair to me. I also wondered in what way their example fits into the events of our lives. If what happened to them serves as an example to the church, my question is, an example of what? I can't accept that God reacted this way simply because they kept back some of the money and God did not get what he needed to do his work. Many Christians still hold from God what they should be giving to Him. In fact, in our discussion Elaine and I tried to con temporize the story. Our conclusion was it would be like telling people you had to spend \$1000 to fix a car when that amount had been given to you as a gift toward the repairs. You tell others of your need, but hold back the information about the gift leaving people with the impression that you are left with a large payment to make. Is what Ananias and Sapphira did really very different from what takes place among believers almost daily today? Then why did God react only once? Let's find out.

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This is really a story of contrasts. It is a story from the record of the early church that reveal a people so Spirit-filled, that they were willing to stop at nothing to help and encourage their brothers and sisters in Christ. We realize that this was not a perfect community. As is the case in any Christian community, there were some who were not controlled by the Holy Spirit, thus the contrast. Ananias and Sapphira were not hypocrites in the sense that they lived as wolves in sheep's clothing. I am certain they believed the gospel message, prayed with others, met in their homes and, did all the things Christians were doing at that time. Their problem, very simply, was that they were not controlled by the Holy Spirit. They had not given themselves fully to God, choosing to allow self to rule rather than God's Spirit. This will eventually surface in a genuine community of believers. And controlled by their own spirit, not God's, these two nevertheless wanted to give the impression that, like the others, they too were controlled by the Holy Spirit.

Moved by the response of Barnabas' act of complete self sacrifice (4:36-37), Ananias and Sapphira believed they could receive the same attention and praise without equaling the sacrifice. Barnabas *"sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet"* Ananias and Sapphira likewise, *"sold a piece of property"* (5:1) but gave to the apostles only a portion of the sales but gave the impression that the full amount was being offered. Those witnessing this must have praised them just as they had praised Barnabas. This deception did not go unnoticed by God.

It was God who was wounded by their lie. The apostles benefited materially for it was no doubt a significant amount that was given, but that mattered little to God. God does not care how much we give him as much as how we give. Somehow, God reveals this deception to Peter. *"You have lied to the Holy Spirit"*, Peter admonishes, *"you have not lied to men but to God"* (5:3-4). God chooses then to make an example of Ananias and Sapphira bringing both their lives to an early and disgraceful end. They will always be remembered as the couple who tried to pull the wool over the eyes of God.

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As was often the case, God only needs to make his point once. This story is written permanently in the record of history as a witness to the entire Church that God is deeply wounded when what we live before others does not match the condition of our heart. (It is interesting that a similar precedent was set in the inception of the Old Testament Church where we find Achan attempting a similar deception before the community of Israel. See Joshua 6.)

God does not tolerate duplicity. Everything might seem healthy on the surface, but where there is falsehood there will be disunity. God longs for an honest community where people are living out who they are before God.

I often wonder to myself where it was that Ananias and Sapphira went wrong. I have no doubt they began as sincere, genuine believers, who, with the others, met in homes to pray and break bread. What brought them to this place of becoming the recipients of God's wrath? Why them and not others? There certainly must have been others who lived double lives? Why did God single them out? I want to identify several factors I believe contributed to Ananias and Sapphira's selfish behavior.

One of the primary causes for their action had to do with an over familiarity with God. In any great movement of God, there is the danger of people becoming accustomed to God. God becomes common. There is a distinctiveness about God that can be lost when we are constantly in his presence and when signs and wonders become the everyday thing. Consider what happened in Acts. Initially we witnessed the dramatic side of the Holy Spirit, the Pentecost experience. People who experienced this and witnessed it were filled with awe and wonder. Acts 2:11 describes the initial reaction to this great movement of God. *"Amazed and perplexed they asked one another, 'what does this mean'."* When Peter and John healed the lame beggar, the people were struck with similar awe. *"When all the people saw him walking and praising God...they were filled with awe and amazement at what had happened to him."* (2:9,10) Furthermore, Peter's sermon to the Sanhedrin

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brought about this reaction; *"When they saw the courage of Peter and John ... they were astonished"* (4:13).

Some time must have passed where the awe turned to expectation. The sense of wonder gave way to familiarity. The surprise of miracles was replaced by the demand for miracles. The *oohs* and *ahs* over the wonder of God eventually faded from the lips of God's people. In any great movement of God, there is always the danger of the whole thing becoming too common and predictable. It was when God began to indwell his people that the drama took on an ordinary and expected turn. Spirit filled people began to carry on doing ordinary things and the miracle of God indwelling man sadly lost its wonder. They *"shared"* with each other (4:32); they *"testified to the resurrection"* (vs.33); *"there was no needy person among them"* (vs.34); people sold what they had and gave the proceeds to the Apostles (vs.35). Those who were hungry were fed. Those who were sick were cared for. The widow was offered support and the unemployed helped. This was the Holy Spirit at work. Less dramatic than Pentecost perhaps, but in many ways more powerful and more real-this was *"Christ in you, the hope of Glory"*, Paul speaks of in Colossians 1:27.

What Ananias and Sapphira lost was the sense of wonder in the greatest act of God; his indwelling of man. God became too familiar. Since Pentecost, and throughout history, God's presence with man has been as real as it was in those early days. It has not diminished one bit. Yet many have joined Ananias and Sapphira in losing the sense of wonder over this reality. It would take the sacrifice of these two for the wonder to be restored. *"And great fear seized all who heard what happened"* (5:5). *"Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events"* (vs.11).

Sadly, this was not the last time God was cheated of his glory and holiness. It happens today. God only needed to make his point once and expects the Church to learn from that lesson. We are responsible and accountable before God for the way we treat His presence. The record of Ananias and Sapphira is sufficient to keep the church in check.

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Furthermore, the example of Barnabas should encourage all God's people to be Spirit controlled not self controlled. Consequently, Barnabas feared God. It showed in his life. A deep reverence for molded Barnabas into an encourager and a generous self-sacrificing friend to the believing community. He did what he did before others primarily for God.

I wonder, has God become to common in your life? You can probably tell by how you live your life. Allow this narrative to seize you with fear. Come to God for a moment acknowledging his holiness and stand amazed that His holiness indwells you. Now go into your day and let him, the Holy God, determine all you do.

*"Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, "for our God is a consuming fire" (Heb.12:28,29).*

### PILOT IN COMMAND (5:12-42)

*"The Apostles left the Sanhedrin rejoicing." (vs.41)*

I am learning to fly an airplane. It is not as easy a venture as I always thought. There are many rules to learn particularly in what I have discovered to be an unpredictable and invisible air traffic system. Yet in every situation it is the pilot in command who has the final word on what to do. Passengers can be reassured (assuming the pilot is well trained) that in this volatile and unpredictable system the person who sits behind the controls knows exactly what he is doing.

This section in Acts begins to reveal in greater detail, a spiritual traffic system filled with dangerous conditions and unpredictable surprises. The devil hates what he sees happening and begins to hurl turbulent conditions onto the path of the Church. We just saw in the Ananias and Sapphira story one attempt at destabilizing the Church. The devil failed and now unleashes even harsher conditions. Passengers can be comforted though to know that regardless of the intensity of pressure placed against them they have a pilot in command who knows exactly what he is doing.

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God is a very intentional God. He knows the end from the beginning. He controls the middle and all that lies in between. While it might seem like turbulence and failure to the disciples, God's plan is definite. His church will make it through and even the gates of hell (Matt.16:18) will not prevail against it because He is the pilot in command.

The dramatic scene before us unveils not only a God in full control and intentional in all He does, but followers who stand in the turmoil with passionate confidence in that God. After all they follow Jesus, who modeled perseverance even in death. They witnessed the resurrection and became convinced by it that nothing can stamp out what is of God. That is the confidence of passion and the product of such confidence is courage.

Let's review what happened with the intention of gaining some personal insight to help inject more courage for all we face. What we witness and seek to model first is the **passionate confidence of a people who knew who was in control**. These disciples believed in the full sovereignty of God, and it made a difference in their everyday lives. Their trust in God was so real that they willingly and even joyfully faced anything for the sake of His name. Look what I mean and try to think of this as a real situation, not something fictional. *"The Apostles left the Sanhedrin rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for his name" (vs.41)*. Do you get what lies behind their acceptance? They were willing to endure opposition, and even the threat of death, because they were doing it completely for Jesus. They counted it a privilege to suffer for the sake of Christ. This was happening to them because they loved Jesus, and suffering for that love was worth everything, even the loss of personal security.

Let's enter the setting more closely. The Apostles find themselves the recipients of a band of jealous Sanhedrin. Remember, the Sanhedrin was a political supreme judicial and administrative council of the Jews made up of priests, scribes and elders. This same group who condemned Christ, now seek to vehemently lash out at all His followers. It is an honor to these followers of Jesus to stand where he had stood. And they were

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determined to endure this as he did. It was a joy to do so. The disciples are arrested, (vs.18) and put in jail. Later God would use prolonged jail time for his purposes, but for now his plan involved a dramatic release.

During the night the jail is opened by an angel (vs.19) and the Apostles are led to the temple where they immediately resume their teaching. *"Go. Stand in the temple courts and tell the people the full message of this new life.* (vs.20). Led by God's Spirit, and carried by passion, the disciples do not hesitate to obey. *"At daybreak they entered the temple courts as they were told, and began to teach the people"* (vs.21). You see, man can never set limits on what God has planned. God is a stubborn God who will have his way and even the greatest forces put together by man or demons cannot stand in his way.

Reflect for a moment on the powerful relevance of this truth for your life. Perhaps you have been consumed by a problem, and the problem has caused you to forget how big God is. If chains and prison cells would not hold the disciples back from serving with courage, then nothing should keep you from telling the *full message of this new life*. Even the common cold should increase that passion. It was Paul who understood so well the power of God in chains. Isn't it interesting that some of Paul's greatest truths were written by hands bound by chains. He says to Timothy, *"This is my gospel for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained* (2 Timothy 2:8-9). Here then is the second principle for us to model. **Adversity, can not and will not hold God back from doing what He has in mind to do.** Rather, God seems to work more effectively when we are limited.

I find great courage in the disciples' determination to pick up where they left off. Freed from prison, they immediately set off to the temple to continue their preaching. Following this sort of trauma, I think I would have wanted at least a day's rest to recover from the ordeal. Others would probably have assigned me a crisis counselor to assure this trial had not left deep psychological marks upon my life. Yet, verse 21 tells us that the

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first chance they had, *at daybreak*, they began to teach and preach about Christ. Their passion for Jesus pulled them like a magnet to the needs around them.

Such rebounding from suffering is a challenge for me to pick up where I left off when my life was so inconvenienced by two years of personal tragedy. My higher calling is to my Lord, not to myself or to my family. Not that I am tempted to put aside my family for the sake of the call. Living out that call begins in the home. I look forward though to *daybreak*, that first opportunity to continue where I left off when this crisis began. It is my longing to tell people the "*full message of this new life*" (vs.20).

When Peter and the others are brought again before the Jewish leaders, they face an intensity of anger that swells to rage when Peter proclaims, "*we must obey God rather than man*" (vs.29). Peter uses this opportunity to present again the full message of the gospel. Had it not been for the wisdom of Gamaliel (a teacher and Pharisee and highly respected by his peers) their fate would have been sealed. Gamaliel wisely saw that if this was a *God thing* you could never stamp it out. *Wait it out* was his advice. See what happens with it. If it is not from God, it will fizzle out into a harmless little insignificant movement. But if this is from God, there is absolutely nothing you can do about it. You just can't stop God. Yet many have tried, succeeded for a time, but in the end He always wins.

Do you need to know that today? The disciples left the Sanhedrin bloodied, bruised and physically exhausted -- but their hearts rejoiced. "*The Apostles left the Sanhedrin rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for his name.*" (vs.41) When you know nothing can stop God and you are serving God and living in the center of his will, you too will rejoice. It was Tertullian, a first century Christian, when addressing the Roman Emperor who said, "*Kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust ... The more you slow us down, the more we grow; the seed is the blood of Christians.*"

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### THE DEMON OF ADMINISTRATION! (6:1-7)

*"It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God" (vs.2)*

Thus far the devil has been foiled in his strategy to kill the church on two fronts. Persecuting the church only caused it to grow more vibrantly. The shed blood of believers was indeed the seed that produced a greater harvest. He then sought to corrupt the church from the inside but this only served to purify the church, giving greater intensity to the believers in seeing God as a holy and mighty God. Now if he could only burden the church! This third strategy has probably been his cleverest and remains one of his favorite today. He does this by distracting the church from her primary task. John Stott explains this latest ploy of the devil this way. *"If he could preoccupy the apostles with social administration which though essential was not their calling, they would neglect their God given responsibilities to pray and to preach and to leave the church without any defense against false doctrine."*

I am the first to admit that my gifts are not in the administrative area. I consider myself capable of it but whenever I have been given an prolonged administrative task I always have this inner conviction that I am being held back from doing what God has called me

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to do. I guess you could say I am a front line sort of person. I prefer to hold the weapon where the battle is fiercest than wrangle over papers.

I know of many pastors who are pinned under foot by the demon of administration. Convinced they are called by God to the front line to "*prayer and the ministry of the word*", they feel duty bound to keep the machine oiled for the simple and tragic reason that no one else is available to do it. Folks, God does not have us do something because there is a vacuum of personnel. How tragic. Ministers and all servants, for that matter, are called to do what God has gifted them to do. If someone has to do what is not in their gifting, and this at the expense of what they are called to do, it simply means some in the body of Christ is not doing their job. The way this issue was resolved in the early church provides some important principles on how to adjust church priorities today.

Notice first **the problem that existed**. The same problem exists today. In every church community there will be some who feel as though (and you have heard this many times I'm sure) *their needs are not being met*. Some express this frustration louder than others, and some make a point of harassing the leadership with it. These *poor souls* are often the ones that demand 90 percent of the pastor's attention. Gordon Macdonald refers to them as VDP's, or Very Trainable People. In many cases, however, the neglect is legitimate and arises from real situations where individuals need help. In the Jerusalem church there were widows from the Greek community of Jews whose needs were being neglected particularly when the dinner bell rang. "*The Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because the widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food*" (vs.1). Luke seems to imply that this neglect was intentional. This would make sense in light of some of the Jewish/Gentile tensions that existed then, particularly when it had to do with food. The apostles rather than preaching with fire, as they had been, found themselves in the unfortunate position of needing to put out fires. I wonder how many pastors today feel as though fiery stomping takes up more of their time than preaching, teaching and discipling. They are called to preach, but little time is available for this because of the draining and agonizing complaints of people around

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them. The pastor, with a sense of duty to care for his sheep, feels bound to keep these neglected ones happy only to find his preaching suffers.

Observe secondly how **the appropriate use of gifts promotes the gospel**. Seven are chosen to "*distribute food*," and these are no less important than the apostles. They just had a different calling. John Stott adds again; "*The apostles were not too busy for ministry but preoccupied with the wrong ministry.*" I have known situations particularly on the mission field where ten years after the commencement of ministry a missionary finally feels at home ... behind a computer. Or running a field office. Running a book store. He was never comfortable preaching and teaching, where his battle tools are the copier, the computer and the calculator, he is in his element.

A church finally in place to grow is one where the pastor is free to give his attention to preaching, teaching and prayer because others have been called by God (vs.3 *chosen*) and commissioned by the church, (vs.6 *presented to the apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them*) to ...(of all things) **distribute food**. Imagine having a commissioning service for ushers, and for those who set up refreshments, and the janitor and nursery workers. The result? "*The word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith*" (vs.7). Why? Because the right people were finally doing the right thing.

There is a third principle at work here. The problem is identified. The appropriate use of gifts promotes the gospel. Now we see that **those who were chosen to administration were filled with just as much passion as the apostles to proclaim the word of God**. These seven were more than pen pushers. They were Spirit Filled men, chosen by God and commissioned by the church, to care for the widows who had been neglected. And they did it with the zeal and passion of a preacher. They did this job with a passion to share the love of Jesus through words and by their actions.

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One of the seven men stands out to the writer Luke as a model of such servant-hood. He is Stephen. His example and that of the other six, elevates the lowly tasks, such as distributing food, to new and lofty heights. You see, in the Kingdom of God, any job, big or small if it is done for the sake of Christ is the *job well done by a good and faithful servant*. Jesus will someday honor such humility in service. *"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it for me'"* (Matt.24:40). Such willingness to serve not only releases pastors to do their job, but it provides new opportunities to proclaim Christ.

I am consumed with this one burden right now. I hope it is yours too. It is the insistent heart of passion. I want to be freed to do what God wants me to do. I desire not to allow before my path any task or burden that will hinder me, or bog me down, from my calling. I will be discerning when others ask me to carry out some task and weigh carefully whether it will hinder or help what God has called me to do. And I want to do all this without ever losing my servant heart. I am convinced that some of the tasks that come our way, which distract us from our mission, are subtleties of the devil. My heart is to obey the Spirit and to do what I do, so He might channel His work, unhindered, through me.

Keith Green, a man used by God through contemporary music died in 1982, having given his all to win souls for Christ. He saw this as his singular task in life, not entertainment or recording good music. This is best reflected in his song, Make My Life a Prayer to You. In a companion devotional to the song Keith reflects on John Wesley's single minded devotion to soul winning. *"I was struck by the fact that they (Methodists) looked upon soul winning as their only task. You have nothing to do but save souls, therefore spend and be spent for this work..."*

Interestingly, in the case of the Methodists, this passion for souls required a highly disciplined methodology, (the reason they became known as the *Methodists*). You could say the Methodists were a highly organized movement who exemplified administration as

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a means to best reach souls, not an end in itself. Administration is not really a demon, provided it is a tool used for God's glory. I trust your life is well oiled, ordered and well disciplined in such a way that your task is clear. Go and serve faithfully, and do it - whatever it is, for Jesus.

STEPHEN A LIFE WELL LIVED; HIS CHARACTER. (6:8-7:60)

*"Known to be full of the Spirit." (vs.3)*

My son's funeral, still only several months ago from when I write this, is something that remains etched in my memory with a deep mix of emotions. I sat two rows from the coffin which rested only feet from the spot where several months before Travis had approached the altar to give his life to become a missionary. Travis had responded to a call during a missionary conference to take that step of leaving all behind in order to follow Jesus. Grief and a deep sense of pride mingled together to form the substance of my tears. Travis literally gave his life to Jesus.

The death of a dear committed child is painful. Yet, I find this pain can only reach certain depths before it is churned into a response of praise for the memory of a dedicated, fully surrendered life. My longing is for that day when praise will dominate the grief.

Such is the response to the cruel and seemingly senseless death of Stephen here in Acts 6 and 7. Flip to the end of his biography, and the image of his tragic death will fill you with pain and even some anger. Look though at the content of his life, and you have no choice but to respond in praise for a life that was well lived. Here was a man who dedicated his life fully to Jesus, and died for it.

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I wonder if I will be remembered like Stephen, or even like my son. Not for the way they died, but for the way they lived. I don't know which I admire more in Stephen: his boldness in death or his dedication to service in life. I guess it would have to be his passion to service in life for this is what gave way to his response to death. It is true that *how we live will determine how we face death*. For Stephen, death was an open window to heaven, (7:56) a closure to his earthly life, but really only the turning of a page. He is living the continuing chapters right now in heaven. Stephen's life story is merely the preface to a book. Yes, it is his life, the way he lived it, his sold out commitment to Jesus, that attracts me more than his death.

I want to break Stephen's life into two parts. These will quickly ring familiar bells to you, as they likely form the two ingredients that distinguish your life. I want to look at his character, and the his mission.

There are six qualities that gave shape to this man accounting for the commitment he possessed. I will go through these quickly, scratching only the surface of each.

1. He was available - "*Choose seven men from among you...*" (vs.3). When the Church community was in need, seven men immediately came to mind as the right men to resolve the tensions regarding the neglected widows. Stephen was one of them, a man who was known by his life for his availability, someone who had demonstrated a selfless love for others. Someone has once said that what God looks for is *not our ability but our availability*. Much can be done through a man who demonstrates a willingness to serve.

2. He was approachable - People who make themselves available to God are approachable by others. Having said "*Here I am*" to God, Stephen and the other six, demonstrated to others a desire to help and be useful. A true servant is easily

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approachable. Another word for this quality is humility. Others will not hesitate to come and ask such a servant for help.

3. He was "instructable" - Anyone so full of the Holy Spirit and possessing such a deep love for Jesus and willing to take on any task could be trusted. Stephen did more than follow man's orders. He obeyed the instructions of God. He listened to the voice of the Holy Spirit. *Full of God's grace*, (vs.8) Stephen listened first to God.

4. He was humble - These men were chosen so the disciples could excel in their ministry. (vs.4) Humility, or was it perhaps wisdom (vs.3), led Stephen to see what God received from his service not what he got out of it. Humility will do that for you. You will ask in every situation, *now what will God get from this*. That becomes the guiding force to everything you do. It will direct your focus to the results for God, not for self or for others.

5. He was visionary - Serving tables was Stephen's task. His calling took him further. Verse 8 tells us nothing about serving food to the widows, although we know this was done. Why is this? Because Stephen did not restrict himself to a social task. *"Full of God's grace and power he did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people."* Wait just a minute. This guy is acting just like the apostles. Stephen's vision for service went beyond serving widows to serving God in whatever way possible. Serving tables was simply the means to doing that. This means the widows received far more than they asked for. Some were healed. They received far more than a plate of food. They were led by Stephen to the communion table of fellowship with Jesus himself. Life would consist of more than food and clothing for Stephen (Matt. 6:25). His greater priority was to make sure these widows and others were not neglected in the daily distribution of spiritual food.

What is it that shapes these character qualities in Stephen's life? Here is the substance. He was *"Full of the Spirit and wisdom"* (vs.3). Stephen had emptied himself of his own

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ambitions and passions, and God possessed him. Controlled by the Holy Spirit, God was able to direct Stephen's mind and thoughts. That would be the source of his wisdom. Like Solomon, Stephen received wisdom because he turned his back from the desire for riches and worldliness. He was also, "*Full of God's grace and power*" (vs.8). What does it mean to be *full of God's grace and power*? I see it to mean that Stephen was gracious in the way God is. Inhabited by God, Stephen was full of God's grace. look at his life and you observe the grace of God. And there is power to that. You will always notice a unique strength in people who are truly gracious. They give their time. They listen. They cry with you. They hurt with you. That was the content that shaped the character of Stephen's life. Wisdom, faith, grace and power.

It was God living in him that helped him know how to live. That is wisdom.

It was God living in him that gave him the confidence that his life belonged to God. That is faith.

It was God living in him that gave him a gentleness around others. That is grace.

It was God living in him that enabled him to know what to do for others. That is power.

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### STEPHEN, A LIFE WELL LIVED: HIS MISSION! (7:1-60)

*"I see Heaven open."* (vs.56)

The world of business Mongul Ted Turner is right now threatening to turn upside down. What began last years as rumors is now accepted as fact that his wife, the notorious and energetic feminist Jane Fonda, is a born again believer. Led to the Lord by her own chauffeur, Fonda now attends a solid, evangelical Baptist Church in Atlanta. Sadly this has led to a break up in their marriage. Two worlds are colliding. It is understandable that Turner would struggle with his wife's new faith. He lives by values and pursues much that is contrary to God's. Some years ago Turner exposed his true stand on life when he said, *"I don't want my tombstone to read 'I never owned a network'"*. I read this quotation in a fascinating account of an old professors journey in death in a popular book by Mitch Albom entitled, Tuesdays With Morrie. Albon, who has been deeply impacted by his former professor's journey, reflects further on Turners statement. He says, *"I wonder if Turner ever found himself in my old professors position, his breathing disappearing, his body turning to stone, his days being crossed off the calendar one by one - would he really be crying over a network?"* Albon then makes this conclusion. *"The day he learned that he was terminally ill was the day he (Morrie) lost interest in his purchasing power."*

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It is in the face of death that what really matters to us surfaces to the top. Death peels away all the layers and what you see in a person at death is the true condition of his soul. Death removes all the façades. At death a person no longer cares what others think about him. A believer will be consumed with God, while the unbeliever is tormented by the unknown.

Just a few days ago the golfing world lost a legend. In a tragic accident (yet unexplained,) Payne Stewart and five others plummeted to their deaths as their Lear Jet ran out of fuel. To many, if not most people, the world has lost a golfer. Friends interviewed reflected on his golfing achievements in a tone that would suggest that Payne's sole purpose for existing was to play golf. There is a side to Payne Stewart that matters now, and it was his faith in Jesus Christ. Golf means nothing to him now and will continue to mean nothing for eternity.

It was in the face of death that Stephen became consumed with God. The last images we have of Stephen are not of a man who waited at widows' tables, but of a man with a deep irreversible passion for God. Faced with death, Stephen had only one thing to talk about: God. Brought before the High Priest, Stephen is asked to comment about the accusations against him. Whether the speech that followed is a summary or the whole sermon, we are not sure. The sermon recorded nevertheless must have taken some time, and the subject is clearly about God. In verse 2 Stephen begins with a defense of God. His subject is *the God of all glory*. This God first appeared to Abraham and finally appeared through his Son, Jesus, who they are guilty of killing. (vs.52)

This last sermon of Stephen is nothing more than a history of God showing that God never changes. But neither does man. In the same way man rejected God then, he continues to reject God now. *"You are just like your fathers; you always resist the Holy Spirit. Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute?"* (vs.51,51).

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I am most fascinated (as is Luke) by what Stephen has to say about God. I would desire at death to be consumed with God in the way Stephen is. I stress again though, this was Stephen's view of God in death simply because it was his view of God during his life. How we live will determine what really matters when we die. I love how Stephen's panoramic view of God strengthens my own view of God. Listen to what Stephen says about God. With Abraham we view a God of promises. In Joseph we see a God of purpose. Through Moses we witness the God of power. Finally, Stephen pulls the curtain completely open to reveal for us God the planner, whose ultimate purpose in all He has done was to bring to us the savior. Let's take a closer look.

**God is the God of Promise.** Abraham moved completely by relying by faith, trusting unequivocally in the promise of God (vs.5). No land, no inheritance and no descendants, this man took God at his word. This, however, says more about God than it does about Abraham. Don't get stuck admiring Abraham. It is God who kept His promise, giving Abraham reason to trust so completely. The history that follows Abraham is one of fulfillment. *"And Abraham became the father of..."* (vs.8). That simple statement by Stephen is loaded with meaning, stressing again how God fulfilled what he said he would do through a man who had no children.

**God is the God of Purpose.** The unfolding of this promise in Jacob's and Joseph's lives was one of turmoil. The promise was not fulfilled without trial. God seems to work out his purposes through the painful experiences of life, and the story of Jacob and Joseph is no exception. God is the God of purpose. Jealousy (vs.9), prison (vs.10), troubles (vs.10), and deep family tensions (vs.12) are all the fabric upon which God weaves his purposes. Joseph's turmoil reveals most clearly how the worst tragedies are beautifully taken by God to mold His purposes. To his brothers, Joseph says, *"You meant it for evil, God meant it for good"* (Gen. 50:20). You see, nothing collapses in God's economy even if it seems as if it does to us. Why? Because God is the God of purpose.

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**God is the God of Power.** Tragedy follows tragedy throughout Israel's history. (vs.17) Jacob's numbers increase. A Pharaoh rises who does not know about Joseph and this nation designed by God with purpose becomes a prisoner. All this Stephen adds, from the perspective of purpose. The following is an interesting statement because it reveals that all along, even captivity served only to bring the situation closer to fulfilling God's purpose. *"As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham..."* (vs.17) Captivity? God's fulfillment? Strange isn't it? But all to demonstrate how God reveals himself as the God of power most effectively when we are weak. *"That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weakness, in insult, in hardship, in persecution, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong"* (2 Cor. 12:10).

**God is the God of Plans.** As the time grew near for God to fulfill His promise to Abraham, and all in the context of human tragedy, a deliverer was born. His name was Moses and he would serve as a Christ-figure(vs.20). He was no ordinary child because he was one with the Hebrews and born with a mission. Here was a Christ-figure, destined to be God's man, a weak vessel, to demonstrate God's power and unveil his plan for redeeming man back for Himself.

Moses would have to be broken before God could use him. Forty years in isolation shapes him into a vessel, no longer self sufficient but completely God dependent. And it is in the seemingly hopeless setting of the desert that we meet God the planner. One man's darkest hour became the stage for introducing God's plan, the tabernacle, which would contain all the ingredients for redemption. It remained with Joshua (vs.45) and continued through the time of David until Solomon would build a more permanent temple as a more solid picture of God's redemptive purposes. You see, in all this, God did not hold back what he planned for man. Every ritual in the Old Testament spoke clearly of His plan for salvation.

God's plan of redemption, reflected so wonderfully in the sacrificial system, reached its finality in Jesus. He was the real thing, but they, Stephen's listeners, have rejected Him

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just as Israel has always rejected what God had for them. But now God has nothing more to give them. There is no plan "B" - Jesus is it! Reject him, and you reject God.

This review of God in history struck a nerve in the heart of the listeners so much so they could bear to hear no more. The rage of the crowd did not deter Stephen's passion for God. He began with God, he is ready to end with God. He looks up and the impact of each stone hurled at his body opens wider the aperture of his soul's eye. He views the Glory of God as never seen before. This is his God. Jesus is usually pictured seated at God's right hand, but Stephen exclaims that Jesus now stands to welcome him home (vs.56). All who die in Christ will receive such a welcome. I am convinced of it, and I can- not wait for my turn. Can you?

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### THROUGH SOWING! (8:1-8)

*“Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.”* (vs.4)

Philip’s amazing and fruitful ministry in Samaria was the product of persecution. The conclusion could be drawn that without persecution the word of God could not have spread as rapidly as it did. Persecution provided for Philip fallow ground to scatter the seed of the gospel in Samaria, thus opening a door to the Gentile world previously held shut.

Philip was not the only agent in this expansion of God’s kingdom. So was Saul the persecutor of the Church. *“Saul began to destroy the Church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison”* (vs.3). God would turn this attempt to destroy the Church as a way of expanding the Church. *“Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went”* (vs.4). Some years later James, the half brother of Jesus, would write a letter to these churches. This letter is addressed to *“the twelve tribes scattered among the nations”* (James 1:1). The word *scattered* here is the Greek word *Diaspora*. We get the word dispersion from this word. Combined these two words *dia* and *spora* form the words *through sowing*. This farming term is appropriate to explain what God is doing in this first century phenomenon. As a farmer scatters seed upon fallow broken ground, so God scatters the seed of His word into the broken ground of man’s experiences.

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John Stott in his commentary on Acts provides a vivid picture of how God takes the efforts of the enemy to destroy the church only to strengthen it. *“What is plain is that the devil (who lurks behind all persecution of the Church) overreaches himself. His attacks had the opposite effect of what he intended. Instead of smothering the gospel, persecution succeeded only in spreading it.”* Stott then offers a contemporary illustration of this. *In 1949 China was defeated by the communists. Six Hundred and Thirty Seven China Inland Missionaries were obliged to leave. It seemed a total disaster. Yet within four years Two hundred and Eighty Six of them had been redeployed in southeast Asia and Japan, while the national Christians in China, even under severe persecution, began to multiply and now total thirty or forty times the number they were when the missionaries left.”* The wind of persecution increased the flame of passion for God.

This principle of growth from pain speaks soundly of God's sovereignty and deep involvement in the daily lives of Christians. *“For you know I have done nothing without cause, declares the sovereign LORD”* (Ez.14:23). The persecution of Acts 8 reveals a law of cause and effect which God seems to conform to consistently even today. It goes something like this:

- Stephen's death caused persecution -
- Persecution caused a dispersion of Christians, scattering them everywhere -
- Dispersion caused wider penetration for evangelism -
- Evangelism caused many to turn to Jesus.

The wind of persecution simply fanned the flame of passion for God. These early Christians lived for God, not for themselves. When their very lives were threatened they trusted God. They knew this world had nothing to offer and looked forward to a *better country a heavenly one* (Heb.11:16). They did not fear death because they were convinced that should they die they would stand in the very presence of Jesus. That was

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the secret to their indomitable strength. Is it yours? Or do you find yourself buckling under pressure?

This principle of *beauty from ashes* was wonderfully illustrated in the tragedy of my wife's illness with a brain tumor several years ago. While she was recovering in a hospital in Liverpool, a friend of mine on the other side of England was visiting a friend of hers dying of cancer. Her friend did not know the Lord. Meanwhile my wife's experience had led me to write a lengthy testimony and this was distributed to many people including my friend who in turn gave the testimony to her dying friend. Through my friend's faithful witnessing and because of the testimony of Elaine, this dear lady came to know Jesus personally. It was the first indication I received from God that He would take what the devil meant for evil and turn it on its head for His own good.

I marvel at how God works. It would take the serious, debilitating illness of my dear wife, an experience that has devastated and broken me, to bring about the salvation of someone dangerously near hell's door. This dramatic twist of providence was not an isolated one. When my son was dying a young man named Daniel, was visiting the local area and attended the youth group which Travis had attended during his short battle with brain cancer. Daniel never met Travis, but heard story after story of his strength and spiritual resolve that came from a deeply personal faith in Jesus. This example led Daniel to dedicate his life to Jesus. I have never met Daniel, but through this event I now correspond with him personally. He sums up the change in his life this way. (This is my paraphrase). *If a twelve year old boy dying from a brain tumor, can have such faith in God, then no less should be expected of me in my good health.*

Are you beginning to get a good picture of how God works? Should this not change your attitude to your adverse circumstances? You see, trials are the breeding ground of passion. God takes what the devil hopes will defeat you as the very thing that strengthens you. Go then, face the trial, and be strengthened.

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### WHEN GOD BREAKS INTO OUR WORLD (8:9-25)

*“The Holy Spirit had not yet come upon them.”* (vs.16)

We must keep in mind when reading Acts what lies before us is a historic record, not a doctrinal treatise. Therefore what you read in Acts will not necessarily be a precedent for the present. The two phases in Samaria's conversion does not mean that in every case a second spiritual movement needs to happen in the life of the believer. Two extreme doctrines have been formed by misreading passages like this one. Catholics insist that the added work of physical baptism is necessary for salvation, and the Charismatics argue for a second work of spiritual baptism. Both positions will likely utilize this event in Acts 8 to argue their case.

This passage in Acts records the introduction of the gospel to a people who lived outside Israel both geographically and figuratively. Samaritans were outcasts. It all began in 677 BC when the King of Assyria took people from Babylon and settled them in the city of Samaria to mix with the Jews. When many Israelites returned from captivity, they refused to allow these local Samaritans to help rebuild the temple. The animosity between the two groups grew and by the time of Jesus there was no love lost between them. Jesus often pointed to the sociological tensions between the two areas and many of His parables sought to unite them under Himself. The parable of the Good Samaritan and Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman in John 4 reveal God's deep love for these

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people. It would be the cross that would ultimately unite these estranged brothers and the application of that occurs here in Acts 8. The preaching of the gospel in Samaria led to many conversions to Christ. While Samaria was now reconciled to God, there were some old wounds still remaining as fresh reminders of the tension with their neighbor Israel. That is the explanation for why Peter and John were sent and why they recognized that *“the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them”* (vs.16). There were some converted, yes. But there was some unfinished business that had to be resolved before the Holy Spirit could be poured out on them and it had to do with Israel.

John Stott comments that *“it had to be demonstrated to the Samaritans beyond any shadow of a doubt that they had really become members of the body of Christ.”* Michael Green in his book I Believe in the Holy Spirit adds this: *As a divine veto on schism in the infant church, a schism which could have slipped almost unnoticed in the Christian fellowship, as converts from both sides of the Samaritan curtain found Christ with out finding each other. That would have been the denial of the one baptism and all it stood for.”*

This delay in the full process of salvation was God’s way of emphasizing the necessity of being restored, not just to God, but also with each other. The gospel had now crossed into Gentile territory and would have great impact on both the individual and the society. How tragic it would have been had the Samaritan assumed that it was OK to be restored to God without being reconciled to each other. This would have given them a false sense of spiritual security. Such was the tension in the personal world of Simon Magus, the sorcerer, whose story takes up a bulk of this narrative.

Struck by Phillip’s abilities to perform miracles the community turned away from Simon to serve God. The Simon cult was in danger of extinction. *“All the people high and low, gave him (Simon) their attention and exclaimed ‘this man is the divine power known as the Great Power.’ They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic”* (vs.10-11). Phillips message of salvation brought a change in peoples

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allegiance from Simon to God. However, that message also brought about a vacuum in Simon's world. We find that he accepts Christianity halfheartedly. The sudden cessation of attention from people left Simon empty and humanly useless.

In some ways you can understand Simon's dilemma. Here is a man who had been given almost god like status, constantly at the center of everyone's attention, and now a nobody. Simon did not understand yet that to be somebody to God was far more important than what you are to others. Simon's world would come into conflict with the world of servant hood. I wonder, did God delay the pouring out of the Holy Spirit because of Simon? Could Simon have exploited this new faith for *his own end*? You see, when people acknowledge Christ but are not surrendered to Him, they will continue living for themselves not for God. Simon's gospel could have had the same content but with a slightly different look. Simon was not ready to die to himself. Becoming a Christian is a radical thing. Salvation brings about a crisis both to the individual and in the community. Samaria was in danger of accepting Jesus with out being changed. The tensions and barriers with Israel could have remained intact. The gospel could not have progressed further *had God not intervened to make his point. Salvation must change the person!* There can be no salvation without death. Samaritans had to die to their allegiance to Simon. There had to be death to historic tensions: death to racial hatred, death to self.

George Barna recently conducted a study on the difference between how Christians live and how unbelievers live. Shockingly, he discovered that there is not much difference. Christians, while their claim sets them apart from the unbeliever, do not live out their lives very differently from them.

How much has God broken into your world? Are you still trying to walk two paths? After all these years, it is perhaps time now to submit fully to the Holy Spirit? May God help you to accept the changes this will bring about in your life. Live for him and you will not want to live for anything else. Only then can God work through you to cross the border to the lives of others.

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PHILIP: THIS WAS A GOD THING! (8:26-40)

*“So he started out.”* (vs.27)

God loves nothing more than when someone moves easily with the direction of his will. Like a fallen leaf blows wherever the wind desires, such a servant of God is completely at the disposal of God.

My favorite character in the old sit com, Hogan’s Heroes, was Sergeant Schultz - and not just because I like his name. (In fact, I hope that is all I have in common with him.) Schultz is typically remembered for the bumbling way he demonstrated complete unquestioned obedience toward his superior, commander Klink. Klink would often give Schultz a passionate instruction about something, and Schultz with heels clicking, would respond tight-faced, *Yawol Heir Commandant!*

Well, it is such passionate eagerness to do his will that God wants from us. Philip is our example here of a clicking heel servant always at God’s disposal. Let me show you from Philip’s example what is involved in being completely available to God.

### **1. Participation - the importance of being party to what God is doing.**

Philip had come to the place in his life where all his plans, ideals and ambitions were also God’s. Philip’s and God’s will were marching to the same beat. Philip had become so much God’s, God needed only to say one word and Philip moved. The Lord said to Philip *“Go South,”* (vs.26) *“so he started out,”* (vs.27) It is difficult to know if Philip understood the reasons God had him do this. I suspect he did not. God’s instructions were

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vague and perhaps unappealing to Philip. Yet Philip knew that this instruction to “*go south to the road - the desert road - that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza*” (vs.26) held some encounter that originated in the mind of God. It was about 60 miles from Jerusalem to Gaza (near the Mediterranean coast). The two locations were connected by a modern Roman built road system. It was a well used road which continued past Gaza winding its way as far as Egypt.

God will at times ask you to go without telling you all the why's. Sometimes what he asks of you seems as appealing as walking toward a desert road. Yet our conviction that God will never ask us to do anything apart from the purpose of his will should reassure us and motivate us to obedience. A good friend of mine in England often says, *I just want to be where God is*. That was Philip, and I trust that describes your attitude toward what God asks. Right now God is asking us to move on at the heels of family tragedy. I do not know what He wants for us nor do I know where it will be and what it will entail. Yet in six months I know our family will be somewhere other than where we are now. My comfort comes in knowing that God knows exactly what He is doing, and if I have made myself available to Him, I am like that leaf blowing wherever He desires.

### **2. Encounter - the importance of recognizing divine crossroads.**

Being available led Philip to see that God never fails in making good that which He has in mind. Sure enough this obscure command to go south to the desert road led to an encounter. “*On his way he met an Ethiopian*” (vs.27). This was not an accidental meeting: it was what God had in mind all along. Here two completely distinct paths converge and all for the reason that God wanted it.

We refer to him as the Ethiopian eunuch, but we need more than that to appreciate what God is up to here. The man had been to Jerusalem to worship (vs.28), letting us know that he was either a God-fearing Gentile or a dispersed Jew who now lived in Ethiopia. That he is reading from Isaiah would strongly suggest Jewish origin. Furthermore, Luke does not seem to go out of his way here to label him as the first Gentile convert which he

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reserves later for Cornelius. That aside, what matters here is that an importance official of the Ethiopian government was hungry for God's word but short of knowing what that word meant. But as He always does, God responded to that hunger and orchestrated a beautiful encounter between two men who emerge from two completely diverse paths. Neither man could have known what God had in store that day.

Those sorts of divine encounters probably happen more often than we think. Think about it: God uses your availability to touch the lives of others by directing you into their path. Several years ago I routinely sat in a seat while returning by train from a trip for the mission. After several minutes I managed to strike up a conversation with the man that sat across from me. At first he appeared very nervous. He had every reason to be, God was trying to get his attention. I was not the first one to have witnessed to the man that day. I began to share with the man about Jesus and about my faith. His response amazed me. *"Just before you came in"* the man explained, *"another man sitting right where you are, did exactly what you are doing, telling me all about this Jesus stuff. Furthermore, he too was a minister, but the similarities with you does not end there. The man was also an American."* This man clearly understood that God was singling him out that day, but unfortunately he did not respond to Jesus.

God singles people daily for divine encounters and you and I are unconsciously his agents. So look out today for a divine encounter. Be available to God for whatever he wants.

### **3. Questions - the importance of knowing where a person is with God and what God is doing in that person**

I have found in my ministry that asking questions becomes important in revealing the condition of another person's soul. Listen to what a person is asking, and you can form a good picture of what he is thinking. A person's questions reveal the priorities of his life. I find that people who ask no questions tend to be those who think more of themselves

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than than they do of others. Self-absorbed people do not ask many questions because they do not ask many questions of themselves.

Asking questions also requires the art of listening. American evangelicals are not very good at listening in our efforts to evangelize. We have both barrels loaded with the gospel message and blast people with it whether they have asked for it or not. The popular interchange used some years ago, *Jesus is the answer... Yes but what is the question?* exposes an insensitive methodology of evangelism. Listen to the interchange between Philip and the Ethiopian and note how one question leads to an answer and how the answer brings the man closer each time to the truth of Jesus.

*“Do you understand what you are reading?”*

*“How can I unless someone explains it to me?”*

*“Tell me please, which is the prophet speaking about? Himself, or someone else?”*

*“Look here is some water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?”*

What do these questions do? They reveal the man's heart to Philip. Armed with each question, Philip knows where the man is spiritually and knows how to address each cry of his heart. Because of his questions and due to the questions of the Ethiopian, Philip has something to work with. Jesus himself often used questions in his interchange with people. It was not because he did not know the answer but because he was unwilling to offer himself as the answer until the person understood fully what He was offering. To the woman at the well he asked for a drink really to highlight the parched condition of her own soul (John 4). Jesus asked the lame man *“do you want to get well?”* (John 5) to resurrect a faith that had lain dormant through 38 years of pain. He asked his disciples where they should buy bread to feed the crowd of 5000 (John 6) to pry open a new world of possibilities where God becomes involved in the troubles of everyday life. On a trail to Emmaus Jesus interrupts two men by asking what they are discussing, (Luke 24) knowing full well he was the talk of the town. To blurt out who he was could not have had the probing effect necessary for them to encounter and receive the resurrected Savior.

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### 4. Content - the importance of speaking of Jesus

We come back now to the conversation between Philip and our friend from Ethiopia where we observe how Jesus is the content of the man's search and the substance of Philip's explanation. Keep in mind, the man has just returned from celebrating the Passover in Jerusalem where he has witnessed the slaughter of thousands of lambs. With this graphic image still vivid in his mind, the Holy Spirit leads him to the passage in Isaiah that speaks of the lamb to be slaughtered. This lamb was *"led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth"* (9:32). The messiah coming as a lamb to be slaughtered did not fit well in the time of oppression under Rome. Israel had enough of slaughtering and looked forward to one who would come to vanquish and conquer. A self sacrificing martyr was not at all appealing to them right then.

Philip, however, does not hesitate to tell the man of the *"good news about Jesus"* (vs.34). And immediately the man accepts the message and his life is changed. He encounters Philip but he meets Jesus, the one the scriptures spoke of, and the one who came to fulfill the very ritual he had been celebrating in Jerusalem. Let us be sure that we never seek to evangelize without Jesus being at the very center.

### 5. Consequence - the importance of seeing the change carried out completely

The change began in the man's heart, but the desire for immediate public expression of this inner change was intense. The consequence of true repentance is always a changed life. *"Look, here is some water, why shouldn't I be baptized?"* (vs.36). Orders are given for the chariot to stop, implying that many of his escorts and servants become privy to this man's experience. This rite would be a testimony to them, not to Philip. Philip disappears from the story but the man continues on his journey with his servants, and he rejoices because he has found Jesus. The Lord Jesus, now his Savior would, be the substance of his life. He would take that message back to his own country and the mission of the church would expand even farther. This was a God thing! a divine intervention made possible because one man, Philip, had made himself available to God.

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There is no limit to what God can do when you place your life completely at his disposal. I hope you are doing that. Do your part and I can assure you God will do His.

### THE STORY OF SAUL; REALLY A STORY ABOUT GOD! (9:-1-31)

*“so you many see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit” (vs.17)*

The most dramatic conversation to Christianity that I am familiar with, at least in recent years, belongs to Manuel Noreiga, the former dictator and notorious drug dealer over the country of Panama. His rule was a frustration to the US government who stood by helplessly as drugs were transported through Panama and Mexico into the United States. The government had enough, deciding that the only course of action was to apprehend this tyrant. I remember so vividly that scene which marked the last moments of Manuel Noreiga as tyrant ruler over Panama. Troops had been sent in from the United States to arrest Noreiga, and now he was surrounded and trapped in his palatial residence. There was a 30-minute gun battle. When the dust had settled, seven of Noreiga's men were killed and Noreiga was captured and quickly whisked off to a jail in Miami, Florida. He is now spending the remaining days of his life there, no longer a threat, Noreiga lives out his remaining days alone, forgotten: the sting removed he appears to be a dog who now has even lost his bark.

Several years later two Baptist ministers began to visit Noreiga. They shared with him about the love of God. About forgiveness. They told him Jesus loved him. Then a dramatic thing happened. This man, who once terrorized innocent people, lifted his blood stained hands to heaven and received Jesus. The dictator became a servant.

Similarly, the conversion of Saul (later to be called Paul) from a Jesus hater to a passionate follower, tells me more about how great God is than how great Paul is.

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Paul's dramatic change, however, does raise some questions in my mind. Mainly this. Did Paul have much choice in the matter? A cursory reading of this story would leave us with the strong impression that this change was forced on Paul by God. God finally put so much pressure on Paul that he had no choice but to repent. Imagine you are Saul of Tarsus headed for Damascus with the singular mission of destroying Christianity. Suddenly on this journey you are struck by a strong intense light, you are knocked off your horse and you hear a voice coming from seemingly nowhere speaking directly to you. The voice is not in your head, because later those with you confirm that they too heard it. You are not imagining this. Then you find that, because of the light, you are blind. You are led to Damascus, helpless, and for three days you sit there in complete solitude and confusion. This solitude is interrupted by the arrival of a godly figure. You can sense that holiness in the room, although you see nothing. He speaks to you, tells you he has heard from God and has an explanation for all that has happened. *"Brother Saul, the Lord-Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here has sent me to you so you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit"* (vs.17).

But wait just a minute. You never asked for this. God can't just step in like this and tell you how to live your life. Then you remember what the voice had said. In fact in the past three days it is the only voice you have heard. *"Saul, why are you persecuting me"* (vs.4). You ask who is speaking. The voice says, *"I am Jesus whom you are persecuting"* (vs.5). Now, after three days this same voice insists that it is going to tell you what to do with your life. First he interferes with your business, which, by the way, became your obsession, and now he thinks you are going to act like a puppet and just bend to his demand. *"Now go into the city"*, that voice had commanded, *"and you will be told what you must do"* (vs.5).

Now in all this we do not see Paul kicking and screaming and being dragged into the kingdom of God. This prompts me to ask again. Did Paul have a choice in the matter or did God just happen to intervene in his life at this moment because Paul was finally ripe for such a change? I am convinced that Paul did not kick and scream into the kingdom of

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God. What happens to Paul here happens because he is ready for it. This does not seem to be the case from the record, and perhaps even he was not conscious of it. But God was. I know this. God never forces himself on anyone. "*He is patient with you not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance*" (2 Peter 3:9). But his desire that we repent does not bring God to put a gun to our head. Certainly he convicts us. He probes the nerves of our heart, and pricks our conscience with guilt. He places people in our paths with the intent that they will convince us we are better off with God. But he will never force us into a decision.

What is it then that led Paul to respond to this encounter with God? In what ways was he prepared for this? Several things.

First, we must acknowledge this principle. **No man can ever resist God and not know it.** The human conscience is a provision from God that works like a fire alarm which sounds out at the first signs of smoke from our sin. Ecclesiastics 3:11 tells us that no man is without excuse or without the evidence of God within him. "*He has also set eternity in the hearts of men...*" Clearly, man cannot run from God. The evidence of his existence and our accountability to him is deeply etched in both creation and in our conscience. "*For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse*" (Romans 1:20). I have heard repeatedly stories of people who, having repented from living a wicked life, acknowledged that deep in the heart they knew they were rebelling against God. Paul knew in his heart that he was fighting God.

Second, the Christ like example and godly testimony of those he persecuted could not have gone without effect in Paul's life. Their witness and strength must have certainly pricked Paul's conscience. God would use the testimony of the very people he was persecuting to soften Paul's own heart. For example, how could Paul ever rid himself of the words and testimony of Stephen. Saul, we are told in Acts 8:1, was the ringleader giving approval to the murderous attack on Stephen. "*And Saul was there giving*

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*approval to his death.*” Saul had to have walked away from such an experience with a burden of guilt, one that would haunt him until Jesus intervened in his life.

This intrusion by God in Saul’s life while on his way to Damascus would not be the only time God was convicting him. It simply marks that moment when Saul finally gave in. The Lord had been speaking to Saul for some time. Every time Saul dragged off another believer to imprison him and at times kill him, the Lord was speaking. He was speaking through the testimony of these faithful believers. God was speaking to Saul through their love and patience and through their willingness to suffer and even die for Jesus. Later when recounting his conversion story to King Agrippa Paul admits that all along he had been fighting God - and he knew it. He explains to the king, *“we all fell to the ground and I heard a voice say to me in Aramaic, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you kick against the goads’”* (26:14). Like a stubborn Ox, futilely fighting the restraint of his yoke, Paul’s resistance was only hurting himself. He was better off on God’s team.

Saul, now Paul, would never see his conversion to Jesus as deserved. Later he referred to himself as, *“the least of all the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle because I persecuted the Church of God”* (1 Corinthians 15:7-8).

The story of Saul’s conversion is again a story of God. Paul’s conversion offers to us three powerful truths about God. It teaches us something wonderful about God’s mercy. God takes someone like Saul who deserves death but instead gives him life. The story also tells us something of God’s mystery. It remains a mystery to all Bible students, to Paul especially, that God would take such a vile offender of the faith and use that same one as an instrument to reach the Gentile world. And finally, the story reveals to us something of God’s means. God uses suffering more often than anything else to accomplish His work. The Lord was to show Paul how much he would have to suffer for the Kingdom of God. But in the end Paul could say I would rather suffer and die for Christ than to live in ease without him. I trust this can be said of you too.

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### CHANGES IN THE LANDSCAPE (Ch.10&11)

*“I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism” (10:34).*

My wife and I recently had the opportunity to view the raging waters of Niagara Falls. I had never seen this magnificent sight except as a photograph. It was interesting to view the actual falls with some impression already in mind. I have to admit that what I saw did not seem as breath-taking as I had expected mainly because of the distracting landscape surrounding the falls. The photographs never seem to include the crude, ugly man made structures that have been built to accommodate tourists. To fully appreciate this natural beauty required that I somehow block out these modern impositions. Had I been a visitor to the falls fifty years ago, undoubtedly I would have appreciate a far different sight.

Because of my love for photography, I have always been fascinated by changes in landscapes and how these changes affect us daily. Seasonal changes, changes in weather, the position of the sun and, sadly, man made structures all affect how we view things.

I would have loved to photograph the changes in landscape that took place in the conception of the early church. God began to brush on the canvass a fuller portrait of his purposes where only the vague outline was visible before. You could say up till this point God had only placed on this canvass a sketch of what he had in mind, but now with quick strokes the painting reveals a beautiful image of a larger community than just Israel that would include the entirety of humanity. How these changes in landscape come about is worth noting. Luke records the encounter of Peter and Cornelius but only as one example of what God is doing on a grander scale. The real impact of these changes is cosmic in proportion and would change forever how Israel was meant to be viewed. No longer with exclusive rights to God, this chosen nation would now need to make room for a larger community, this one including the Gentiles.

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The first figure that emerges on this canvass is that of a Gentile by the name of Cornelius. Keep in mind that to this point Israel did not accept Gentiles as a people approved by God. Sadly, they had mistaken God's election for favoritism. God never intended to divide man in this way, nevertheless, because of Israel's stubbornness, and the Gentiles refusal to accept the model of a monotheistic community reflected in Israel, a wall now separated God's people from the rest of the world. This was a corrupted landscape. The beauty of God's purposes was completely lost amidst the manmade structures. That wall now stood as a barrier to the Great Commission. Philip brought a chisel to this wall bringing cracks to it in his ministry in Samaria. Peter though would strike that wall with a sledge hammer bringing a final blow so the gospel could reach the Gentile world. It would not happen though without God's intervention.

Luke tells us an angel visits Cornelius and whets his appetite for the fuller spiritual meal Peter would bring. Cornelius we are told is a god fearing man who along with his family were "devout" and "gave" generously to those in need and prayed regularly to God (vs.22). And Cornelius was a man of high standing. A centurion, Cornelius commanded a Roman military unit of 100 men. He loved God, loved his family, and loved others. Yet, he did not know Jesus.

God, however, responds to his hunger for truth. His prayers are answered one afternoon in a vision. An angel appears to Cornelius who informs him that his prayers have not been in vain. In fact, God has been deeply pleased with them. The prayers have been like a "memorial offering before God" (vs.4). Apparently much of Cornelius's prayers were a plea for truth. God will satisfy that hunger to all who ask. "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled*" (Matt. 5:6). God instructs Cornelius to "*go to Joppa and bring back a man and Simon who is called Peter*" (vs.5). God has specific plans to meet Cornelius's need.

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Keep in mind here that God again has to take the initiative to further the message of the gospel. Given the Great Commission in very clear terms, the disciples are reluctant to push ahead with God's command without hesitation into Gentile territory. Like he did for the Ethiopian through Philip, God acts first to prod the disciples further. The disciples are still reluctant to openly accept God's acceptance of Gentiles. As us, they probably included these lost in their prayers but refused to become personally involved in their lives. I wonder how often God divinely intervenes to break that stubbornness in our hearts.

The camera that has been focused on Cornelius is now lowered revealing another change in the landscape now exposing Peter. We find Peter in a prayerful mood on the roof of a home of his friend Simon the tanner (vs.6). Ironically, Peter somehow manages to ignore the little fact that his friend Simon made his livelihood by converting skins of dead animals into leather. Normally Jews regarded such a home as unclean. We can understand better from this why God uses this vision of unclean animals to break this hypocrisy in Peter's heart.

What happens next to Peter is meant to break him. Jesus has given to Peter the "*Keys of the kingdom of heaven*, (Matt. 16:19). His was the privilege of taking the lead of reaching the gentile world. Later, at Cornelius' house, this would all finally begin to make sense to Peter. "*God has shown me that I should not call any man unclean*" (10:28). And, "*I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.*" (vs.34-35) Later Peter explains his actions to the Jewish believers (ch.11) and the light comes on in their understanding of how God works. They join Peter in concluding that God "*has granted even the gentiles repentance unto life.*" (11:18)

I currently live in a community in northeast Georgia that has very definite boundary lines dividing racial and socioeconomic classes into very neat categories. There are blacks, the poor, the local middle and upper class and the northern transplants. Dotting this diverse

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community are perhaps as many as 100 churches, each a safe haven to keep these communities separated. I spoke to a black man recently about this problem. His observation I thought was profound. He said, *“Sunday morning is the most segregated time in this local town.”*

The Church I attend is made up primarily of transplants who love God and pray fervently for the lost. We are like a family though that claims to be intimate with one another yet each of us remain in separate room. The pastor of my church and I recently discussed what the solution to this problem might be. I explained that before the church could ever evangelize the community with the same passion it cares for world missions, we will have to learn how to serve the community. These walls dividing ethnic and economic groups can only be broken by an outpouring of self-sacrificing love. This will have to go beyond door to door evangelism and will need to include tangible acts of service. Food drives, offering tutorial programs, personal relationship building, and youth programs will all be necessary steps to turn these heavy currently impenetrable walls to a malleable body.

The most obvious change that takes place in our story in Acts has to do with the acceptance of Gentiles by Jewish Christians. Yet I wonder, if the biggest changes were those that took place in Peter’s own heart. For Peter to be a Great Commission Christian, he would have to first learn to love those God loved. The prejudice in Peter, however, lay deep. Peter and his disciples could no longer preach from a distance and simply pray for the lost in Samaria and in the uttermost regions of the earth. God was calling them to total involvement. Are you also ready to respond to such a call?

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### BURST DAM! 11:19-30

*“The Lords hand was with them.” (vs.21)*

Yesterday I took some friends to visit the water falls that gives this little North Georgia town its identity. Toccoa Falls is certainly no match for the torrents of Niagara Falls although it can boast that it stands higher. In 1977 the lake above the falls burst its dam and flooded the college campus which covers the valley down from the falls. thirty-seven people were killed. For many years when visiting the falls one could see a line along the tree barks marking the level the water had risen to during those tragic few moments. The tragedy took only minutes to do its damage, but the marks lasted much longer. The greatest and more lasting marks were those left deeply engraved in the lives of those who attended the college in the year of the flood.

The spreading of the gospel at this stage in Acts threatened to stagnate in Jerusalem. Few seemed to understand or at least accept God’s desire for the gospel to spread to all nations. Philip and Peter were pushed by God and thus passed the borders of Samaria, but outside of this the Church refused to budge much further on her own initiative past their comfort zone. Until the dam burst that is. Chapter eleven of Acts marks the turning point in Acts where we see visible evidence of the gospel reaching beyond Jerusalem and it reaches a point of no return. Here passion for Jesus would leave a lasting mark on the Gentile world.

A close study on the marks left from this bursting of the gospel leaves us in awe of God. I see four visible marks left by the outpouring of His Spirit. It would take pain for God’s mission to be strengthened. God would now use ordinary believers to carry this work out.

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God would pour out his Spirit as an encourager to the Church. And finally, God would keep the Church unsettled by reminding them of the uncertainty of the future.

1. God would use pain to strengthen his mission. It would take the persecution of Christians in Jerusalem to first weaken the dam that contained the gospel only in that city. Basically God forces believers out of Jerusalem scattering them into the regions beyond, and it would not be pleasant. *“Those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch...”* (vs.19). The Great Commission was to happen one way or another, either by believers willingly moving beyond the walls of Jerusalem, or, as takes place, God would make certain it happens through persecution.

Hebrews 12:7 links hardship with the reaching of God’s purposes. It seems to be the way of God. *“Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons.”* And again Paul was told upon his dramatic call that he would endure much hardship in order to enter the Kingdom of God (Acts 14:22). Likewise, there will be times in our lives when God must hurt us to move us. Very few of us will ever move beyond our comfort zone if not prodded by God. It is in our nature to seek comfort and gain security, but in such a state we are of not much use to God. I am amazed by the comfort by which Americans live. Many in the community I live in are well meaning Christians, but with two homes and many luxuries, I wonder how useful they really are to God. A Chinese pastor recently urged Americans to stop praying for the end of persecution in China. *“The church in China has grown and been strengthened under persecution,”* he explained. Furthermore he adds , *“the end of persecution would only serve to weaken the Church.”*

Think of this for a moment. Your pain is right now probably the best thing to ever happen to you. Can you not thank God for it? I often imagine myself getting to heaven and falling at Jesus’ feet thanking him for all he has asked our family to go through. It will all seem so clear when we enter glory. The persecution of believers in Jerusalem had no value to them as it happened. The disciples must have seen it as a mark of victory for the

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enemy. But it is in looking back that we, the same church, can see so clearly what it did for the Great Commission. God always knows what He is doing and He uses pain best to achieve what He wants.

2. God would use ordinary believers to carry this work out. To this point in Acts, the attention has been on the Acts of the Apostles. Here a transition takes place where the ordinary Christian begins to play an extraordinary role in God's work. These are the unsung heroes of Acts, the faithful unnamed believers who, when forced from their homes and displaced abroad, become passionate witnesses for Jesus. Some told the message "*only to Jews*" (vs.19). Others however, "*went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling the good news about the Lord Jesus*" (vs.20). These displaced Christians not only had a passion for God's word, but also for the Great Commission. Therefore God blessed them as he blesses all ordinary believers who live for the progress of God's kingdom. "*The Lord's hand was on with them...*" (vs.21)

3. God pours out his Spirit as an encourager to the Church. To keep these believers from discouragement and defeat, God sends them an encourager. His name is Barnabas, and he enters this story as the Churches' cheerleader. His primary role in coming to Antioch was to "*encourage them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts*" (vs.24). It is really the Barnabas type that the Church continues to need today. Ordinary Christians who make up the most critical part of God's work often get tired and discouraged. I know. I have in the past year. But at key moments God has sent me some Barnabases to challenge me by their support and love. I have been strengthened by these friends of God who have cheered me on and encouraged me to see that serving on is worth it even in the face of suffering. God sent Barnabas to Antioch to encourage the Church to hang in there. He came to Antioch to encourage these suffering believers by simply standing with them, and perhaps even suffering with them and praying with them.

As their designated encourager, Barnabas had one goal. He "*encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts*" (vs.23). This is all an encourager needs to

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do but he can not do it from a distance. A true encourager joins his brothers and sisters urging them to hang in there, to say *I know this is tough but remain faithful to the Lord with all your heart and you will find in the end, it will be worth it all. Don't let what is happening to you defeat you. You don't in the end want to say you gave up.* We find about Barnabas here that he was in effect a tool of the Holy Spirit. It was really the Holy Spirit at work here through Barnabas, and it is the Holy Spirit who works today in strengthening and challenging the Church to remain faithful in the midst of suffering. Perhaps you are one of the vessels he will use as the Churches cheerleader.

### 4. God keeps the Church unsettled by reminding them of the uncertainty of the future.

Church work differs from business in this one thing. We, the Church, know that someday we will go out of business. Lest the Church in Antioch become too settled in their new-found existence as a community of believers, God sends them a prophet to unsettle them. I should probably say, keep them unsettled. He does this in Antioch through an obscure prophet named Agabus. Agabus joins this group, *“stood up and through the Holy Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world”* (vs.27). Just when the dust was settling from the Jerusalem persecution and these believers thought it would all become smooth again, they are reminded that life on this earth will always be unsettled. This did not bring about a sense of fatalism, however, but opportunity. *“The disciples each according to their abilities decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea”* (vs.29). Their own experience with pain gave them a burden for the pain of others. Furthermore, the uncertainty of the future prompted these believers to work even harder to expand the kingdom of God. It is to this aim that Barnabas needed Paul in Antioch.

We find that the work of God would progress through a unique partnership, that of Barnabas and Paul. Barnabas was more than someone standing by believers giving pep talks. He was a strategist who had the best interest of the believer in mind as he or she would face the uncertainty of the future. It was Barnabas' strategy to best prepare these believers for uncertain days.

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Barnabas knew Saul well and so he goes to Tarsus himself “*to look for Saul and found him (to) bring him back with him to Antioch*” (vs.25). Saul remained here for a year teaching “*great numbers of people*” (vs.26). This strategic move, of bringing Saul to Antioch resulted in Antioch becoming the center of world missions and a base for Christianity. “*Disciples were first called Christians here*” (vs.26). It is interesting to me that Barnabas comfortably knew the limits of his own role. He knew he could not remain in Antioch to strengthen these believers himself. Barnabas was an encourager, not a teacher, and he perhaps realized the Church in Antioch needed someone with different gifts than his own. The Church in Antioch needed more than encouragement; they needed to be grounded in God’s word, particularly as they faced an uncertain future.

I am frustrated today by the way Churches manage to get by happily by just being stroked. Many churches have a “feel good” climate that is absent of any real determined effort to prepare believers for the future. There seems to be a lot of cheer leading going on but little nurturing. A baby learning to walk can be cheered by his father but still needs the milk from his mother. That is perhaps a good analogy in understanding the Barnabas and Paul dynamic in Antioch. Barnabas is the cheerleader, Paul is the supplier of food. Both roles are necessary to grow a healthy church.

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### WHY ME LORD? 12:1-20

*“But the word of the Lord continued” (vs.24)*

Since my son’s death, my wife Elaine had often been baffled over the question of why God took him but spared her. It seems illogical to her, sometimes even unfair, that she spent the most time suffering in the hospital and lost so much, while Travis suffered briefly and went to be with the Lord. Here is the mystery our family lives with. Why did God spare my wife, but take our son? (I am not implying here that I wish it had been the other way around.) If we had ever thought we had God figured out, this experience was enough to change that. God does not always make sense and neither are His ways explainable. *“The Lords ways are beyond understanding”*, Job tells us. Through his crisis Job tried in vain to make sense of God, but he could not. *“How Great is God - beyond understanding.”* (Job 36:26) However, Job understood this principle about God’s ways. Despite his inexplicable nature, we can be absolutely assured that he works inexhaustibly on our behalf. You might not be able to understand God, but you can bet what he does is always grand and good. *“God’s voice thunders in marvelous ways; he does great things beyond understanding”*. (Job 37:5) God might be a mystery, but he is a marvelous mystery because His ways, while not always understandable, are good for us and good for His glory.

This brings me to the mystery of Acts 12. What remains unexplainable is this. Why does God miraculously spare Peter when just a few days before the gauntlet was allowed to fall on the head of James the brother of John? Why does God spare Peter but not James?

It was King Herod who stepped up the pressure against the believers in Jerusalem. He *“arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them”* (vs.1). One of these, James, is imprisoned and beheaded. This pleases the Jews, prompting Herod to raise the level of persecution by arresting Peter. Peter is imprisoned and perhaps told what Herod plans to do with him. *“Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after*

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*the Passover*” (vs.4). There is no one in Jerusalem who did not know what this would lead to. In fact, this would place the event just one year to the week of Jesus’ trial and crucifixion. Knowing what had happened to James, Peter no doubt had resigned himself to the fact that he stood at death’s door. Jesus had even told Peter that he would one day face this sort of death. Peter was prepared for it but God was not.

God had different plans for Peter than he did for James just as he had different plans for my wife than he did for our son Travis. That night God intervenes and delivers Peter. Wakened by an angel, Peter is instructed to leave the prison. Led out by the angel, Peter only realizes this is not a dream when he is well out of this prison area. He interrupted the prayer meeting organized on his behalf and God’s work, with Peter at the helm again, thrives. I don’t know why God does things this way. What we do know is praiseworthy. What He does is always good. God’s ways are beyond understanding to us, but they are always perfect.

Let me share with you several ways to effectively live with this mystery of God. These have helped me at a time when I needed to move on when little seemed to make sense.

1. God is never restricted to one methodology. He has His own way of doing things and we had better let Him if we are to stand on this side of his blessings. He has one way of working through one individual that will be far different from the way He works in another. God’s purpose was to permit James to die. This somehow promoted His glory and was good for strengthening the church. God’s purpose for Peter was to deliver him and this was God’s way of promoting his glory and strengthening the church.

It is not easy to say, but I can live with this truth as it relates to me personally. God’s purpose for my son involved something dramatically different from what he had in mind for my wife. I can live with that if it promotes His glory and strengthens the church. Thus far I have seen evidence of both.

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2. God is unstoppable. Try as you may, you just cannot stop God. Herod tried, though it appeared he was succeeding for a time, it later would come back to haunt him. God is unstoppable. Whoever stands in His way gets run over. Herod's purpose was solely to hurt the Church. Her progress was a threat to his reign. He "*arrested some belonging to the church, intending to persecute them*" (vs.1). Of course, behind the scenes it was Satan attempting again to stop Jesus' reign from spreading any further. That is always the true agenda behind persecution. Satan knows the church seems to grow from persecution, but apparently there are enough believers who give in that it makes the effort worthwhile. Knowing he is defeated, the enemy desires to take as many souls with him as he can.

A clear message was sent to Herod. God cannot be stopped. Try as you may, but this thing will not stop. The gospel will continue to spread, and it will spread as fire spreads across an open and dry field. Both James' death and Peter's rescue demonstrated God's power over Herod. It is the apostle Paul who later acknowledged when he was in chains, that God's word cannot be chained. "*This is the gospel for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained*" (2 Tim. 2:8-10).

3. God takes pleasure in our prayers whether they are answered the way we want or not. I heard someone explain once that Peter was released because the church prayed for him but seems not to have prayed for James. I find this to be very simplistic. It suggests that God's hands were tied in regard to James' situation because no one was praying for him. God wanted to intervene, but He could not. We should keep in mind that the text simply doesn't mention prayer when describing James situation. Luke, our author, might simply have chosen to not mention it. In Peter's case the reference to the Church praying is important to the context. When he is released from prison, he immediately goes to the group of praying believers. I have no doubt that same group prayed as fervently for James as they did for Peter.

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To suggest that God could not move because no one prayed is a misunderstanding of prayer. Thus far in Acts, the followers of Jesus are pictured to be in a continuous habit of prayer. Furthermore, I believe the church prayed (vs.5) more for courage for Peter than for deliverance. This was obvious by their reaction to seeing Peter set free. James had just died and Peter faced the same end. To the many in that prayer meeting there must have been the acceptance that Peter would die. So they prayed that Peter, like Jesus, would “*endure the cross and scorn its shame*”(Heb.12:2). I am not suggesting that God did not act according to their prayers. Perhaps He did. My desire is simply to keep us from treating our relationship with God as if he is a Genie in a jar ready to respond to our demand. What is important about prayer is that God takes pleasure in the fact that we have poured out our crisis before him. We do not demand that God do what we want. Rather we ask God to glorify Himself by doing His will and magnifying Himself.

4. God always has the last word. If you do not like the situation you are in right now or find yourself burdened or in crisis, take heart. God will have the last word. This story begins with Herod on a controlled rampage but ends with his humiliating demise. To Herod, James’ death and Peter’s arrest were political moves to strengthen his position. This was particularly necessary because of the volitional political situation in Caesarea. His presence there resulted in a diplomatic resolve between Tyre and Sidon. Luke explains; “*He had been quarreling with Tyre and Sidon,; they now joined together and sought an audience with him*” (vs.20).

Luke does not tell us the details but whatever Herod did brought to an end the tensions between the two towns, and he is hailed as a deliverer. He milks it for all it is worth. “*Wearing his royal robe, sat on his throne ...they shouted, ‘this is the voice of a god, not of a man’*”(vs.21-22). This is brief because God, the true king, intervenes. “*Because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down and he was eaten by worms.*” (vs.23) Apparently whatever resolved the situation between Tyre and Sidon was God’s doing, and Herod knew it but took credit for himself. God has the last word. There is no great ruler in past history who is now great. Yet God has remained great

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through all of history. Rulers come and go. Some terrorize their people, some are tyrants more evil than we can imagine. Yet, their rule always ends and today their body rots in the grave, and their soul awaits the great day of judgment where they will stand side by side with the poorest soul who, in this life, had no power or authority. “*And I saw the dead great and small standing before the throne...*” (Rev.20:12)

Luke ends this powerful section reminding us that regardless of the trials and despite the great pressures against the church, God’s word “*continued to increase and spread*” (vs.24). Nothing will stop God. Do you hear this? Take courage my friend; unlike Herod you are on the right side of the battle. Press on and keep serving your ing.

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*“They placed their hands on them and sent them off” (vs.7).*

The dramatic send off of Paul and Barnabas described here in chapter 13 is a scene repeated through-out the history of the church. This would be a holy commission, not a human one, and brought about by the empowering of the Holy Spirit but sought after by the saints through prayer and fasting.

I often wonder if this sort of commissioning service had greater significance to the audience in heaven than to those who participated in it here on earth. Sometimes I sense these sorts of send off today are a hallow ritual to us. In our modern capable age we seem to manage quite well deploying and commissioning our missionaries without desperate dependence on the Holy Spirit. These early saints, on the other hand, refused to move until God acted, so fearful and inadequate they saw themselves. I had a taste of this several weeks ago when the Church I attend commissioned eight returning missionary couples. Never before have I sensed a moving and working of the Holy Spirit like this. This was not a human effort, but humans gathering together convinced that these eight couples could not go unless God did it.

The eight missionary couples who stood on the platform had all in various ways recently walked through the fires of hardship. Some more than others. One couple, missionaries to Africa, had recently been in a near fatal car accident. God spared them, but the wife broke her neck and the family's return will be subject to her recovery. My wife and I stood there as two individuals broken of all the self sufficiency and confidence that we once possessed early in our ministry. As hands were stretched our way, I consciously thought this is the only way we can go back in the power of the Holy Spirit. I would not dare move right now at this time of my life without the empowering and enabling of the Holy Spirit. Never in my seventeen years in the ministry have I felt so weak and powerless. Therefore, I go in the power of God. I fear going without Him lest I go alone.

The saints placed hands on Paul and Barnabas, and the Holy Spirit fell upon them, because without this holy commissioning they would go nowhere. So vital was their

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dependence on God, time was first set aside for worship and fasting. “*While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting the Holy Spirit said, ‘set apart for me Paul and Barnabas for the work to which I have called them. So after they had fasted and prayed they placed their hands on them and sent them off*” (vs. 2-3). What did this commissioning service really do? Several observations can be drawn from this as significant lessons for us today. I urge that these need to be guidelines for our sending out of workers today.

1. It was this commissioning service that determined who would go. There were five qualified among this group. These were recognized as capable and God-gifted leaders, prophets and teachers who could have each qualified for the missionary task of reaching the Gentiles. Ultimately, though, there was only one thing that qualifies any of us as missionaries and that is our being particularly selected by God. It was God who took over this meeting in Acts and said, “*set apart for me Barnabas and Saul...*” (vs.2).

2. It was this commissioning service that determined whom they would work for. This commissioning service kept in focus whom the task was for. Look at the emphasis of who speaks and to what end. “*Set apart for me...for the work to which I have called them” (vs.2). I return to the ministry with a clear picture that I return to God’s work. Missionaries are participants not directors. They serve the master and seek to fit into the work the master is already doing. My assignment when I return in several months is personally overwhelming because it is new and will require many things to fall perfectly into place. We will need the resources, the right people to step forward, and a clear vision. All of this overwhelms me until I remember my relationship to the task. I am merely a servant following the directives of my master. It is his work, not mine. I have been set apart *for the work to which He has called me.**

3. It was this commissioning service that brought about a bond between those who went and those who stayed. The hands that commissioned , the lips that offered up prayers, and the hearts that fasted belonged to people with a deep conviction that what they did was

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deeply significant to God's work. They did this in reverence and holy fear. Here was a praying church who sent out workers with the confidence that they would not go alone. The continued prayers of these saints would hold Barnabas and Paul up under the severest trials and tests. One missionary friend of mine challenged a congregation once with these words; *"You might not be able to go physically to the mission field, but you can go there on your knees."*

The commissioning service I recently attended was necessary for me, and I know for those others who took part. Again, I would not dare go without it. It reminded me that I was a part of God's special forces chosen specifically by him. It helped me to see again that I was sent to God's work not mine or my mission society. It also deepened a bond between myself and those who continue to raise holy hands to God on my behalf. What began in Acts continues today. The Holy Spirit is deeply and vitally involved in the work of mission, more than we recognize. Let us all be careful to never act without him for only then would we be truly alone. Remember the words from the first and greatest of all commissions when Jesus said, *"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the end of the earth"* (Matt. 28:19,20).

A DRAMA DIRECTED BY GOD. 13:4-12

*"Sent on their way by the Holy Spirit"* (vs.4).

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My parents served as missionaries in the remote jungles of Irian Jaya, Indonesia, for 38 years. Many of those years were spent in the isolated mountains of the Wissel Lakes where I was born. There they could go for months with little contact from the outside world. And there they poured out their lives among a primitive people who previous to any contact with missionaries had lived for thousands of years alone from the rest of the world. In fact, these mountain natives assumed for those centuries that they were the only ones who existed other than the other tribes in the surrounding area.

My parents could have easily despaired for the years of isolation except that they knew the One whom they worked for was with them. It was a conviction that led them through many lonely and trying times. They, like Barnabas and Paul, had been "*sent by the Holy Spirit*" (vs.1) and that Holy Spirit in 38 years of faithful and often fruitful service, never once left them alone. Every missionary has his/her story of how God worked in sometimes impossible situations. Today, however, the gospel continues to expand like wild-fire farther into the darker corners where the gospel has never been heard. This, because more and more men and women of God are willing to sacrifice everything so others might hear. These are only the players in a drama directed by God. His purpose is to provide the world with the opportunity to know Him, and he uses ordinary people, like you and me, to see this come about.

Paul and Barnabas' first term as missionaries would be only the beginning of a massive world-wide movement, and it would begin with only these two. Imagine this. Only two sent out by God and yet so much happens. Should we be surprised? Elsewhere God has told us that "*Five of you will chase a hundred, and a hundred of you will chase ten thousand, and your enemy will fall by the sword before you*" (Lev.26:8).

Barnabas and Paul were players in the drama directed by God. What lay at the heart of their success was simply that they had been sent by the Holy Spirit. What happens when the Holy Spirit sends God's workers out? What happens when God's workers recognize they are only the players, but significant workers in a great drama that will one day

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climax in the return of Jesus as King? Being sent out by the Holy Spirit led Paul and Barnabas to conduct themselves fully for God. Look what it meant to them:

1. It led them to proclaim the word of God. (vs.5) Wherever they went they, spoke of the word of God. They told people about the message of Jesus. It was a simple task, but to Paul and Barnabas life depended on it. Eternity depended on it. This they would do first in the Synagogue among a people (Jews) who would recognize the voice of God. Yet wherever Paul went, it was the Gentiles who seemed to respond to that word.

2. It led them to go anywhere they could to proclaim this message. (vs.6) They were burdened not just for a few people, but for everyone. They had taken on God's burden for humanity expressed so well by Peter. They did not wish *"that anyone should perish but all to come to repentance"* (2 Peter 3:9). This is likewise the burden of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, the mission society with which I serve. I hear constantly of their deep longing to expand their work. Every year I hear of new territory being penetrated by the presence of new missionaries. Our mission leaders are always asking, *where else can we go? What more can we do? What new opportunities exist?* Likewise, Paul and Barnabas responded to anyone who had an interest. This commitment not to be restricted to one people or area led them to the leader of the island of Cyprus, the pro-counsel Sergius Paulus. Paul finds him to be an intelligent man but one empty of any spiritual knowledge.

Satan, however, does not give territory up without a battle. Every missionary will tell you that Satan has his secret agents who emerge when the gospel seems to be making its greatest strides. Some missionaries are defeated by opposition to their work, but not Paul and Barnabas.

3. It led them to believe who had the true power. So confident was Paul of this, he looks this agent of Satan, the sorcerer Bar-Jesus, straight in the eyes and says to him, *"you are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right"* (vs.10). God proves his power

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over Satan by blinding the sorcerer. The devil's attempts to distract are frustrated and the proconsul believes *"for he was amazed at the teaching of the Lord"* (vs.11). Notice what turned the corner for the proconsul was not Paul's display of power over the sorcerer. Perhaps the proconsul had had enough of the dramatics from this magician. It was the teaching of the Lord that convinced him. God's truth, the word of God, brought about this change in his life.

Meeting Paul and Barnabas would have been a joy on this first term of missionaries. They had zeal and passion, a single-minded pursuit for winning the lost. I fear some missionaries lose this on their first term. Why? Because they lose sight of this mission. They take success or even the lack of success personally. They forget whom they serve and that they are not alone especially when the enemy steps up the opposition. Last Wednesday our church heard from a missionary to Gabon of a general in that country who is causing havoc for the missionaries. Denying visas, refusing permits for churches and making life harsh for missionaries, he is doing all he can to defeat the work. We prayed against this secret agent of Satan. Even in prayer we, with thousands of miles between us, have the power to rebuke the enemy and recognize this general as a child of the devil.

Barnabas and Paul never dared think the work was their own. Had they, they would have despaired. They would have been overwhelmed by loneliness and quickly overpowered by the opposition. Yet, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, made them God's agents with the confidence and authority to face anything. The devil was bound and the gospel presented uncontested. That is what will happen to God's servants who know their place in God's work of missions.

### FIRST TERM HARDSHIP 13:13-52

*"And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit."* (vs.52).

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For Paul opportunities came out of severe hardship. Many of Paul's references to hardships in his epistles came about during this first term as a missionary, or what is called his first missionary journey. It is important that we look past the Sunday School images of Paul floating from one scene to the next in Acts, and picture instead a loyal servant of Jesus trudging through every obstacle imaginable. Yet never does his commitment to preach Christ waver. In Paul's theology, suffering was necessary for the promotion of the gospel.

Consider for a moment the length and the difficulty of the journey Paul takes on this first term. Look at a map and using your legend follow the path he took. Moving from Paphos to Perga to Pisidian Antioch was no Sunday afternoon stroll. Paul and Barnabas and John Mark begin this phase of their journey on a boat sailing from the island of Cyprus (Paphos) making a 300 mile journey to the mainland of Perga. This alone must have been rigorous. A cursory reading of the next stage of their travel (from Perga they went to Pisidian Antioch) does not reveal the depth of the trials that must have been a part of this journey. To get from Perga to Pisidian Antioch Paul and Barnabas had to make a *"stiff climb over the Taurus mountains which were known to be infected with Bandits.* (John Stott: commentary on Acts) In 2 Corinthians 11:23-26 Paul refers to this sort of experience reminding us that he faced real life hardships. He writes; *"I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipped wrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea. I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own country men, in danger from Gentiles, in danger in the country, in danger at sea, in danger from false prophets."* This is like reading the biography of a first century Indiana Jones.

Many of these trials Paul refers to in his letter to the Corinthians occurred on this first missionary term. Consider for example the climb from the low plateau of the coast

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(where Paul landed by ship) to the rigorous climb of the Taurus plateau some 3000 feet above sea level. Some even suggest that Paul's thorn in the flesh was a severe bout of chronic malaria fever, often caught on such journeys, and which leaves the sufferer with serious damage to the eyes. Could all of this hardship have been the cause of John Mark's desertion from the team? Verse 15 explains how Mark leaves Paul and Barnabas before they leave Perga to climb the mountain probably deciding to return on the ship that had just brought them. Perhaps Mark "chickened out" when he realized what he was getting into.

Paul and Barnabas arrive in Pisidian Antioch certainly tired and weak. But they are on a mission. They must have taken time to rest, particularly if Paul was sick, and on that first Sabbath they join the worship at the local Synagogue. Those there recognize Paul to be a rabbi so he is invited to speak (vs.15). Here Paul stands, a man broken by illness and weakened by the long journey and he is the one who is asked to encourage them.

*"Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak."* Well, they ask for it and they got it. Boy, does Paul ever have a message of encouragement for them. For the next hour perhaps the message from the lips of this weakened broken man, are the strongest words ever spoken. Consider it for a moment and allow God to encourage your heart as well.

First Paul encourages them by reviewing God's blessing and provision in the past. (vs. 16-22) Paul speaks here to *"men of Israel and you Gentiles who worship God"* (vs.16). They know the story of their history. But remember, Paul urges of them, that it is a story about God's grace and provision. *"He made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt, with a mighty plan he led them out of their country, he endured their conduct...he overthrew seven nations...God gave them judges...he made David their king"* (vs. 17-22).

These sweet words from a worn out weakened man gave this congregation a rush of excitement. Yes, God certainly has been good to us they must have said. And how valuable it is for us today to pause for a moment and reflect also over the history of our

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lives. We too will observe that it has been a gracious loving God involved in it all. But Paul is not finished. He has further encouragement. He speaks next of the greatest blessing of all - God's provision in Jesus. *"God has brought to Israel a savior as he promised."* (vs.23) This is why Paul has made this journey. That is what has made every trial, every bruise every break and every insult and attack worthwhile. *"It is to us that message of salvation has been sent"*(vs.26). *"We tell you the good news. What He has promised our fathers, He has fulfilled for us..."* (vs. 32-33). *"Therefore brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you"* (vs.38).

What an encouragement this was to a people whose religion centered only on past tradition. Christianity is not just about adherence to a past tradition or experience. It is the present experience of a relationship with God. What a lesson for today. I saw first hand in my ministry in England how Christianity was appreciated for its past contribution but not its present provision. Yet the message of the gospel needed to echo loud from those old and imposing steeples that Jesus is for you, and he is for you now. This concept of God being relational and present was so revolutionary to Paul's audience they could not wait to hear more. *"On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord"* (vs.44). *"When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed"* (vs.48).

Somehow, and sadly, many do not accept such a personal view of God. They would prefer to view God as a past tradition. Many today are like those hardened traditionalists who oppose Paul, preferring a religion of the past over a relationship. *"When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying"* (vs.45). It is easier for many to keep God in a dusty old box of history. Let him loose and he will demand obedience and self surrender. This, as it was for these leaders, is too high a price for many but not for Paul, or for many who heard his words of encouragement. What about for you? It cost Paul dearly to bring that message to these people, but it cost God more. Paul's trial was only a token experience of what Jesus went

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through to provide us salvation. I have to ask myself. Am I also willing to pay that price?

Gladly, I say yes!

THE UNFINISHED SERMON! 14:1-20

*"We too are only men, humans like you." (vs.15)*

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I have two recurring dreams that have kept me an active sleeper for several years now. They both have to do with preaching. In one dream I have just begun to preach. The room seems rather hazy and dim, but full of people. I begin my preaching but feel unsure of myself as though something devastating is about to happen. It does. The moment I begin to speak people begin to stand up, one by one, and leave. Within minutes the room is empty and I am left alone, stunned, and still behind the pulpit.

The second dream has the audience more attentive than the first dream. In this dream I still feel unsettled sensing that something unpredictable will happen. The moment I step behind the pulpit to begin my message another man stands up from within the congregation and he too begins to speak. What follows is a very confusing scene and one fortunately reserved just for dreams. I am frustrated that I do not have the undivided attention of my audience and the more I raise my voice the louder the other man speaks.

Obviously these dreams contain some deep rooted fears I have about preaching. I will leave further psychoanalyzing to others though. I would, however, place Paul's sermon in Lystra in the category of outlandish dreams except that it really happened. Here Paul preaches his heart out. Sometime, either before the sermon, or even possibly during the sermon, a man crippled from birth (vs.8) enters the scene and as though becoming part of the sermon, Paul heals the man. Paul never gets any further in his message, and here is where the story becomes almost nightmarish. Imagine, preaching and while you preach you heal a man. The crowd responds by hailing you a god. What would you do with that? Preachers love to be affirmed, but this goes a bit far. *"The gods have come down to us. Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes..."* (vs.12). *"The priests of Zeus... brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them"* (vs.13).

The devil has all sorts of creative ways of deterring people from hearing the real message of the gospel. To this point he has succeeded by turning the crowd against Paul and

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Barnabas. Now he turns the crowd to Paul and Barnabas but in such a way the true message of Jesus is never heard. Even today many popular speakers and Christians (or at least religious) leaders have become icons rather than mere humble messengers of the gospel. Benny Hinn, the Charismatic preacher, is known to contain supernatural spiritual power that few others have. Filled with what he calls the anointing, he can strike people down by simply blowing on them. I have seen moments when entire sections of people in an auditorium collapse to the floor by this "breath of God." This man has such a large following, few seem to question that his powers are maybe demonic in origin, not from God. Even the Pope, whether he seeks it or not, is venerated as bigger than life, a god figure - who does not seem to refuse the worship that should only be reserved for God. Imagine if the Pope ran down from his Pope mobile as thousands are worshiping and praising him tearing his white garment off and crying out to the masses, *I am only a human like you. You should praise God not me.*

John Stott in his commentary on Acts offers an interesting bit of historic detail that helps us understand the people's reaction in Lystra. He says, *"About 50 years previously the Latin poet Ovid had narrated an ancient legend. The supreme god Jupiter (Zeus to the Greeks) and his son Mercury (Hermes) once visited the hill country of Phrygia, disguised as mortal men. In their incognito, they sought hospitality but were rebuffed a thousand times"* (p.230). This legend, explains Stott, occurred in a village near by to where Paul and Barnabas were. The village subsequently fell to the rage of these gods and was destroyed. The people in Lystra and Derbe did not want to fall to the same fate thus their reverent acceptance of Paul and Barnabas as the reincarnation of Zeus and Hermes.

Paul and Barnabas, unlike Benny Hinn and the Pope, respond to this veneration with holy fear and demand the people to stop. They *"tore their clothes and rushed into the crowd shouting, 'men why are you doing this? We too are only men, humans like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God..."* (vs.14-15). *"Even with these words they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them"* (vs.18).

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If this had been a dream what happen next reaches nightmare proportions. Jews from Antioch, who obviously had followed Paul to Lystra, turned the crowd against Paul and Barnabas this time hurling stones rather than praise. They leave Paul for dead, and the gospel dies a quiet death in Lystra and Derbe. Notice in Paul's sermon he is never able to mention Jesus.

We have to acknowledge there will be times when the devil will gain victories and capture a foothold in people's lives. In this life, sometimes the devil will win. He did in Lystra and he often does today. In six years of ministry in England, fortunately I was never treated like a god. (I'd make a lousy one anyway.) I did leave England though, as Paul left Lystra, with a heavy burden for those who just wouldn't hear of Jesus. That burden lingers and is often the fuel that gives life to my prayers. While it might seem the sermon remains to be completed, sometimes God will take what has been said, and has been lived, and continues to preach that word to the hearts of people by the convicting work of the Holy Spirit. While Paul and Barnabas were forced out of Lystra, the Holy Spirit remained and the work continued.

THE CHURCH IS FOR CHRISTIANS NOT FOR PAGANS! 14:21-28

*"Strengthening the disciples and encouraging them" (vs.22).*

The phone call the other day from my friend was disconcerting. He explained to me that many are thinking of leaving the church he was once part of and has also been a church

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close to my heart. My friend continued to inform me that this church along with so many other Churches are seeking the seekers but neglecting the believers. It is a trend rapidly replacing the traditional idea that the Church is primarily for Christians. This seeker trend urges the Church to create an atmosphere and structure comfortable for the pagan. It says; *present the gospel in a non threatening manner and in a language and style relevant to the pagan. Don't use biblical language that might not relate to the pagan's life. Terms like cross, blood and hell should be avoided. These are offensive to the pagan and their tender souls might not be able to absorb these. They might be so turned off you will not see them again.*

In the case of my friend's church, all this has been happening at the expense of committed and mature believers. Many of these are fed up from not being fed and have become seekers themselves looking for a Church where they can grow, be strengthened and be given opportunity to serve.

I will take a risk here and make what I know is a bold statement in a day when appeasing the pagan seems to be the popular trend. The Church is for Christians not for pagans. In fact, I will even risk the wrath of some pastors by suggesting that the pagan, while welcome by believers in Church should not feel welcome by the preaching of the word. I want him or her to squirm in their pew. I want him or her to feel so uncomfortable, so convicted, that they will want to change their life and become one of God's children too. I realize, of course, that many seeker sensitive Churches have this as their goal, and I commend and encourage their creativity in presenting the gospel and their desire to see pagans won to Jesus. Many traditional Churches have sadly lost this passion for the lost and cater only to the believers. However, the Church cannot stroke and woo the pagan to God by bending to their needs and overlooking their state before God. In Ephesians 2 the Apostle Paul makes a sharp distinction between the pagan's life and the life of the believer that ought to be most evident in the Church. *"You were dead in your sins.." (vs.1) "You followed the ways of this world" (vs.2). "all of us loved among them at one time gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature.." (vs.3). "We were by nature objects of*

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*wrath.."* (vs.3). *"Remember that at one time you were separated from Christ, excluded from citizenship...foreigners to the covenants of the promise"* (vs.12). It is the pagan who must be most aware of this distinction between himself and believers, and this distinction should become most obvious to him when he enters a Church building or mingles among believers.

Here is the balance that must exist in a healthy Church. I will follow this by exposing Paul's philosophy of the Church as revealed in our passage. A pagan ought to feel welcome by believers but unwelcome by the preaching of the word of God. Listening to the word of God, certainly preached in his language and relevant to his day, ought to make him feel completely out of place among this band of Christians. Yet the power and truth of that word should convict his soul. He or she must see something among these Christians and hear something from the preaching that whets his appetite but causes him to sense a real lack of it in his or her own life. The word preached strengthens the believer in his faith but should also cause the pagan to exclaim; *I don't have that but I want it. I feel deeply uncomfortable here, but still there is something about these people that makes me realize there is something missing in my life.* The pagan visiting Church should feel like a blind person sitting in a theater. They can hear the noise, dialogue and music but not being able to see the screen restricts them from fully appreciating the show. Being in a setting like this makes the blind person more aware of his blindness but also causes him to long to see like the others. Being in Church should make the sinners more aware of their sin than they ever have been before. I remember at times preaching and later being told that someone attending church that day had been deeply offended by what I had said. Looking back now, provided it was the truth that had offended them, I am able to say *"good, that is what I wanted."* May God help us to keep the church for Christians and may the Church also become a place where pagans are changed into children of God.

Paul's travel back to Jerusalem took him through the same places where he had previously preached the gospel. Each of these cities now had Christians but no organized

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church. So there, "*Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church*" (vs.23). Here we discover something integral about Paul's philosophy of the church. They return through each city with a fourfold purpose. To, strengthen the disciples, encourage them to remain true to the faith, warn them of hardships to come, and to model before them a lifestyle of prayer and fasting. There are the marks of a healthy church and most become the substance that forms the experience of the church. Let's take a closer look at each.

1. The disciples needed to be strengthened: How? Through solid preaching of God's word and through personal discipling. By communicating the doctrines of the faith. It was their desire to "*establish and fortify new converts and churches*" says John Stott. This same term *strengthened* is used in Acts 9:31 when the Church faced a period of peace. The church "*was strengthened and encouraged by the Holy Spirit.*" In Acts 15:32 two prophets, Judas and Silas, "*said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers.*" Barnabas and Mark later "*went through Syria and Cilicia strengthening the churches* (Acts 15:41). This mission of strengthening the church was conducted in the spirit of Colossians 2:6 and ought to become every pastor's statement of purpose. "*So just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.*"

2. The disciples needed to be encouraged. How? By being challenged to live out what they believe. To "*remain true to the faith.*" Disciples of Jesus are cheered by their pastor as they progress along this path. Doctrine then is the basis of their experience but also becomes their motivation to living out their Christian lives. For example, I am challenged by the doctrine of sanctification. It is that doctrine so entwined with the indwelling Holy Spirit therefore becomes one of the top priorities in my life. I believe firmly in this doctrine but struggle to live it out. I need to be encouraged and challenged to live out what I believe. Paul urges this of Timothy on three separate occasions in his letters. "*Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them*" (1 Tim. 4:6). Speaking about elders Paul says, "*he must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it was taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine*" (Titus 1:9). And again the Timothy he urges,

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*"You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine"* (Titus 2:1). In each case there is a correlation between doctrine and living. We are all urged to live out what we believe. And it is the pastor and Church leaders who are selected by God to be our cheerleaders in doing so.

3. Disciples need to be prepared for tough times. A pastor assumes his people will face tough times and that these trials will test the faith of the believers. Paul warns his believers that hardship parallels the experience of living the Christian life. *"We must face many hardships to enter the kingdom of God..."* (Acts 14:22).

Recently a friend of mine from the church where I pastored in England let me know he was listening regularly to my messages on tape. I wrote back to him explaining how nervous I am to know what I was saying back in those rather calm and easy days. I know I preached a lot about hardships and how to handle pain. I urged my people to allow God to use the difficulties they face to mold and shape their faith, yet I personally had never truly experienced a real trial. Since, I have had to thank God for the solid doctrine that existed in my life a doctrine of suffering which had formed a platform to remain standing on when the trials did come.

Many believers in churches today, particularly in America, are not taught how to suffer. Yet the scriptures cover no other subject more than this one. Today many churches preach a doctrine of ease rather than hardship. Many are not prepared for the trials that do befall them, so rather than being strengthened by the trials, they fall apart.

4. Disciples need the model of a lifestyle of prayer and fasting. Paul and Barnabas' ministry of strengthening and encouraging and preparing for suffering was capped by a time of prayer and fasting for them. *"and with prayer and fasting committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust"* (vs.23). I use the term modeling here because I believe the pastor should teach less on prayer and do more praying. I love the pastor who listens to me, then places his arms around me saying, *"Mitch, let me pray with you about*

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*this.* " One pastor friend of mine has been on the receiving end of many of my groans this past year. He gives little advice, but over the phone responds to my pain by praying for me. I have been strengthened and encouraged by his prayers. If a pastor prays for his people he is modeling a lifestyle of prayer.

May God bless and strengthen the pastor who wants his people to grow.

### CHRISTIANS AND TIES! (15:1-35)

*"We should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God."* (vs.14)

In my second pastorate I came to my office one Monday morning and scanned the condition of the sanctuary after what had been an active Sunday the day before. Before heading for my office I noticed that a sheet of paper tacked to the wall had an additional handwritten comment to what I had typed as a schedule for the ushers' Sunday

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responsibilities. One of my hard headed elders had written, *"all ushers must wear suit and tie."* I was disturbed by this. Our church had only recently been growing and many of those now attending were new to the faith and not accustomed to some of our long standing church traditions suit and tie wearing being one. Several of these young men had also been selected to serve as ushers. I knew this imposition of suit and tie wearing would not go well with with these casual dressers and so I made my way to the office, found some white out and removed that handwritten comment on the bottom of that sheet.

For Gentile Christians to be told they had to be circumcised in order to live in God's kingdom was like a handwritten addition to what God had written in stone. The issue of circumcision and sacrifices had died a certain death in Acts ten when God confronted Peter with these issues before Peter's ministry to Cornelius. In a vision to Peter, God lifted these Old Testament requirements from the shoulders of both Jews and Gentiles. This new phase of God's grace would present a gospel that refused to demand anything that would only burden God's people. Peter understood this and would later explain to his Gentile friends this change. *"God told me that I should not call any man impure or unclean."* (10:28). And, *"God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right"* (10:36). Later Peter gave further explanation to the Jewish leaders. *"When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, 'so then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life'"* (11:18).

Requiring Gentiles to abide by the Jewish law, whether it was keeping to certain diets or being circumcised, was now a non-issue. It was as relevant to the Christian faith as one being asked to wear a tie today. *"Some men came from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers; unless you are circumcised ... you cannot be saved"* (15:1). Seeing this handwritten comment to what God had written in stone angered Paul and Barnabas bringing them into *"sharp dispute and debate with them"* (vs.2). This was no passing matter. Later Paul would write an entire epistle (Galatians) as an attempt to salvage the gospel there in Galatia.

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Finally, Paul and Barnabas were sent on their way from Antioch with the blessing of the believers but also with a desire to clear this matter up. *"Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question"* (vs.2). On their way they travel through Phoenicia where they were cheered by believers there when Paul shared with them what God had done among the Gentiles. *"This news made all the brothers glad"* (vs.3). Paul did not allow this legal issue to dim his enthusiasm. He was determined to concentrate on that which mattered; the gospel to the Gentiles. It is when they arrived in Jerusalem though that the cheers turned to jeers when after reporting all that God had done among the Gentiles the circumcision matter arose again. This must have deflated Paul. This was not what mattered to them. Eager to report what God had done on the mission field, they were forced to divert their attention to a matter that to God no longer mattered.

I did not attend our mission society's annual council this last year, but I heard from others that a lot of the debate from the floor seemed to involve more and more issues no longer associated with what has always been the heart of our mission. We are a missionary society with a passion to win lost people to Jesus, but more and more this is being moved to the edge of the circle. At the center now are issues not really critical to the heartbeat of our movement. *Should women serve as elders or should they preach? What percentage of the money should go directly to overseas ministry? What should the format be of our denominational structure?* These are important issues that will affect the heart, if ignored, but they ought never to dominate and replace our passion for our mission to reach the lost around the world.

In our story, it is Peter who takes out his whistle to bring calm to what seems to be a chaotic scene. He speaks and sets the record straight attempting to bring the minds of the people back to what really matters. He brings them back to the heart of God. Interestingly, it is Peter who has just come through an inner battle over the whole issue. I am not referring to his relationship with Cornelius. It is very likely, from Paul's account

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in Galatians 2, that Peter had recently bent to the Pharisees' demand for circumcision of Gentiles. In fact it seems Peter was one of the troublemakers who came to Antioch insisting this from the Gentiles. Listen to what Paul wrote about Peter. *"When Peter came to Antioch I opposed him to his face because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.... even Barnabas was led astray"* (Gal.2:12-13).

Peter recovered his original passion for the grace of God and spoke to the Jerusalem Council. What he said was perhaps more a personal confession than an attempt to resolve the situation. Yet, his position became a framing document for the church, and an agreement is reached that no imposition should be placed on Gentiles other than that of keeping holy before God. *"Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood"* (vs.20).

This story is clearly a reminder to us never to drift from the essential message of the gospel that *it is by grace that we have been saved* (Acts 15:11, Gal. 2:8). It also reminds us that the devil will do all he can to distract Christians from their mission of winning the lost to Jesus. James sums up the Jerusalem meeting well when he says, *"it is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God..."* (vs.19). God's grace and winning the lost; These are the two things I will write and post on any church wall. Just don't tell me I have to wear a tie. I know where the white out is!

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### A STORY OF CONFLICT 15:36-16:6

*"Commended the brothers to the grace of the Lord."* (15:40)

Having a passion to serve Jesus does not mean we will be free of conflict with others. Mark's desertion at Pamphylia (13:13) would finally catch up with him. It left a deep mark on Paul who now will not consider taking Mark with him on this second leg of the

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missionary work. Paul seemed to have no room for quitters. Barnabas did, and fortunately for us so does God.

Only three weeks ago, through consultation with our mission society, the decision was made not to send us back as missionaries to England. In fact, the national office has decided to withdraw completely from England. Initially this decision seems to put an exclamation mark to our ministry to England drawing it to a sudden close, but seems to place a large question mark on the minds of our brothers in England. We have a situation here made of two minds. There seems to be a sharp disagreement over this decision, some in the national church seriously questioning if this decision is even of God. I, however, try to fight off the conclusion that this ends God's work in England. Of course it doesn't! God is not dependent on us. His work will continue. While the decision has drastically altered our plans and caused some friction among the church brothers, God's work will continue. In fact we hope his work will be strengthened as a result giving those in England greater ownership of the vision we sought to impart to them. The point is this. God's work does not end when strategies are changed and relationships are affected by the changes. Sometimes, as we see in our story, the work is even strengthened.

Barnabas we are told had a sharp disagreement with Paul's refusal to take Mark (vs.39). This phrase implies that there must have been words said, and the tension was apparently quite heavy between the two heroes. Notice though that God's work not only continued, but was even strengthened. How? I believe because passion for God superseded personal conflict. Paul and Barnabas handled personal conflict in a godly manner. Yes, that is possible. It is possible to disagree, even sharply, and still be in God's will. Look how.

1. They kept serving God. Paul and Barnabas's ultimate goal was to strengthen the Church. *"Let's go and visit the brothers ... and see how they are doing"* (vs.36). The conflict with Barnabas did not deter Paul from following through on this goal. *"He went through Syria and Cilicia strengthening the churches"* (vs.41). Meanwhile, Barnabas *"sailed for Cyprus."* (vs.39) Although there was personal conflict they never took their

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eyes off their task. There was on greater mission than getting along, and that was to serve Jesus and fulfill his commission. Let me be careful here. This is not license for a missionary or pastor to bulldoze people in the name of a higher call. My point is to say that where there is conflict, as unfortunate as it might be, it does not become reason enough to fold the tent and pack up. I am simply saying that if there is ever going to be conflict, don't let it stop you from serving. Obviously, as we will see in a moment, everything should be done to dissolve the conflict.

2. They still valued team ministry. I have met some pastors, and missionaries who have become lone rangers in many ways because they avoid conflict that way. Their experience with people has taught them that it isn't worth working with people so they might as well do the work alone. When I meet a pastor who seems to be alone, I can safely assume there is a story of interpersonal conflict in his life. His independent nature is a way of avoiding further conflict. Paul could have easily walked away from this situation saying, *that is it, I am on my own*. But he doesn't. While working alone might have been easier, Paul knew it wasn't safe. He did not allow this conflict from needing another partner. He valued partnership and knew he would be stronger with it. So after the dust has settled over the situation with Mark, "*Paul chose Silas and left...*" (vs.40). The conflict over Mark did not turn Paul into a loner, although sometimes that is the image we have of this man. Instead, throughout Paul's life of ministry, partnerships were vital. For example, in the beginning of chapter 16, while back in Lystra, Paul becomes enamored with a young man called Timothy. Timothy seems to possess all the qualities Paul needs, and becomes a member of the missionary team. "*Paul wanted to take him along on the journey*" (16:3). It seems Paul would not dare minister alone. Team partnership was a valuable asset to his ministry.

Pastors ought to occasionally reflect on this matter. How much are they trying to do alone? Do they rely on other men for strength and encouragement? Or have they secluded themselves from others to avoid conflict? I recently commented to someone how I need men in my life. I value other men to meet with and pray with. In fact, every Monday

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morning four or five of us, all men, meet together at MacDonald's for encouragement and prayer. The end of some of Paul's letters, particularly The Epistle to the Romans, reveal how important people were in his life and ministry. If Paul needed people, so do we!

They allowed God to own the conflict. I don't believe Paul and Barnabas parted in bitterness. Rather, I sense from the reading, they agreed to disagree and gave the matter over to God. Here was a matter, much like those things we will face, that could not at that point be resolved on a human level, but neither did it dominate. The ministry was more important than the conflict. You see, conflict only becomes sin when it embitters the participants and disables them from service. What is released to God, however, is never wasted. It might be unfortunate that Paul made such an issue over Mark, but it was not sin, because the matter was given to God. As long as God owns the conflict He can redeem and even use it to further his work.

Many church denominations exist today as a product of conflict over theology or even strategy. They have not necessarily been a detriment to God's work. Instead, in many cases the work of the churches has been strengthened by the presence of various societies who are committed to the gospel. The growing movement we see today for unity in the church, seems to be inviting God to own the differences and strengthen his work through diversity. As long as the gospel is not compromised and doctrines water down, God seems to do more through the presence of these various groups. In Acts, the result of God owning the conflict was a stronger church. *"So the church was strengthened in the faith and grew daily" (vs.5).*

4. They did all they could to resolve the conflict. While we are to keep serving where there is conflict, the Lord nevertheless wants us to resolve it. The tension between Mark and Paul later dissolved into a happy relationship. Later Paul tells Timothy, *"Get Mark and bring him back because he is helpful to me in my ministry"* (2 Tim. 4:11). In Colossians 4:2 and Philemon 23-24 Paul again speaks of Paul's renewed confidence in Mark.

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Mark no doubt had to earn his way back to Paul's heart and did not allow Paul's early mistrust to ruin his passion for God. He kept serving and proved his faithfulness. That, I imagine, must not have been easy. Imagine the great apostle Paul not approving of you and saying so to your face! Passion for Jesus enables you though to live with conflict. My prayer is that God will help the servant whose feet are currently stuck in the cement of conflict. May God intervene and break free those who have become so bitter from conflict they have become no good for God. If you are living right now with unresolved conflict, let God own it and keep serving. He will bless you for doing so, and he will strengthen the church by this resolve. I find courage in knowing that nothing is ever wasted when placed in God's hands.

### OVERCOMING SPIRITUAL SPATIAL DISORIENTATION 16:6-15

*"Concluding that God has called us to preach the gospel to them" (vs.10).*

Having just acquired my private pilot license, I have joined the company of pilots who agree that John Kennedy's fatal plane crash occurred after he suffered from a condition called *spatial disorientation*. Spatial disorientation occurs when a pilot has lost all

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reference points and decides to trust his bodily instincts rather than his instrument panel. Many believe that Kennedy flew into hazy conditions which combined with flight over water can render a pilot completely disoriented. The pilot can be descending rapidly when his body tells him he is climbing. Or he may be taking a sharp turn when he thinks he is flying straight and level. It is likely that John Kennedy hit the water never knowing he had lost his orientation. Had he trusted the instruments, the accident might never have happened.

This is the only protection from spatial disorientation. Trust the instruments, not your body. Believe that the instruments are telling the truth and depend on them wholeheartedly, even when your instincts are crying otherwise. Christians, I have found, often fall susceptible to a condition I call *spiritual spatial disorientation*. Most of us would admit to times when we have disregarded God's trustworthy instruments for what our senses tell us. I seem to be at a place in my life right now where, if I took my eyes off God's instruments, I would crash.

Having just received word that we will not be returning to England as missionaries has left me disoriented. I seem to have flown into a murky haze causing me to lose sight of those clear reference points previously so dependable in my journey. I don't seem to have a clear sense of direction right now and my body is screaming to go directions I know go against the instruments. My emotions especially are telling me to go back, to continue as we had planned, and I long to follow what these instincts tell me. However, while the torch shines only upon portions of my path I find comfort in knowing that God sees the whole journey, and He knows what He is doing. My part is trust! Someday, I know I will look back at the strange direction God has taken me and I will say, *Ah, it was the best after all*. That is the reward of trusting God when our own instincts cry out for something else.

The apostle Paul begins his second missionary term finding that God had a completely different plan than what he had assumed. Early on this journey, Luke writes; "*When they*

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came to the border of Mysa, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to" (vs.7). The alteration plans came at the heels of another sudden change. Luke records again, "*having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia*" (vs.6). God's instrument panel seemed to be revealing a far different scenario than what Paul instinctively thought he should do. We are not told how or even why Paul and Silas are "*kept by the Holy Spirit*" from preaching in Asia and Bithynia. We can be encouraged from this in knowing that even the great apostle did not always understand God. God had his reasons and Paul and Silas trusted him even if it went against what they thought was right.

That night, however, Paul had a dream in which God's reason for the closed door began to make some sense. A man from Macedonia begged Paul to "*come over to Macedonia and help us*" (vs.9). The closed door and this appeal were enough for Paul to "*conclude that God had called us to preach to them*" (vs.10).

The value of trusting the instruments over personal interest became evident in the following verses. Paul could have easily *done his own thing*, but being completely reliant on God kept him from doing so.

I am one who is prone, particularly to my family, to be led by my emotions. I am in England as I write this which is turning out to be a very emotionally laced time in my life. We are back in the community where I served six years as pastor, to say good-bye and sort through our personal belongings. We have three weeks here to release this work to God. After one day, however, forces are already at work tugging at my emotions in a cruel game of tug of war. I am torn between what I know is right and what I feel. God has closed this door to return here; I am clear in my mind on that. Yet every emotional instinct tells me that this is home. We belong here. Humanly, it makes no sense that we do not return. Nevertheless, whom am I going to trust? My feelings or God's trustworthy even reliable instruments?

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Glancing over some of the Proverbs this morning, I have gleaned some good and relevant insight. *"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge"* (1:7). *"Whoever listens to me will live in safety."* (1:33) *"Turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding ... then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God ... then you will understand what is right and just and fair - every good path"* (2:5-10). *"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight"* (3:4-5).

I don't always understand God, but I trust Him. I want to look back at this difficult time some day, and be able to say, *I am glad it went that way, because it was God's way.* *"As for God, his way is perfect..."* (Psalm 18:30). It will certainly be more rewarding than the painful regret of doing things my own way. Meanwhile, it all seems a bit hazy outside the cockpit where I am sitting, so I am going to keep my eyes fixed on that instrumental panel. Are you?

A TALE OF THREE CITIES! (ch.17)

*"he reasoned with them from the scriptures"* (vs.2).

My family and I are right now a week into a three-week visit to England. We are here to say good bye to our friends and to sort through our things which have been in storage for two years. It has taken this visit for me to be reminded how secular this nation is. Unlike America, few attend church, and neither is there much interest in God. The British, sadly, are pagans who do not pursue God.

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Last night we visited a young couple whom we have known for some years from our ministry in England. They both attended church faithfully, he as faithful believer, she as a curious but resistant atheist. Concerned that she had attended church so long with no change I broached the subject of her faith after dinner and I found that she had progressed very little in her struggle with God. Having been raised in a secular and humanistic society, it is no wonder she finds Christianity incompatible with her scientific outlook of life. I have met many like her in England.

Paul's travels now take him deeper into the forest of secularism. In fact Paul encounters three kinds of people. In Thessalonica the people were worldly and they fought the gospel. Berea was very secular, but Paul found the people there were eager to make sense of the message of Christianity. Athens presents what is perhaps a most familiar reaction particularly for those of us who have worked in Europe. You could say Athens then, reflects the current attitude toward Christianity in Europe today. Here people had religion but their lives were void of meaning. There existed a tradition of religiosity but the substance was lacking. This vacuum gave rise to paganism.

While Paul's time in Thessalonica and Berea were important, I would like to spend a little more time observing his ministry in Athens. Here you will recognize the mindset that continues to exist in America and in secular Europe. First, though, we need to summarize Paul's message. His message was his sword. With his singular and simple message Paul sought to pierce the heart of the secular person with the truth. Doing so always brought about a reaction. For example, in Thessalonica *"the Jews were jealous, so they rounded up some bad characters from the market place, formed a bog and started a riot in the city"* (vs.5). All this happened because Paul wanted them to know God loved them. It was that seemingly dangerous message that caused his accusers to say, *"these men who have caused trouble all over the world have come here"* (vs.6). By trouble, they meant reconciliation to God through Jesus Christ. That is trouble only for the kingdom of Satan. Here then was Paul's troublesome and threatening message. *"He reasoned with*

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*them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead" (vs.2).*

This message of love became the subject of hate and rebellion simply because it pitted Jesus against Caesar (vs.7). It forced the issue of who is god in the hearts of people. The message of love and reconciliation threw the city into turmoil (vs.8). I have always been baffled by how people respond to the message of Christianity with such hate, until I realized how accepting Jesus does bring about a revolution in one's life and community. I am finding with my friend I shared about earlier, that turning to God will never happen without a fight.

The Bereans responded to this message with more dignity and respect. being of *"more noble character ... they received the message with great eagerness and examined the scriptures everyday to see if what Paul said was true."* (vs.11) Many believed the message, and a church was formed (vs.12).

Athens posed a new and different challenge for Paul. *"While Paul was waiting for them (that is Silas and Timothy who had stayed behind in Berea), he was greatly disturbed to see that the city was full of idols"* (vs.16). This disturbed Paul because it revealed a pervasive emptiness in the society of Athens. Any culture inundated with idols and multiple gods or even religious beliefs, such as America or Europe, is a culture living in a vacuum. I get this sort of reaction when I hear about the religious situation in India whose people, particular Hindus, pay homage to literally millions of gods. That vacuum can only be filled when people believe in the one true God, the creator of heaven and earth. This is the God Paul is eager to tell people about. And so Paul, armed with this message goes to the Synagogue and interestingly also to the market place (vs.17. I guess he does this because after his run in with the market place mob in Berea, he had acquired a new burden for these people.

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His ministry in Athens exposes him to two kinds of secularism. Those from the school of Epicureans and the stoic philosophers. (vs.18). According to the Warren Wiersbe, Epicureans *"sought truth by means of personal experience and not through reason. They were materialists and atheists, and their goal in life was pleasure."* Stoics followed *"ones reason ... unmoved by inner feelings or outward circumstances."* They denied pleasure and sought to gain from pain. According to John Stott, *"the world (for the stoic) was determined by fate, and human beings must pursue their own , resign themselves to live in harmony with nature and reason, however painful this might be."*

In both cases, the people of Athens were fatalists, who saw no real meaning in life so one might as well make the best of what he had. Among the Europeans I see this to be the common person's faith. There is no God, or if there is one, he is uninvolved, so live it up or just live with it. Enjoy or endure is the philosophy of the modern secular man. The gospel has an answer to secularism, the template beautifully laid out by Paul in his Mars Hill sermon (17:22-31). Based on this, here are five ways to respond to secularism.

First, begin where they are. Evangelicals have often failed (particularly in the USA) to seek an understanding of the secular mind. An unbeliever is not an empty headed person. They have a very definite set of believers and have not arrived them by accident. My friend I spoke of at the beginning of this devotional, arrived at her place of belief out of personal choice. A person who denies God or resists God has chosen to deny or resist God. It is vital for the believer to know both what the secular person believes and how they got there.

Paul's point of identification with pagan Athens was an idol to an unknown God. In verse 23 Paul explains how he *"walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship."* Paul spent time getting to know the mind of the Athens unbeliever, and it was in this that he tapped their core struggle. Their plethora of gods left them empty. Pagan worship fell short of granting them any assurance. Paul had the gospel to fill that void. God was their answer.

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Second, he introduced God as the creator (vs.24). As creator, God cannot be reduced to an object or even represented in an idol. Neither is God satisfied by foods or rituals. God is too big for any of this. Idolatry is really an attempt to bring God to our level. Paul, observing the vain attempts to do that, sought to bring majesty and even awe to his presentation of God. *"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. "*

Our witness to the secular person should always begin by presenting God as the creator. If God is creator, we are all part of that creation; therefore, there must be a purpose to our being here. Paul pursues that purpose next.

Third, God, as creator, is also provider for his creation. The Epicureans believed in a force but not one that contributed to his creation. Our God, however, *"gives all men life and breath and everything else"* (vs.25). What a God! The only reason I am alive is because God wants it. He is the provider and sustainer, not some God who might have had something to do with us but is now removed from our situation. No, our God is an involved God who longs and loves to give to us.

Fourth, God as creator who provides, is also an involved God. As God, He participates in his creation. *"He determines the times set for them and the exact place where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him ... for in him we live and move and have our being"* (vs. 26-28).

Fifth, such an involved God demands our allegiance. *"He commands all people to repent"* (vs.30). But God does so only after providing man a way out through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Man cannot turn a deaf ear to the sacrifice of God. There is no man, woman or child, who will not someday have to decide about God. *"He set forth a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed"* (vs.31). Justice is

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a double-edged sword in the hands of God. To the one who believes, God's justice provides relief and eternal security. To the one who rejects God, God's justice condemns.

The secular person must hear the truth. Deep in his heart he has chosen to reject God. No secular person is where they are by accident. They need to be confronted by this. I asked my friend, mentioned earlier, if she accepted that her intellectual doubts with Christianity might actually be a cover for her resistance and rebellion toward God. She admitted that she knew this was the case. She stands today without excuse. The week following this conversation, I dedicated her baby. Oh, how I long that this child will grow up in a home where there is Christian harmony, not one torn between two beliefs.

### SONGS IN THE NIGHT (16:11-40)

*"About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God." (vs.25)*

It is one thing to sing in the comfort of a sanctuary, totally another to sing in a dank prison cell. The vision of the Macedonian beckoning Paul and Silas to Philippi could have been taken as a cruel joke. My wife, when explaining to people the trial we have undergone will often say, *Satan is having a good laugh*. Paul and Silas never expected the vision to lead them on a trail that led to their imprisonment. By this time though, they must have begun to suspect that anything can happen when one obeys God. Satan might be laughing in the background, but it is God who always has the last laugh.

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Philippi was a Roman city often referred to as *Rome away from Rome*. This city was infested with Romans who were promised a good life if they moved there, free of taxes but with all the benefits of being a Roman. It was a strategic place to present the gospel. Few Jews lived there since there is no reference to Paul's usual trip to a Synagogue. The riverside did well for a place of prayer and worship and that is where Paul and Silas went. *"On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river where we expected to find a place of prayer"* (vs.13). Prayer would wait, for Paul and Silas instead found themselves with a rich opportunity to share the gospel. Here was not the Macedonian caller, but a wealthy *"dealer of purple cloth"* named Lydia. *"The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's messenger"* (vs.14). The first church in Philippi would consist of a woman and the *"members of her household"* (vs.15). No doubt a song of rejoicing was already forming on Paul and Silas' lips.

The membership of this all female church would expand with the conversion of a fortune teller slave girl, but so would the pressure against Paul and Silas. Her conversion was a direct hit, a bulls-eye shot on Satan's territory, and he would not take it sitting down. *"When the owners of the slave girl realized their hopes of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place to face the authorities"* (vs.19). Whatever potential existed for revival dampened and even *"the crowd joined into the attack against Paul and Silas"* (vs.22). They end up in jail, stripped, beaten, humiliated and *"put in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks"* (vs.24). It was here, in a state of helplessness and defeat that Paul and Silas surprisingly broke into song. The Macedonian call seemed a hoax. Their only true converts were two women, and their reward was imprisonment. On the surface there did not seem much to be singing about, but sing they did. *"About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns."* (vs.25) John Stott comments; *"Not groans but songs came from their mouths. Instead of cursing men, they blessed God. No wonder 'the other prisoners were listening to them"* (p. 267 Commentary on Acts) Warren Wiersbe gives this further insight. *"When you are in pain, the midnight hour is not the easiest time for a sacred concert, but God gives 'songs in the night' (Job 35:10)*

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Charles Spurgeon was himself prone to deep bouts of depression, but he often spoke of the need to praise when the desire for it is lacking. He said, *"It is easy to sing when we can read the notes by daylight; but the skillful singer is he who can sing when there is not a ray of light to read by ... Songs in the night come only from God; they are not in the power of men."*

My wife has learned how to sing the midnight song. She is now walking in the dawn but for the past two years she has walked a very dark path. She has lived with the inner anguish of her own losses with communication, and bitter loss of her son. There are moments when she falls near a state of deep despair. What has not dimmed though has been her love for Jesus. I jogged with her recently, and I felt I had been invited to join someone on a sacred walk with God. The entire run she prayed and sang to God. From the outside she has very little to sing about. But in her heart the divine composer continues to write new songs.

What did Paul and Silas have to sing about? I see several things that made that turned that dark cell into a concert hall. First, They must have praised God for the conversions of Lydia and the fortune telling slave girl. Prison was a worthy sanctuary to praise God for the salvation of souls. Physical pain and confinement could not compare to the joy of having witnessed two more people released from a great spiritual prison.

Second, they sang because they were suffering for the sake of Christ. Paul would later write a letter to the church at Philippi. Perhaps he thought about what he would say there in that prison cell. Maybe what Paul wrote in the epistle to the Philippians' church was a summary of what he and Silas were singing in the prison. There in that prison cell they thought about Jesus who *"made himself nothing ..and humbled himself even to death on a cross"* (Phil. 2:7-8). This led Paul to speak of his own eagerness to die. *"I am torn between the two; I desire to depart and be with Christ which is far better..."* (1:23).

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Third, they sang because nothing could strip them of their faith in Jesus. In the epistle, Paul again speaks of the value of suffering and the role of faith in suffering. *"Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. I consider everything loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ"* (3:7-8).

Finally, they sang because their lives were a living testimony to the developing Christ in Philippi. *"For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggles you saw I had, and now hear I still have"* (1:29-30). *"Join with others in following my example and take note of those who live according to the pattern I gave you"* (3:17). Paul and Silas did not charge into Philippi like rich traveling evangelists who did the job and left. They came, shared Christ, and suffered for it. Imagine what this did as an example for this new Christian group?

The midnight song was a holy song that invited God in their trial and led others to Christ. Perhaps the most dramatic part of this story, if it has not been dramatic enough, was the conversion of the jailor who guarded Paul and Silas. This holy song, perhaps accompanied by a choir of angels shook the prison cell, breaking the chains that bound Paul and Silas. The song of salvation broke greater chains, the spiritual chains that bound the jailor and his family in sin. Here that midnight turned to dawn and the suffering all seemed worthwhile. Whatever dark experience you are going through, how is your singing? Have you tried to sing when you feel bound and useless? There is no better way to invite God to join you, and no better way to witness what He can do even with your worst moments. Go ahead, and let that song begin to form on your lips.

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### WHEN THINGS DON'T GO OUR WAY! (Chapter 18)

*"Do not be afraid, keep on speaking, do not be silent" (vs.9)*

Once I walked out of a church meeting angry. I had never done this before and neither have I done it since. I had pastored this church for two years which had become a breeding ground for frustration. I came to a point where I could no longer hold back my reaction to what I perceived as stubbornness on the part of the leadership. As I left the room where the meeting was held, I turned to face the leaders determined that my last words sting. *"I resign!"* I announced, and promptly left the room.

I regret ever doing this, and fortunately the issues that led to this outburst were resolved and I stayed on for several more years. The years of ministry since have been relatively free of interpersonal tension, and I have been privileged to work with godly men with whom I have enjoyed harmony and one heart. Many pastors stand the danger of losing

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their passion and motivation for ministry because of interpersonal conflict. Many I know, have stormed out of meetings announcing their resignation never to turn back to reconcile. Bitterness can create a permanent wall and even the soothing voice of God calling for peace can be drowned out by an unwillingness to forgive.

The Apostle Paul was perilously close to slamming the door on his work. Now in Corinth he spent every Sabbath *"reasoning in the Synagogue trying to persuade Jews and Greeks."* (vs.4) Accompanied by Silas and Timothy *"Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to Jews that Jesus was the Christ"* (vs.5). Paul had been opposed by his audience before and had taken it in stride. But this time he had reached his limit, and he exploded. Here, the great Apostle Paul, God's hero and choice servant, loses control. *"When the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them (I resign), 'from now on I will go to the Gentiles."* (vs.6). This outburst came about because the Jews *"opposed Paul."* The attack on Paul had now become personal and had a deeper effect on Paul than everything else Paul had gone through before. He had been deeply burdened for these people and had given his life that they might turn to God in repentance. In fact in Romans 9:2,3 he shares the depth of this burden. *"I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off for the sake of my brothers, those of my race."* Their resistance of Paul only intensified that longing and it was that sorrow and anguish over their situation that led Paul to shake out his clothes in protest there in Corinth.

We know also that Paul had come to Corinth in a state of emotional weakness. It seems he was intimidated by the vast task that lay before him. In his letter to the Corinthian church he shares this. *"When I came to you brothers I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear and much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power so that your faith might not rest on man's wisdom, but on God's power"* (1 Cor. 2:1-5). This sense of

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inadequacy was not a matter of strategy for Paul but an admission of a deeply personal struggle. We should honestly acknowledge here that the Apostle Paul was struggling emotionally with confidence. Corinth seemed to have brought out deep fears in Paul's life which he counted by sticking to his calling and determining to keep preaching Jesus. Frustrated, intimidated, opposed, tempted to quit and tired, Paul resolved to keep preaching the cross.

What happens next confirms the suspicion I have that Paul was close to giving up. God comes to him and renews Paul. It was the soothing voice of God one night that brings renewed vigor back to Paul's failing passion. Paul might have been on the brink of despair deciding, after his incident and outburst in the synagogue, that the work wasn't worth it. God's word to Paul that night was one given to a wounded soldier. We ought never skim over such references to Paul's vulnerability. Let these words from God to Paul soothe your heart as well. Perhaps you are a wounded soldier near collapse. Let these words renew your passion. *"One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision. 'Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent for I am with you and no one is going to attack and harm you because I have many people in this city'"* (vs.10).

I have found in my life that nothing will re-ignite burned out passion re quickly than a word from the Lord. Many burned out pastors seek relief by retreating but one word from the Lord can do more than a thousand hours of retreat. This word from the Lord to Paul's failing heart put a spring back in his step and a provided him a new boldness for his ministry. *"So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God"* (vs.11). The attacks against Paul remained intense, and it would continue. *"The Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him to court"* accusing him of *"persuading the people to worship in ways contrary to the law"* (vs.12-13). God remained true to His word, and the thunderous attack on Paul diminished to nothing but a pattering of rain.

God's word that restored strength to my buckling knees came appropriately on the day of my son's funeral. What God said to me that day kept the flame burning which had

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threatened to blow out under the strong winds of loss. It is a word that continues to carry me in what remains a hard and uncertain time. These were more than words as the Holy Spirit took each one and gave them to me as a rich meal is offered to a starving traveler. Here is what God said to me. *"Therefore my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."* (1 Cor. 15:58) Whatever you are going through my friend, listen to God. Let him speak to you.

### MINISTRY WITHOUT THE HOLY SPIRIT (Ch.19)

*"We have not learned there is a Holy Spirit" (vs.2).*

Serving Jesus in the absence of the indwelling and empowering of the Holy Spirit is merely a human activity. You remember back in chapter two, I said the Church remained a corpse until God breathed life into her, and she became a living being. True passion is a product of a life empowered by the breath of God. When He lives in us, He breathes through us. To be filled with the Holy Spirit is to my spiritual life what breathing is to my physical life. I cannot function without both. Just as I would die physically if I would not be able to breath, I also will die spiritually if I am not breathing the breath of God.

Paul leaves Corinth, and arrives in Ephesus to find a group of disciples who had not yet received the gift of the Holy Spirit. The only baptism they claimed to have had was John's baptism which was merely a *"baptism of repentance"* (vs.4). John's baptism was

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simply God's way of preparing people for Jesus. Through John, a place was being prepared in people's lives for a supernatural indwelling.

This past summer our family has enjoyed a good bit of swimming. I have especially enjoyed a half hour of swimming daily at a large pond situated on the edge of the college campus near where we live. It is a fresh pool of water fed by a stream of cool water from the mountains. Every autumn the pool is emptied, and cleaned, to prepare it for the following summer when it will be filled again. The process of cleaning the pond can be a lengthy and demanding one. The floor has to be cleaned of debris, the plastic lining repaired, and the whole area built up by fungus has to be scrubbed clean. Eventually, when this whole process of cleaning is complete, the pond is ready to be filled again and enjoyed for another summer of swimming. Until the pond is filled, however, it remains useless. It is only when water is poured into its huge cavity, that people can benefit from it.

John's baptism was like cleaning that pond. It was necessary, but not the end in itself. Cleaning simply prepared the way for the moment God's Spirit would be poured out to fill the hearts of people with the fresh water from heaven. *"On that day, living water will flow out from Jerusalem"* (Zech.14:8). It is not enough to just prepare yourself for God. Repentance is not the end, but a means to an end. Living a clean, good, and moral life does not make you holy before God. It merely prepares you to be filled by God's Holy presence. Only then are you able to live a holy life.

So Paul prayed that these good and moral people in Ephesus would become indwelled by God. *"When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them and they spoke in tongues and prophesied"* (vs.7). As you read through the rest of chapter 19 you will find that this indwelling took these disciples to new heights, but it did not mean life got better for them. It simply meant that now God lived in them. It was God who lived in and through them now. It was God who would go with them and provide for them. Let's look at what difference it made for these disciples to now be indwelled by the Holy Spirit.

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**First, it brought about resistance from others (vs. 8-10).** Paul, himself full of the Holy Spirit, *"spoke boldly there for three months arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the way"* (vs.9). That phrase, *publicly maligned the way*, strikes me. It is one thing for people to refuse Christ, but totally another to publicly insult him. This must have affected these new disciples deeply. In fact, they and Paul could bear only so much of these insults against their Lord. *"So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture halls of Tyrannus"* (vs.9). They did this for two years becoming Spirit-filled disciples, deeply passionate about God, sharing their faith, and determined that no one is kept from hearing about Jesus. That alone is one of the greatest evidences of being Spirit indwelled: a longing for others to know God.

**Secondly, when the Spirit indwells believers, God works in power (vs.11).** *"God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even the handkerchief and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick"* (vs.12).

The handkerchief held no special power. The power lay in people's faith in a powerful God. Sadly, some attributed this to the personal belongings that had been in Paul's possession. I remember once skeptically ordering a handkerchief prayed over by a TV preacher who claimed that the cloth, because he had prayed over it, held special power. That is idolatry. Power lies in God's hands, never in objects. And such power is distributed through the Holy Spirit. You will only know the power of God if the Holy Spirit indwells you. *"Not by might, or by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord Almighty"* (Zech.4:6).

**Thirdly, the indwelling and empowering of the Holy Spirit delineates between those who have it and those who don't.** This story is a story of contrasts. The disciples Paul met did not have the Spirit, and he insisted they not serve until they did. There was however, another group of seven sons of a priest named Sceva, who sought to minister

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for God with out the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The price was high. They apparently sought to serve with only a second hand knowledge of Jesus. God did not reside in them through Jesus, and they did not think it mattered. Serving Jesus without the infilling of the Holy Spirit can be dangerous for two reasons. One, it makes us vulnerable to the enemy, and it brings insult to the name of Jesus. Attempting to rebuke an evil spirit, the seven men found themselves instead completely defenseless against the spirit. *“Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?”* (vs.15) *“Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and over-powered them all. He gave them such a beating they ran out of the house naked and bleeding”* (vs.16). It is interesting, isn't it. Belonging to Jesus makes us known to the enemy. The devil apparently is forced to read every name that is written in the lambs book of life.

I wonder how many ministers try to serve in the absence of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. I don't believe you will find them only within liberal churches. They stand also behind the pulpit of some good evangelical churches. My heart is burdened when I hear them preach. They are usually very good preachers, but that is the problem. They are good without God's help. AW Tozer wrote once that if you took the Holy Spirit out of some churches, you would not notice any changes.

Serving apart from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit also brings insult to the name Jesus. And so, this tragedy involving the seven sons of Sceva brought renewed fear and reverence to Christ's name. *“When this became known ..they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor”* (vs.17).

**Finally, this indwelling and empowering brought about confession and amputation of sin.**

*“Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds”* (vs.18). Those who practiced sorcery (an alternate way to acquiring evil power) brought their materials and had them burnt (vs.19). This sort of spiritual amputation will happen when Jesus' name is held in high honor.

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I am scared for America, because evangelicalism seems to be doing so well without God's help. I am nervous about what persecution will do to our churches. A friend of mine recently lost his 80-year-old mother and this left him seemingly disillusioned with God. I even sensed this experience left him with doubts. Some of his subtle remarks reflected a faith that was skin-deep. This bothered me because it revealed a Christian world view that is absent of any true power. I am uneasy when I attend contemporary Christian concerts. I am not sure why Christian contemporary music makes me uncomfortable. Is it because it is all so easy? Too light hearted, perhaps? Too soft? I wonder. Look at the seven sons of Sceva, America, and don't attempt to serve God or promote the Christian faith in the absence of God. *"Your enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour"* (1 Peter 5:8). I think he has found a meal on the continent of North America.

### A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY (20:7-12)

*"Seated at the window was a young man named Eutychus"* (vs.9)

I can never read the story of Eutychus without thinking of my brother-in-law Jonathan, and the tragedy he encountered some years ago. In 1982, Jonathan fell out of a third-story window, and because of it, his life has never been the same. Jonathan had been instructed to set up a scaffolding to repair the window, and the moment he stepped on it, it collapsed sending him falling to the ground. Fortunately, he landed in a grassy area, but this did not spare Jonathan of severe injury. A shattered leg and a punctured lung would send Jonathan to the emergency room for surgery. Three days later he fell victim to a stroke. The stroke rendered Jonathan quite disabled, and it would take him years to regain his abilities to read and to write. Today, Jonathan is unable to work, but works diligently at home in caring for his family. Despite all this tragedy, Jonathan possesses a real and deep faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. A third-story fall changed Jonathan, but it will only be when we get to heaven that we will know how much these changes glorified God. While I am deeply burdened for Jonathan, I see a faith that is rock solid, and it is a faith that

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could not have been formed apart from this tragedy. I love Jonathan deeply. He is a friend and a true brother.

While Jonathan's fall only has the third story as the common feature to Eutychus's fall, both stories reveal how tragedy can put a healthy dose of perspective into life. By this time in Acts Christians are meeting on Sundays (vs.7), and the meetings are mostly held in homes. It is here in Troas that Paul joined the disciples for worship and breaking of bread. It is interesting how this church in Troas was formed out of disappointment. You remember back in chapter sixteen Paul is kept by the Holy Spirit from entering Bythnia (16:7) detouring him instead to Troas. This detour would prepare the ground for the cultivating and reaping of a blossoming church. Paul would later return to Troas to celebrate this harvest.

Paul had a lot to say to this group. Because he was to leave the next day, he uses the time he has to exhort and encourage them. It is likely he would never see them again. The meeting was held on the third floor of a home (vs.9), and the large crowd that gathered must have made the room stuffy. It did not help that oil lamps were used for lighting, and this no doubt contributed to a muggy climate. A young man, perhaps a teenager, by the name of Eutychus, shuffled himself from the center of the room to find relief at the nearby window where he was able to draw deep breaths from the outside air. As he sat on the window's ledge, he drifted to sleep, lost his balance and fell down the three stories. Imagine the commotion this caused. I once had a drunken man interrupt my sermon, but this would have put a definite halt to Paul's preaching. Those closest to the door rushed out, and the mad dash downstairs must have sounded like the heavy hoof beats of a stampede of horses. They found Eutychus on the ground, dead!

Within moments Paul reached the crowd, and the way was made clear for him to come nearest to the dead boy. With a strong sense that this was not from God, "*Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. 'Don't be alarmed, he said, "he is alive'"*" (vs.10). "*They all went back upstairs, broke bread and ate. After*

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*talking until day break, he left. The people took the young man home and were greatly comforted”* (vs.11). Now how in the world would you continue where you left off after something like this? I believe what had just happened gave depth to the experience of worship. Whenever these believers met together, they would never forget this miracle. There had been a death and a resurrection and it had all happened in the power of the name of Jesus. Is it not meant to be this way for us. We are to worship with the reality of Jesus’ death and resurrection filling our hearts and minds. The cross, not the third story, ought to be the basis of our worship. We cannot overlook though what worship would be like for Eutychus from this moment on. He had died, but he was now alive.

Eutychus was certainly the one singled out as the most affected by this experience. His experience of death and new life would make his worship of God deeply personal. But it is your experience too. You perhaps have not fallen out of a third story window, but you have experienced new life. *“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins ... But because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions..”* (Ephesians 2:1,4) That is the miracle you should dwell on when you worship God. Jesus died and rose again. You have died, but because God loves you so much, he rushed down from heaven, fell on you and declared you alive. Worship should never be boring if we keep this in mind.

While this personal experience changed everything for Eutychus, there is one thing he would never do again. That’s right! His place at every meeting was in the front, as far away from the window as possible. He had learned his lesson. One fall was enough.

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### A PASTOR'S TORN HEART (20:13-21:1)

*“After we had torn ourselves away from them we put to sea” (21:1).*

This section reveals a side of the great Apostle Paul that is deeply personal and pastoral. Paul's passion as a shepherd shows up most clearly here. A church planter, Paul was not an administrator, but a people builder. This is evident in Paul's longing to revisit those places where we had started a church. For example, at the end of his first missionary term we are told that Paul *“returned...strengthened the disciples and encouraged them to remain true to the faith”* (14:21). Also, *“sometime later Paul said to Barnabas, ‘let's go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord to see how they are doing’* (15:36). Then again, when he completed his second missionary term, Paul is not in a rush to get home but instead seeks out those to whom he had ministered. *“Paul set out from there and traveled from place to place through out the region strengthening all the disciples”* (18:23).

It is chapter nineteen that Paul's deep love for people is most exposed. Deciding to leave Troas, Paul set his gaze in returning to Jerusalem in time for Passover (vs.16) obviously

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to be there at a time when the city would be full with worshipers from all over. Paul leaves Troas in a somber and reflective mood, choosing to travel alone rather than accompanying Luke and Timothy. *“He made this arrangement because he was going on foot”* (vs.13). A lot had happened, the death and revival of Eutychus being the major event, therefore, Paul needed time alone with his Lord. He rejoins his companions in Assos. Before sailing for Jerusalem Paul had a longing to see his friends from Ephesus. He sends for them to meet him in Mellitus where he hoped to *“strengthen and encourage them.”*

When the disciples arrive from Ephesus, Paul uses this time to deepen his fellowship with them. This was a deeply pastoral move on the part of Paul with the aim of assuring that the church in Ephesus rested on solid ground. Reviewing the dialogue Paul has with these friends will serve as a good pastoral model for those in a shepherding ministry. If you are a pastor, study this passage carefully, and ask yourself if you are really serving with a shepherd’s heart. I see here four important qualities of a shepherd’s heart.

First, Paul urged that they follow his example, and remember that he had given their lives to them. (vs. 18-24). We see from this that a good shepherd seeks to serve by example. *“You know how I lived the whole time I was with you. I served the Lord with great humility and with tears although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews.”* Like Jesus, Paul was willing to suffer out of his love for the people he served. Like Jesus he served in humility considering the needs of others more important than his own (Phil. 2:5-6).

Secondly, Paul’s message and commitment to God do not waver when the pressure was most severe. *“You know I have not hesitated to preach...”* (vs.20). I remember in the first church I pastored the senior’s wife died from cancer within six months of my arrival. This was a time of deep testing for the pastor with the expectation placed on him to continue shepherding and preaching. What I admired most about the pastor was how his love for people and his passion in preaching deepened out of this tragedy.

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Third, Paul lived his life determined to finish the race. Paul was a driven man, who had one goal in life and that was to finish well. His determination was *“to complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me - the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace”* (vs.24). Paul did not live for himself. In fact, he said to his Ephesian brothers, *“I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race”* (vs.23). This was Paul’s reason for moving on from his friends, and the Ephesian leaders knew it.

Finally, as every good shepherd will do, Paul urged these leaders to be good shepherds themselves, to serve well those God has placed under their care (vs. 25-36). Like Paul had been to them, they were to be to others. And here we have a beautiful model and pattern for pastoral leadership. There are several facets to this. It begins by living a disciplined and structured life yourself as a leader. *“Keep watch over yourselves”* (vs.28). John Stott adds this thought. *“For they cannot care adequately for others if they neglect the care and culture of their own souls”*(p.326 Acts Commentary). A shepherd can never expect from his sheep what the sheep do not observe in the shepherd.

Foundational to spiritual leadership is a godly life. A godly leader spends more of his time nurturing his own soul. This must have been what Paul had in mind when instructing Timothy on how to lead well, he said, *“be diligent in these matters; give yourselves wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your own life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers”* (1 Timothy 4:15,16).

A shepherd who is disciplined and structured will also seek the best from his sheep. *“Be shepherd of the church of God which he bought with his own blood”* (vs.28). A spiritual leader should never forget that the people under his care belong to God, they are not his own, they have been purchased by the blood of Jesus. What this means is profound in the shepherd’s relationship to his sheep. Consider this. The sheep under your care, pastor, are deeply precious to God. He died for that sheep, so love that sheep just as Jesus loves him. Like a loving shepherd then, the leader seeks to lead the sheep to pasture where the food

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is the best. If you are spiritual leader, is this how you view your relationships? First, they are God's sheep bought by the blood of Jesus, and second, your task is to lead them.

Finally, a good shepherd protects his sheep from wolves and all other dangers. *"I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!"* (vs.29,30).

There are two kinds of wolves Paul warned against. *"Savage wolves will come in among you,... even some from your own number will arise and distort the truth..."* (vs.29-30).

The goal of these wolves is simple; *"in order to draw away disciples"*(vs.30). As I write this I am traveling across the northeast of America speaking at missionary conferences. I am speaking at a total of 14 churches, and so I am able to get a good view of the current state of the church in America. I am in my fifth week now and already I have encountered five churches that have lost large number of people because of poor shepherding. Wolves, disguised as sheep have come into these churches, and in the name of evangelism have disrupted unity. Out of the mouths of these wolves have come divisive words. Words like "seeker sensitive," "contemporary," "change," while good on their own, have been uttered to cause division in the churches. I have listened to their stories, and they are quick to blame the wolves. A music leader pushed his agenda against the will of the leadership. An associate pastor started a new church and lured half of the congregation with him. A group of young people started a contemporary service on Saturday night, and it turned into a separate congregation. It is not, however, the responsibility of the wolves to maintain unity. Wolves will act like wolves. Paul tells the shepherds to look out for wolves and to protect the sheep from them.

Well, Paul opened wide his heart to these Ephesian elders. His Epistle to them, written some years later, confirmed his deep love for them. But for now he needed to say good bye, and the departure was a tearful one. After praying together on the shore, *"they all wept as they embraced and kissed them"* (vs.36). So heavy was the mood, Paul and his

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companions had to *"tear themselves away from them"* (21:1). Most missionaries and pastors who have had to move on will relate to the mood of this scene. Only two months ago we returned to England after a two year absence to say good-bye to a people we deeply love. Never in all my 15 years of ministry have I felt so close to people as I did with these. When you have seen God work in people's lives as we did there, and having shared in their pain and triumphs, saying good-bye was deeply painful. I join Paul in his final words to his Ephesian brothers and take them as words to my brothers in England. *"Now I commit you to God and the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified"* (vs.32).

And here is a final word to those torn by the pain of separation. When you left your place of ministry, God stayed. He continues to work, for it is His work. Take courage in that, and keep serving where He has now placed you.

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BRACE YOURSELF, HERE IT COMES (Chapter 20)

*"I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die" (vs.13).*

Imagine if you knew what was to happen to you in the next several years of your life. If someone would have told me three years ago that in the next several years my wife would suffer a serious illness, and my son would die, I would probably take it poorly. Such news would be unbelievable, and unbearable.

We are, particularly in the west, people who strive for security. The prospect of being unsettled or not in full control of our lives bothers us. People go to great lengths to assure that their future will be free of pain and insecurity.

Several people have asked me how I managed to do so well in these past years. I have some reason to question their confidence in my strength, but I do acknowledge God has given me an ability to accept this trial. I don't know how this will sound to others, but some years ago, before all this crisis hit my family, I sensed God asking me to prepare for something unpleasant. I did not know what that meant, but deep in my heart I felt God was wanting me to take some steps in preparation. I spent a lot of time considering

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suffering. I reinforced my faith by studying God's word with greater intensity. Those who sat under my preaching noted a consistent theme. *Christians, strengthen yourselves, and be ready for those times when God will take you through deep waters.*

I compare this commitment to preparation to the times I used to love playing on the beach as a child. I particularly loved big waves. I remember standing waist high in the water eager for that big wave to crash against me, and when it did I would brace myself challenging that wave to knock me down. When the wave did hit, I would strengthen my whole body, lean against the wave, and my feet firmly planted. Such is the determination Christians need as the forces of life crash against them.

Paul was one who had braced himself for the crash of a wave. He knew what lay ahead for him and from the moment of his conversion he was told to brace himself for a life full of trials. *"I will show him how much he must suffer for my name"* (9:15). To the Corinthians, Paul said, *"as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way; in great endurance, in troubles, hardship and distress..."* (2 Cor. 6:4).

With this in mind, we find Paul arriving in Jerusalem. He wanted to be there for Pentecost (20:16), and he knew that he was following the footsteps of Jesus to the cross (20:22). Like Jesus, Paul did not have to go through this. He had the option to get out, but he chose not to because Paul saw his life as not his own. He had been crucified with Christ, and it was no longer Paul that lived, it was Christ living in Paul. (Gal.2:20) To run from this, and to pursue personal security would have meant betraying Christ. Paul was simply being carried by the current of God's will and he did not resist.

It was when Paul was in Caesarea, on his way to Jerusalem, that God confirms to Paul that the path he is taking to the cross is the right one. Perhaps Paul had doubts, certainly his companions did. God sends to Paul a prophet named Agabus who vividly communicated to Paul that he must go on and that he would suffer for it. This would be Paul's Gethsemane where he had to struggle between God's will and his own. He

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submitted to God's. Taking Paul's belt, Agabus *"tied his own hands and feet with it and said, 'the Holy Spirit says, in this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of the belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles'"* (vs.21).

When Jesus shared with his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer, and be handed over to die, the disciples were adamant that they would protect him from this. Yet, as Peter was to find out, this was God's will. Jesus must die. Similarly, Paul's disciples tried to dissuade him from going to Jerusalem (vs.12), but Paul was convinced this was God's will and he was ready to go. *"I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of Jesus"* (vs.13). Those there, Luke included, *"gave up, and said, 'the Lord's will be done'"* (vs.14). Paul's friends had resigned themselves to the fact that this was of God. They would not stand in the way.

When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, he reported to the Jerusalem council who advised him to show good favor with the Jews by purifying himself. So Paul did. *"The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them. Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them"* (vs.26). None of these were required by Christians, for to them the sacrifice of Jesus had met all the requirements of purification for God.

Not long passed before some enemies of Paul arrived from Asia who quickly stirred the crowds against Paul. *"The whole city was aroused and people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple..."* (vs.30). Fortunately, the crowd was again kept from killing Paul by the intervention of a Roman commander. Paul was bound and chained, and his life would never be the same again. He was on his way to Rome, and he would spend the rest of his life a prisoner.

Why was Paul so willing and ready to place himself in harm's way like this? Because he was braced! He was so secure in his relationship to God, nothing, not even the threat of death, affected him, or deterred him from his mission. He was so ready to meet God, the

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only thing that kept him eager to go on was his mission. Paul was truly anchored to Jesus. No wonder he could later say, *"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, neither angels, nor demons, neither height, not depth, not anything in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord"* (Romans 8:38,39).

Paul had reached that crucible in his Christian faith where he could say, *Lord, whatever you want I am willing!* This sort of security is available to every believer, but not every believer claims it. Through complete submission to God and his purposes, the believer cannot be shaken by even the worst events in life. It is by accepting fully God's will for your life, that you too, like Paul, can say, *I am ready to be bound and even die.* Oh, this is such a good place to be, and I trust you are there with me. Are you willing to be bound to a rough family situation, if that is God's will? Are you willing to be bound to a sickness, if that is what God has for you?

*Have thine own way, Lord. Have thy how way. Thou art the potter, I am the clay. Mold me and make me, after thy will. While I am waiting, yielded and still.*

### WHEN YOU ARE NOT YOUR OWN (chapters 22-27)

*"So you must also testify in Rome" (32:11)*

From this point on Paul no longer had control of his own life. The pen was taken from his hands, and it was God who now wrote the script of Paul's life. Paul's life now fully belonged to God. Paul was no longer his own. He had been bought with a price, and he was God's, for God to do as He pleased with him (1 Cor. 6:20).

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God's plan for Paul was very specific. I believe it is for us as well. One night, perhaps when Paul was overwhelmed and even fearful, the Lord came to encourage Paul. *"Take courage! As you have testified in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome"* (23:11). I stand at a point in my life where I know without doubt that God has something very specific He wants for me. Like Paul, I am aware that the path getting there might not be so smooth. I too need to hear these encouraging words from our Lord.

I remember how often as a child, I would go to bed, tired. Sometimes the fatigue was too much and, as many children do, I would go to bed fussing and crying. My mother would sit on the edge of the bed, gently rubbing my head, and I can remember her saying to me; *"it's OK Mitch, you will feel better in the morning."* Note the contrast to Paul's story. As Jesus sits on the edge of Paul's bed he says instead, *"it's OK Paul, but in the morning it will get worse."* Paul was ready for this however. He was determined to take on whatever God had for him. Such is the determination of any servant of God's who sees his/her life fully in God's hands. Servants, fully committed in this way, brace themselves for the inevitable tough times ahead, because they know that God's purposes are very certain. They are convinced that God wastes nothing.

These chapters trace five separate trials involving Paul. They are the crowd, the Sanhedrin, before Felix, Festus, and finally King Agrippa. In each case God renewed Paul's passion to speak about Jesus. Bound, and not his own, Paul proclaimed Christ boldly and without reservation. In each case his situation, humanly speaking, got worse; but with each he moved closer to the center of God's will. I want to review each trial setting, and draw several conclusions that will give us more courage as we might see our lives slip further out of our control over to God's.

The crowd. (22:1-29) This crowd that spoke to was a lynch mob. They were the ones who dragged Paul from the temple and accused him of desecrating it. Paul had brought some Gentiles to the temple vicinity, and this had enraged the Jews. *"He has brought*

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Greeks into the temple area and defiled the holy place. (They had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with Paul and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple area)" (21:28,29). Paul would have been killed had a Roman commander not come to his rescue. "When Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great he had to be carried by the soldiers" (vs.35). Paul had been told by Jesus that he would suffer, and here he stood, as Christ had, before a crowd screaming for his death. Perhaps many were the same ones who had stood there before Christ yelling for Jesus to crucified, now calling for Paul's death. "The crowd kept shouting 'away with him'" (vs.36).

Unlike most who would find themselves in this situation, Paul was not eager to escape. He saw this as an opportunity, and he was determined to take advantage of it. He saw beyond the hatred and heard a cry that went deeper than the screams for his death. These were sheep without a shepherd. These needed Jesus. With permission from the commander, Paul began to speak to the crowd, and there before the thousands he gave his testimony. The mob turned into an quiet audience with rapt attention to Paul's every word. He was just like them, he explained, a persecutor and hater of Jesus, until one day God opened his eyes. God met him on a road to Damascus, and his life changed forever. For a moment the crowd listened in silence until Paul explained his calling to the Gentiles. "Then they raised their voices and shouted, 'rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live" (vs.22). They rushed at Paul, determined to do to him what they had done to Stephen. God intervened, for it was not Paul's time to die. The commander whisked Paul away to the safety of the barracks. Paul's treatment by the Romans was no better. Wanting to interrogate Paul in order to get to the bottom of this, Paul was flogged until Paul pulled out his passport to show he was a Roman citizen. This would protect Paul from punishment, but it would also mean he would have to be tried as a Roman citizen.

The Sanhedrin (23:1-11) The commander is still determined to find out why this gentle preacher was the object of such hate, so he called for the "chief priests and all the Sanhedrin to assemble. Then he brought Paul and had him stand before them" (vs.30).

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This assembly became Paul's second trial, but also a second opportunity to present the gospel to Israel's leaders. The mood was tense. Paul began by claiming he stood before them in good conscience, having fulfilled his duty before God. (23:1) Hearing this, Ananias the High Priest had Paul slapped. In a rare outburst of anger Paul snapped back, *"God will strike you, you white washed wall. You sit here to judge me according to your law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck"* (vs.3). Paul is told that this was the High Priest to whom he is speaking. He regretted this remembering his obligation to obey his leaders (Romans 13:1).

Paul stood before his former colleagues. Some of these he had studied with, and some had even been his cohorts in the conspiracy against Christians. After these many years, Paul must have been struck by how he had changed, but they had not. Like a missionary returning after years of service to a high school reunion, Paul found his old friends had not changed one bit. Their noses were still stuck in the law, and their hearts were hardened. They cared more about the letter of the law than the spirit of the law. This must have broken Paul's heart. Is this perhaps why the Lord had to encourage Paul that night? (vs.11). Was Paul's heart broken by what he saw in those he loved?

Meanwhile, before Paul lay an opportunity to direct the attention away from his situation to an issue he knew divided the two groups present. The resurrection! *"My brothers. I am a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead"* (vs.6). This caused an uproar. Now the Pharisees who believed in the resurrection took pot shots at the Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection. *"This dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them"* (vs.10). Paul's life was now under serious threat, and so the next day he was taken to Caesarea for five days until the High Priest arrived to serve as prosecutor against Paul.

Here Paul stood before Governor Felix, his third trial (chapter 24). The leaders from Jerusalem were determined to get rid of Paul. Paul is again accused of being a trouble maker and a *"ring leader of the Nazarite sect"* (vs.5). In his defense Paul admitted he

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was “*a follower of the Way which they call a sect...*” (vs.14). That should not peg him though as a trouble maker, he had to explain. “*I worship the God of our fathers ... I believe everything that agrees with the law and that is written in the prophets, and I have the same hope in God as these men...*” (vs.14-15).

I am in New York City as I write this section, and the particular area in which I am is predominantly Jew. I have been reflecting how similar a heritage we have to Jews. Yet one thing separates us and really places quite a gap between us, and that is our belief in Jesus. That was the dividing issue between Paul and his accusers. It is the dividing issue for all of humanity. Felix could not escape the significance of this moment in his life. He was “*well acquainted with the way*” (vs.22), and having adjourned the trial after several days he “*came with his wife Drusilla who was Jewish. He sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus*” (vs.24). Paul covered the basics of Christianity with these two. “*As Paul discoursed on righteousness, self control, and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid*” (vs.25). God had allowed this trial to convict another leader. Sadly, politics took over Felix’s conscience, and Felix dampened the Spirit by hoping Paul would offer him a bribe for his release. Yet “*he sent for Paul frequently and talked with him*” (vs.26).

It would be easy to pass over verse 27 and not consider what Paul had to go through for the next two years. Two years passed and “*Felix wanting to grant a favor to Jews, he left Paul in Prison.*” What did this do for Paul? He must have identified often during those two years of inactivity with Joseph who spend two forgotten years in prison after the butcher had forgotten about him. I wonder if Paul second guessed his call? We are not told what it was like for Paul, or how he was, although I am sure it was a foundational time for Paul to develop his theology. Paul would later become very accustomed to writing from jail.

Paul, left in isolation, was however not forgotten by his accuser. It will often be when we feel neglected by God that our enemy will let us know that he is not ignoring us. The

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enemy will often make his presence most felt when God seems silent. A new governor replaced Felix; this time Felix is appointed over the jurisdiction. This prompted the chief priests to renew their attack against Paul. *"They urgently requested Festus ... to have Paul transferred to Jerusalem, for they were preparing to ambush and kill him along the way"* (25:3). When met by his accusers, Paul again held tight to his Roman ties insisting on his right as a Roman citizen, to stand before Caesar.

This placed Paul into his fifth trial, this one before King Agrippa. He was the last of the Herods who sided most with the Romans. Having heard of Paul, this king was eager to meet him in person. The scene of Paul standing before Agrippa carried some unusual ironies. Agrippa and his wife entered the room where Paul was with great pomp. Once they sat down, Agrippa motioned for Paul that he be allowed now to speak. Paul must have chuckled to himself as he thought of his commitment to serve a higher authority. Paul served a greater King and spoke at His command, not the command of man. Did Paul perhaps also feel burdened for the deception of power. Paul spoke and appealed first to Herod's Jewish heritage. Paul was also sensitive to how the Holy Spirit was working at that moment. *"But I have had God's help to this very day, and so I stand here to testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen that Christ would suffer, and as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to His own people, and to the Gentiles"* (26:22-23).

The conversation that followed was deeply personal. While certainly there were servants and slaves hearing the gospel, the Spirit was also convicting the heart of these two great leaders. First Paul appealed to all Festus had heard in the previous days, then Paul appeals to Herod's appreciation of Israel's heritage and tradition. There is no record, sadly, of these two men committing their lives to Jesus. We only know that they had been given a chance. Rev. 20:11 says, *"The dead and small stood before the throne.."*, and Paul was clearly committed in this great hall in Caesarea to preach to both the great and small (vs.22). A day would come when both Festus and Agrippa would step off their high thrones and be made to stand side by side with the servants and slaves there to attend to

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their every need. In fact, some of those slaves, and servants as Christians will one day be as kings themselves, honored by Jesus for their commitment to Him. In Paul's eyes there was no difference between Agrippa and the slave that attended to his every need. Paul must have been burdened by this delusion of power. Paul stood there certainly absorbing all this, and he must have looked at the scene before him as they would be, not as they were right then. He saw mere men, given power for only a short time, but someday that power will be stripped from them and they will be forced to stand before the one who hold the true power.

Paul was in chains, but he was freer than any man and woman there.

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### JUST THE BEGINNING (Chapter 28)

*"Boldly and without hindrance he preached the Kingdom of God" (vs.3)*

Paul's journey landed him in a rented house in Rome where for two years he was restricted to house arrest. Getting there was not without incident and drama.

Paul knew his life was not his own, but he also knew what God wanted of him. He himself had told others, *"I must visit Rome"* (19:21), and Jesus had forewarned him that his destiny had a clear direction. *"Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome"* (23:11). The devil had overheard this plan and not liking it was determined to do all he could to thwart and even destroy Paul. Every other effort to take Paul out of the picture only seemed to strengthen God's hand. Satan was determined to tip the scales his way. The storm that swept into Paul's path on that final leg needs to be seen as coming directly from Satan's strategy book on how to break the church. Yet again, what Satan meant for harm, God turned into good. (See Joseph's comment to his brothers who had tried to ruin his life in Genesis 50:20).

I need to comment here a note of encouragement. What God has planned for you will happen if you simply rest in Him. You might have to live in chains for it, or go through storms, and sometimes even experience a shipwreck. If you belong to God, nothing can defeat you. Every effort of Satan to destroy you or ruin God's plan for your life will fail. Like Paul you will find these attacks will only strengthen God's position. Consider how it did for Paul.

First, the storm meant to cause fear instead brought about trust and deeper faith. It began as a *"gentle south wind"* (vs.13), but before very long a wind of hurricane force, called

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the “north-easter swept down from the island” (vs.14). “The ship was caught in the storm .. So we gave way to it” (vs.15). The ship “took such a violent battering” (vs.18), the sailors had no choice but empty the ship of many of her contents. Days went by with no relief and the men were helpless. Luke remembers how “*finally, we gave up all hope of being saved*” (vs.20).

After Paul reprimanded the sailors for failing his advice earlier to “*not sail from Crete*” (vs.21), he now reassured them that no one will be lost. An angel had told Paul that he must stand before Caesar. “*So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me*” (vs.25).

Paul was a bulwark of courage to these men, injecting in them a surge of confidence to their fearful hearts. My family nearly shipwrecked when the storm of my wife's illness and my son's death hit us with such brutal force. For so long we enjoyed the gentle breeze of a good life. The ship nearly broke apart under the stresses of the hurricane winds of sickness and loss. Like Paul's ship we had to give in to the storms. In some storms we have no choice but to ride it out. Our family, like Paul, refused to give in to fear. God has asked me, like He asked of Paul and all believers who suffer, to be a bulwark of confidence injecting confidence in my family. So often I have would say to my family, “take courage, we will not give up on God and let the devil have his way with this.” Can you imagine Paul showing fear in this situation. Had he, it would have deeply affected those who were looking to him for courage. Some people have asked me why I have remained strong. I tell them that had I not, my family would have had no one to lean on. Like Twila Paris's song, The Warrior is a Child, I have needed to be strong for my family, but alone before God I have cried, and there before him, the cracks in my armor are most visible. Paul needed to be strong, because many depended on him, and it was God who gave him that strength.

Secondly, the destruction of the ship led to a revival in Malta. Where our storms land us, sometimes in ship wrecked condition, that place often becomes a place for renewal and

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revival. Our family landed broken and battered in a small north Georgia town and this would be our Malta for three years. I can say, looking back now, that God brought renewal to many people during those three trying years. The testimony of Travis faith in suffering, and the way my wife has held on to God in her pain, has given many renewed strength, and brought some into a personal faith in Jesus.

As Paul's battered ship neared the land fear worsened. Many of the sailors had not eaten in 14 days, so Paul encouraged them to eat (vs30). "*After he had said this he took some bread and gave thanks to God before them all.. Then he broke it and began to eat. They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves*" (vs.36). This partaking of the Lord's supper meant something when life hung by a thread, and so will it be for us. I can remember the month Travis died how communion, several Sundays before, held deep meaning to me as never before. Knowing God provides when everything else has failed, is deeply reassuring. This becomes the "*table before mine enemies*" (Psalm 23:5).

The Island Paul and his traveling companions land on is called Malta. Here God would use the shipwreck to bring revival. What Satan meant for evil God turned to good. God is good at redeeming shipwrecks. He still does that today. He takes broken lives, broken relationships and uses them to renew and strengthen his people. What first impressed the islanders about Paul was his demeanor. People will often watch us when tragedy hits. What placed Paul in high regard, even godlike status, with these people was the obvious fact that God was with him. A snake jumped out of a pile of wood Paul was carrying and bit him. Paul should of died from this but he did not. (28:6) This miracle would give Paul credibility in talking about Jesus.

After this incident, Paul healed the father of the chief officer of the Island (vs.7). This brought "*the rest of the sick*" to Paul (vs.9) and we can assume many came to faith in Jesus. What began as a tragedy turned into a definite triumph.

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Third, house arrest and chains while in Rome, meant to restrain Paul, instead provided him with an open door to preach Christ. *“I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God’s word is not chained”* (1 Tim.2:9).

When he finally did arrive in Rome three months later, Paul is allowed to rent a house, but is forced to remain in house arrest. Paul’s first priority in arriving in Rome, was to call the Jews together. He witnessed to them of Christ. Interestingly they had not heard of Paul or of the accusations against him by the leaders in Jerusalem. Paul preached to them about Jesus. Some responded but many did not. Paul’s confinement however, became a sanctuary of sorts for many to come hear of Christ's love.

The book of Acts ends with a triumphant note. *“For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented home and welcomed all who came to see him”* (vs.30). The commission to the Apostles, which Acts began with, had not lost any of its momentum. Men and women throughout Asia and Europe were filled with passion and a love for Jesus accepting any trial and hardship for the sake of the gospel.

Paul’s passion, despite his hardship, never diminished. Acts ends with a commentary note that held true for many thousands of other faithful witnesses. *“Boldly and without hindrance he (Paul) preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ”* (vs.31). While Acts ends here, Paul’s story does not. Under house arrest Paul wrote at least three epistles; Ephesians, Colossians, and Philippians. It is believed that Paul did not remain under house arrest in Rome, but after two years was released. Later however, he was captured, and imprisoned again in Rome this time kept in a dungeon under the reign of Nero. Here Paul wrote his pastoral epistles, his office a dungeon. This is the hallmark of passion. God works best when we are most limited.

How is your passion? Does it need to be renewed? Come to Jesus and he will renew it. Accept your situation, thank God for it, let God use it, and you will find yourself to be; A PERSON OF PASSION.

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