Lessons on the Acts of the Apostles

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Dedication

To our friends from the Becoming Closer class, for their constant encouragement and support.

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The Acts of the Apostles is frequently quoted, but infrequently studied - perhaps on the ground that history is boring. It need not be so.

Preliminaries

The author of the book is undisputed: it is Luke, the physician, who wrote the Gospel which also bears his name. He is a historian, but one who acknowledges (clearly, here in verse 2) the power of the Holy Spirit in his writing. In this there is wisdom, for Luke clearly is not an eyewitness of the Resurrection. We know little enough about him, but it is most likely that he is a convert to Christianity taught by Paul. His method in both books is plain: he is a researcher. He gathers the words and evidence of others to produce his book.

In one sense this is a terrible blow to the fundamentalist school of "automatic writing." This school holds that all the books of the Bible were written by the Holy Spirit - the nominal authors just held the pen while the Spirit moved their hands. If so, why the careful research? But in another sense Acts can be called the "history of the Holy Spirit." For as the Gospels were the biography of Christ, in a sense, Acts records what the Spirit did through the church. No book of the Bible expounds more clearly the work of the Holy Spirit.

Doctrine

There are three principles of doctrine - what we might call analytic principles - which are shown in Acts:

- ***Doctrine is best revealed in action.*** Many writers have taken bits and pieces of the Bible and constructed strange doctrines from them, assuring their hearers that this is the word of God. But in Acts, we see how the Apostles themselves "did it." We can be sure, therefore, that this is what they saw as the result of sound doctrine. Therefore, we can reason backwards from their actions to the doctrine behind it, carefully checking it with other Scriptures as we go.
- ***Doctrine occurs in time and space.*** Doctrine is not abstract; it is specific in application. Peter, for example, was shown that the Gospel was to be preached to the Gentiles - a point revealed in the Old Testament, by the way - and from that we can conclude that it should be preached to any and all who will hear it. So the principle remains the same; the application in our time may be quite different.
- ***Doctrine must result in action.*** If ever there is a lesson in Acts, this is it. Doctrine is not the idle speculation of Bible teachers and preachers; it is the word in action. I give you Thomas à Kempis' rule: for any doctrinal question, suppose you absolutely knew the answer. Would it make any difference in your conduct? If not, you don't have a doctrinal question.

Let us therefore begin - by waiting.

Waiting for God

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command:

"Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."
(Act 1:1-8 NIV)

St. John Chrysostom put it this way: "It cannot be that a man should enjoy the benefit of grace except he watch." Somehow, intrinsically bound in the lives of the great saints, is the idea that waiting for the Lord is a requirement of the Christian life. It is so here.

Wait for "the promise."

The word used here is unique in the New Testament: *perimeno.* It comes from the Greek words "peri" (from which we get our word "perimeter") and meno, which means "a place." In other words, the word "wait" used here means "stay in place." Other words used frequently mean things like "to expect fully" or "to stand still." In all these senses there is the idea of being in one spot, waiting calmly. For this, we have no patience at all. Neither did the disciples.

The impatience of the disciples

The question they ask displays their impatience: is now the time when you will restore the kingdom? We may see in the question some of the aspects of waiting:

- Note that the disciples ask this question together. They already know the answer; Christ has told them that even he does not know. But now, by force of numbers perhaps, they hope to pressure out of the teacher the answer they long for.
- He tells them it is not for them to know. That carries with it two implications:
- There are certain things which are beyond us in this mortal life. We are not capable to know some things. - nor are we allowed![1].
- There are also certain things which it is not good for us to know. If we all knew what suffering was coming, how many of us could face it? The human mind sometimes goes through ordeals which are best faced one day at a time.
- Note too the substitution Christ makes: instead of the answer they desire, he tells them they will receive power. It is the teacher's duty to determine the curriculum; he must teach what is needful for his students, not just what they want to tickle their ears and soothe their curiosity.

The Disciples Wait

There is a curious example here: Christ tells the men to return to Jerusalem from Galilee - and wait. This brings us some questions:

Why the wait - at all?

Why not just send the Holy Spirit immediately? After all, there was the Ascension right in front of their eyes?

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[1] See II Corinthians 12:4

- First, that they might build an expectation. They needed time to focus their minds on the gift the Father was about to give them. We even tell our children that Christmas is coming; what effect does this have on them?
- Next, by his absence Christ would increase the welcome they would give to the next person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. This is not just an emotional thing; rather, it rightly emphasizes the equality the Spirit has with the Father and the Son.
- Such an expectation in common builds a bond of unity - and they would have great need of that unity.

Why in Jerusalem?

Why were they commanded to stay in one place - and in particular that one most dangerous of places?

- So that they might learn the reason for courage. God would care for them even in that most hostile environment.
- By keeping together, they would strengthen each other in the faith.
- Christianity is not a solo flight. By doing this together, they started giving us an example as well.

Why "in a few days?"

Why wasn't Jesus specific about it? Why didn't he say, "at Pentecost?"

- So that they might learn to watch and pray. By not knowing the time, they needed to be ready at any time - just as we must be ready for our Lord's return.
- So that they might learn to trust God - again. Because their satisfaction was not immediate, there was a time when they had to go on trust. The choice was simply: disbelieve and abandon all - or trust God and wait.
- So that God's timing might be fulfilled. Pentecost was the harvest feast; this was to be the start of God's harvest. Pentecost is 50 days from the Passover Sabbath - which puts it on a Sunday, which is now the Lord's day.

Why do we "wait upon the Lord?"

I said that we learn by example from the Apostles. So then, what shall we learn from their example here? Why are we required to "wait upon the Lord?"

So that God might prepare us

Sometimes God is using the time of waiting to prepare us for other things. We don't know what those things might be, so it would be impertinent for us to claim that we are already prepared. So how is he preparing us?

- By prayer. Waiting, with "nothing to do," gives us the time for a season of prayer with the Lord. Prayer changes us, and makes us ready for his purposes.
- By study. In the time we wait, we should be diligently seeking his will in our reading of the Bible. How often have you come over a passage that you're read many times before, only to have some new and deep insight? It is God speaking to you in the times of waiting.
- By self-examination. When we are working busily, we often fail to take the time for self-examination. Results become so important that we forget that God does not need us for his results. Rather, he wants us to grow like him - and that growth often begins by realizing how much we fall short.

- By trust. It is exactly in those times when we cannot see the power of God at work, wondering when He will act, that we learn to trust him as we should.

So that God may develop his providence

We are not the only ones that God is working with! Perhaps you are already suited to the purpose at hand - though not perfect, of course - but God is still working on someone else! We need to wait patiently:

- So that his "seasons" can arrive. Sometimes he arranges things so that a furious outpouring of his Holy Spirit comes. All things must be in readiness when the Spirit moves; God works this in seasons. His time; his timing!
- So that the wicked may be readied for God. Remember Philemon? When Onesimus left he was a wicked man; he returned a brother. Philemon in the meanwhile could do nothing but wait. But what a result!
- So that out of our waiting others may see the Lord. John, the Apostle, was banished to the salt mines on Patmos. By the world's test, he could now do nothing - except receive the vision we call Revelation. Sometimes our waiting is not for us, but for others.
- So that God may redirect his servants from the good to the best. Paul and his companions wanted to return to Asia Minor; the Spirit led them into Greece to spread the Gospel even further. In this they had to wait where they were - so they wouldn't have to backtrack.

So that we may know that He is God.

Often our impatience is the result of our knowing that "we can do it." Why is God holding us back?

- That we may see that it is his power, not our own ability, through which his purposes will be accomplished. Moses told the nation of Israel to "stand still and see the salvation of God."
- That we might see evil defeated - by itself. How often do we moan about the evils of our time, and forget to look back at prior evils? Communism was the wave of the future, taking over the world, completely irresistible. Where is it now? Why is it dying?
- That we should learn both hope and patience. These are virtues! How can we practice hope or patience if we are not called upon to wait upon the Lord?
- Further, that we should trust in *no one else*. If we will not wait, we will (like Saul who would not wait for Samuel) trust in someone or something other than God - usually our own righteousness.
- Finally, so that we may learn to bear the greatest waiting of all - the wait for his return. We need to learn to be vigilant and patient in the "small waitings" so that we can master the great one.

The Ascension - Acts 1:9-11

With the possible exception of the Virgin Mary, I know of no topic which is more important - and less preached - than the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a high and holy event, one which greatly shows the glory of God. For all that it means, however, it seems to excite little comment from Protestant expositors. Catholic and Orthodox writers are a little more kind to it; but this seems largely to stem from the use of Ascension Sunday in the liturgical calendars.

The Ascension, however, is a most necessary event. It was included in all the ancient creeds (for reasons we shall see). It also appears that the neglect of the Ascension - and its results - are a sign of the times of the end.

Why is the Ascension so important to us? It is a demarcation point of history. From it we may see things past, present and future. It serves to limit the past, define the present and describe the future. So we shall see the Ascension in past tense, present tense and future tense.

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."
(Act 1:9-11 NIV)

Ascension - Past Tense

The Ascension is a marker that certain things are finished. Christ has returned to the Father; therefore, the work of Christ is complete.

The atonement is complete

It is interesting to note that of all the cults that have arrived in the last two thousand years not one has presented another atonement. Satan can counterfeit revelations and prophecies; he can produces lists of laws for holiness - but he cannot do what Christ did, for it is finished. The atonement, the sacrifice for sins, is finished. If it were not, Christ would not have ascended.

Since the atonement is complete, we know that we have no work to do for our own salvation - it is God's free gift. That was the mission of Jesus: to seek and save the lost. That mission is completed. Now our mission - the Great Commission - has begun.

The ascension is proof of the Resurrection

The ascension is absolutely necessary in this regard. One of the oldest and most common heresies (even today) is that Jesus did not appear in the flesh - it was only an illusion. You will hear cults tell you that he left no footprints, for example. He was "only a spirit" they say. But tell me: if he is only a spirit, why the Ascension? A ghost - that's what a spirit is - can fade out any time. (By the way, can fade back in too). But a physical body must go somewhere.

Twice before (Elijah and Enoch) we have someone with a physical body who is taken up to heaven. (This is the reason some expect Elijah and Enoch to be the "two witnesses" of Revelation - they

never died, and it "is appointed unto man once to die.") The ancient church was quite specific on this point: Iraneus, for example, tells us that he ascended "in the flesh."

The ascension marks the end of Christ's ministry

We see for the last time - until his return - the Shekinah, the glory of God, shown in the cloud. We have a last echo of the old Law, in that two angels (the testimony of two witnesses) tell the disciples of his return. There is a definite break point here. Without that break point, the disciples would have been thoroughly confused by the coming of the Spirit - for God is One.

Ascension - Present Tense

We may see things present in two ways: those things which Christ now does for us, and those things which the Spirit was sent to do.

Our Advocate

The letter to the Hebrews assures us that we have Christ as our advocate[2], our High Priest, at the right hand of the Father. Consider the implications: the Creator, God the Father, ruler of heaven and earth and all between, sits over all things. Who can appeal to him? Who can move him? Our advocate can. He is the High Priest for the Christian. A priest always serves as a bridge between God and man, and Christ is our bridge. He knows what it's like to be human, for he is human.

The inspiration of the Scriptures

Remember that nothing of the New Testament was written before the Ascension. Why? Because the Spirit had not come! We would not have the Bible we have today if Christ had not ascended.

The spread of the Gospel

Human beings are confined in geography. If Christ does not ascend, then his followers, necessarily, are confined to Palestine. If He does not ascend, the world would come to him, wherever he was - rather than the Gospel going out into the world. The result would inevitably be that many would not know him as Lord and Savior simply because they were born and lived in the wrong place. Would the disciples have willingly left their Master's side? I think not.

Our holiness in living

All Christians know the futility of self-reform. New Year's resolutions last about a week for most of us. How do we achieve "normal holiness" in our lives? By the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit would not come unless Christ had departed. So we would not know the power of the Spirit if Jesus had not ascended.

Gifts of service

Interestingly, Paul tells us that the gifts of the Spirit in the church - appointing some to be apostles, others teachers, etc. - is somehow connected with the Ascension. It is connected with his

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[2] Hebrews 7:25

Ascension in triumph - that as a conqueror, the conqueror of death - that he gives gifts to men. Those gifts are the works of service he outlines:

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men." (What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up
(Eph 4:7-12 NIV)

Ascension: Future Tense

The most exciting aspect of the Ascension is simply this: it is the picture of the future. In the Ascension we can see these things which are to come.

Christ's return

In this passage the angels tell us that He will return in the same way he left. He is coming "with the clouds."[3] We know from other passages that this also means that he will return with the angels of God, and the cloud in question is most likely the Shekinah, the glory of God.

This is a great comfort. It destroys all of those statements which say that Christ has come invisibly (they saw him go, we'll see him return). It destroys those who say he returns spiritually; it destroys those who say his return will never happen. He left. He will return. He said so, and God cannot lie.

New Heaven and New Earth

Again, much beyond our comprehension, there is this. He is going to prepare a place for us, a place described as a "new heaven and a new earth." Peter assures us that the elements will melt with the heat of that day.[4] Do we know what this will look like? Most assuredly there are commentators on Revelation who can describe it in detail. Regrettably, however, they do not agree on the description. I will undertake no such description; but consider this: Has not the Lord been a magnificent creator in the existing earth and heavens? If He sees fit to recreate both, will it not be much more magnificent?

Judgment

From the earliest days of the Bible, in Job, the children of God have been told and expressed the idea that they would some day rise from the dead. Paul expresses it this way:

According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

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[3] Revelation 1:7
[4] 2 Peter 3:12-13

(1Th 4:15-17 NIV)

A careful reading of all the Scriptures relating to this (well beyond the time required for a single lesson) would reveal this: not only are the righteous to rise, but all will rise - to face the judgment. How many resurrections? Do the wicked rise with the righteous? What about the people before the time of Christ? All these things some think they know - and disagree. But this much is certain: all will rise, and all will face the Risen Lord as Judge - some to hear "well done" and others to hear "depart."

Our bodies like his body

We are told that he is the "first fruits" of the Resurrection of the dead. In this we understand that upon resurrection we will have a body like that he has - a physical body, but possessed of powers beyond our understanding or knowing in this life. This body will be suited to the new heaven and new earth. What will it be like? How does this work? I don't know. It is entirely possible that the answer is beyond my comprehension. But I do know this: we shall be like him.

Scoffing in the Last Days

One last thing predicted about the Ascension is this: in the last days, men will scoff at the possibility of resurrection, denying the life to come.

I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles. First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation."
(2Pe 3:2-4 NIV)

This is a sign that the times are ripe, and surely this sign is upon us.

Conclusion

Because so little is placed upon the Ascension we forget that we are destined to live with him forever. Consider the times; consider the world around you; consider the world to come. Then consider how you should live:

But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction. Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen.
(2Pe 3:13-18 NIV)

Betrayal - Acts 1:15-26

One of the most difficult characters of the New Testament is Judas Iscariot. He has left his name in the English language as a synonym for the word, "traitor." Americans will always have Benedict Arnold; veterans of World War II will recall Quisling - but for two thousand years the name Judas meant one who betrays. To this day the name arouses emotions among those who believe. We see the end of his story here.

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) and said, "Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus—he was one of our number and shared in this ministry." (With the reward he got for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out. Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) "For," said Peter, "it is written in the book of Psalms, "'May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it,' and, "'May another take his place of leadership.' Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection." So they proposed two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. Then they prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs." Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.
(Act 1:15-26 NIV)

Betrayal

As interesting as Judas' betrayal might be, it will help us grow not at all unless we look at it with intention. Let us examine it in this light: what might have motivated this betrayal - and what might we do to prevent such things in our own time.

Bitterness

Judas was the only disciple of the twelve who was not from Galilee. As such, he was an outsider. In all the lists of the disciples, he is always listed with the "last third." These lists are consistent in grouping the twelve disciples into three groups: the inner, middle and outer groups. The order within the groups changes, but the groups don't - and Judas is always in the last group. Perhaps this sense of being the last man in grew into bitterness in him.

Can we see something like this today? I think so. Consider that there is no salvation outside the church; there is no "solo" Christianity. Therefore anyone who wants to be saved must come to the church. But suppose the church (that's us) finds him so unlovely that we do not accept him as brother? Do we reject others because they are new? Or based on race, or age, or physical appearance, or criminal record? Or any other such criterion? It is not for nothing that James commands us to be impartial!

Fear

It has also been suggested that things were getting hot in Jerusalem, and that Judas feared for his own skin. This may be. We must remember that courage is the root of all virtue, and perhaps under Judas that root had dried up and died. For this reason, we are called to "en-courage" one another.

Did you think of it that way? By encouraging, we also "en-courage." How? Perfect love casts out fear! When someone is loved and supported, it becomes easier to do that which requires courage. Therefore, we should encourage one another.

Shame

We know that Judas had his hand in the till - he was skimming money from the community purse. It may be that he feared exposure, and who more likely to know that he was such a secret sinner than the Lord himself? The skeleton in the closet may look dry and dusty, but it (like Ezekiel's bones) may rise up and be mighty.

Sometimes we give the skeleton its power. By our censorious attitudes ("I could forgive anything but…") we say to the sinner, "Better keep that skeleton in the closet where it belongs." In short, we are discouraging confession and repentance! If the church visible (that's us) will not forgive, then how can the sinner conceive that the church invisible will? Or, for that matter, that the Father will? Far better that we encourage all to repent - by the acts of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Pride

It has been suggested that Judas may have been trying to force Christ into bringing in his earthly kingdom. There is an air here of man giving advice to God. After all, could not Christ bring down twelve legions of angels to conquer the earth? Why won't the man see the obvious - that the authorities will kill him if he doesn't! Perhaps this is the jealousy of those who are merely bright against the truly great. It is thought that Saltieri poisoned Mozart out of jealousy. I cannot say - but the story is possible.

There is a cure for this too. Do we teach the omnipotence of God - but not the omniscience? Do we say "God can do anything" and mean, "all you need to know is how to manipulate the Almighty?" We must also teach and believe the omniscience of God. More than that, we must in Christian charity learn and teach that pride is a dreadful sin - not, as our world proclaims, a sign of greatness. Thus we must also grapple with it, and correct our brothers who have fallen into it.

Satan

The New Testament has little to say about motives. It simply states[5] that "Satan entered into him." The same word (Greek *diabolos*) is translated "devil" when Christ says (about a year before this) that "one of you is a devil."[6] The word in the original means an accuser, particularly a false accuser. Perhaps we shall never know.

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[5] Luke 22:3
[6] John 6:70

In all this we must remember one thing. It is not the case that Judas is not responsible for his own sin. Satan enters only where invited; the Spirit bars all other entrance. Faust had to ask for damnation; indeed, to pursue it diligently. We are not proclaiming that another person's betrayal is the victim's fault. Rather, this is a case of snatching a brother from the flames.

Steps in the Return

It is not sufficient to "blame." God wants us to return the sinner to him. This, in the case of betrayal, begins with anguish.

Anguish

Some have the conception that a real Christian would not be upset at being betrayed. After all, we know that we will have trouble in this world. But consider: it is normal to be in anguish when you have been betrayed.

- It is normal because you have a sense of personal loss. Perhaps God has removed the relationship because it needs to be removed - but the sense of betrayal is based upon the loss of what we thought was a good thing.
- There is also a sense of righteous indignation. Judas does not just sell Christ out; he betrays him with a kiss. It is the sense that something so right - the sign of love, a kiss - is used to do something so wrong. It is an outrage.
- It is therefore a sign of the sickness of our time that we are so little anguished by betrayal. We tend now to greet it with an exasperated sigh. The story of Judas no longer angers anyone. We need to remember the reaction of Attila the Hun to hearing that the innocent Jesus had been crucified: "If I and my soldiers had been there, they would not have dared!"

Peter, in bringing up the subject of Judas' replacement, gives us (in passing) the Scriptural answer to our anguish: the Psalms. Why did God give us the Psalms in the Old Testament?

To say, "that's how I feel, God."

In a sense we are being given permission to say to God, "This is how I feel."

- We are allowed to go to God and say, "I am so wretched and miserable about this." It is not a requirement that we are constantly possessed of a happy face.
- We are allowed to go to God with our thoughts of anger and vengeance. We can say, "This is what I want you to do to him."
- We can say to God, "Life is so unjust, so unfair. I don't like it, and I need to complain about it to someone who can do something about it!"

To hear God's correction

- If we can complain, he can correct us - by reminding us that we are sinners too.
- We also need to know who rules and reigns. The Psalms complain - but they also show the glory of God. We need to be reminded more than instructed.
- And - perhaps most precious of all - we need to hear that despite our anguish and low position, despite all persecution and betrayal, God still loves us and cares for us.

Forgiveness

We can learn a great deal from Jesus' treatment of Judas.

- Jesus foresaw the betrayal - and warned Judas that it would be better for that man not to have been born.
- Even at the betrayal, Christ reminds Judas' of the authority of the man of God - note that Judas leaves to betray Jesus *only when Jesus commands him to go.*
- And at the last, when Jesus is betrayed by a kiss, he greets his betrayer as "friend." What a stunning example for us!

Look at that example. We judge the depth of a crime by two things: first, the actual type of crime itself, and second, the innocence of the victim. We view (rightly) that robbery is worse than jaywalking. We are more upset when a gang member kills a baby than we are when the victim is another gang member. Is there any crime worse than murder? Is there any victim more innocent than the sinless Son of God? Yet despite this, Jesus greets him as "friend."

We can learn from this: there is no sin so great that God cannot forgive it - and that we should not be willing to do likewise, even against ourselves. This depends upon repentance, and unless suicide be repentance Judas never repented. But upon repentance God will forgive, and so should we.

Reconciliation

If forgiveness is ours, so is reconciliation. Forgiveness alone is not God's purpose; rather, he intends reconciliation. So important is this that he has made us the ambassadors of reconciliation:

> All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.
> (2Co 5:18-21 NIV)

We are to be the ambassadors of reconciliation.

- We are to reconcile ourselves to each other - and quickly.[7]
- We are to be mediators of reconciliation between other Christian brothers.
- We are to be those who reconcile others to God, by bringing to them the grace of God.

Ours is the royal priesthood of Christ. We are to bring the grace of Christ to all - even those who have betrayed us. Consider this: what would you think of a doctor who told you that he did not want to treat your disease - because it was a frightful disease and he was afraid he might catch it himself? Apply the same standard to a minister (paid) for the Gospel - who was unwilling to preach the grace of God to someone because they were too great a sinner. Then carry the same principle forward to yourself - and ask if you are permitted to be selective about those to whom you will bring the grace of God. The minister of God - the royal priest - brings God's grace to all he meets - and he brings all he meets to God for grace.

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[7] Matthew 5:23-26

God's reaction

No one is essential to God

Despite our pride of place, there is not one of us that God cannot do without. Consider: who is this Matthias? He is never mentioned in the Scripture in any other place. We know nothing about him. Yet he is considered one of the Apostles. God doesn't need anyone; he desires everyone.

God's permanent attitude.

We may sum it up this way:

- God is always willing to forgive the repentant sinner.
- God understands our grief at betrayal.
- God desires that we, like Him, forgive the repentant sinner, no matter what the sin might have been.

This is a part of God's eternal plan. Paul mentions this in passing:

and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.
(Col 1:20 NIV)

Note that he is to reconcile "all things" to himself. We have the privilege of being a part of this work; we are the ambassadors of reconciliation. Let us prevent such sin as we can - bring such sinners as we can back to God - and forgive on every possible occasion.

Pentecost - and the Spirit - Acts 2:1-13

Pentecost is considered the birth of the Church. It is right, therefore, for us to examine it as a birth. But we may also look at it in a different light: it is the beginning of the age of the Holy Spirit. Before the Advent, God spoke to man via prophets; in our Lord's ministry by Jesus, and now, after Pentecost, through the Holy Spirit.

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?" Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine." (Act 2:1-13 NIV)

Symbols

One of the most common errors of the "fundamentalist" Christian is to assume that God would never use anything but the plainest of speech. It is not so; God is the great creative artist, and he speaks to us in symbolic language as well. We can learn many things from this; one thing is that he planned the existence of the church - and the meaning of its "birthday" - long in advance.

Pentecost

From the Old Testament itself, we can learn much about Pentecost, and see in it a forerunner of the events in this passage:

- It is a harvest feast - it celebrates the start of the harvest. What could be more appropriate a festival to announce the coming of the church, the harvest of God?
- It takes place 50 days after Passover - the defining event of God's people, the Jews. This transitions the day of celebration for God from the Sabbath (last day) to first place - Sunday, the Lord's day.
- The Jew was to celebrate Pentecost at one place - the place where the Lord was to place his name.[8] That is Jerusalem, of course; but it was described before Jerusalem was taken by the Jews. It happens where God's name dwells.
- Interestingly, the Jews were to do no work on this day. That means that it is just as holy as the Sabbath. In addition, it also means that they were to let God work on this day - and work he did. No wonder we now celebrate the Lord's Day and not the Sabbath.

Fifty - the number of redemption

Fifty is a number with a particular meaning in the Old Testament: it means redemption or restoration:

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[8] Deuteronomy 16:9-11

- It is composed of seven times seven, plus one. Seven is the number of perfection or completeness. We therefore have a completed perfection - and more!
- If you wanted to redeem the firstborn - man or animal - the price was 50 shekels.[9]
- If you wanted to redeem your land, the price was based upon the area you would sow with a homer of barley seed - and redeemed at 50 shekels to the homer.
- If you took the spoil of battle, one part in fifty went to the priests.
- Most important of all was the fiftieth year - the year of Jubilee, when all things were restored to their hereditary owners.

Fifty - the number of the Temple of God

Not only is fifty the number of redemption, it is also the number uniquely associated with the temple of God - particularly the temple not yet built but described in Ezekiel.

- The curtains of the tabernacle were hung by fifty loops on each pole.
- All the entrances to Ezekiel's temple were 50 cubits long.
- Perhaps most important of all: the price of the temple mount. David bought it from Auranah for 50 shekels. David's words, "I will not offer a sacrifice to my God which costs me nothing" ring in the ears.

The temple of God - the Holy Spirit - is now "us." Does it cost us nothing?

Fire

Fire is universally the symbol of purification. You will recall Isaiah's lament that he is a man of "unclean lips" - which the angel purified with a fiery coal.[10] The refiner's fire so frequently referenced in the Psalms would be a familiar metaphor to the disciples.

Wind

Interestingly enough, wind is also a symbol of the Spirit - perhaps because it is a play on words in the Greek. (This drives translators crazy when trying to translate John 3:8; the word for Spirit and the word for wind are the same). The Jew of this time would think instantly of Ezekiel 37; Ezekiel is told to "prophesy to the breath" (some translations would have "wind") so that life may come into the dry bones. We shall see that this connection with the resurrection of the dead is no idle thing.

Side Note: speaking in tongues

The passage is noteworthy in the 20th century as the root of Pentecostalism - the idea that speaking in tongues is a mark of the Christian. There are four views; take your choice:

- Some, the Pentecostals, hold that a Christian *must* speak in tongues. This seems contrary to Scripture which tells us that the Spirit gives *some* to speak in tongues.
- Others hold that the church must have those who speak in tongues - but that not all will. Unfortunately, the view is most commonly held by those who feel that speaking in tongues is a sign of being a better Christian.

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[9] Leviticus 27:3
[10] Isaiah 6:5-7

- Some hold that speaking in tongues - given its rarity in the past - is a phenomenon which does recur. It is a little tough to tell the Spirit that, by a two thirds vote of the elders, speaking in tongues is prohibited.
- Others hold that all such gifts perished with the Apostles, there being no record of any continuance. Certainly the gift of tongues seems to have so perished until our day; healing, on the other hand, is reported almost continuously.

That this is a gift of the Spirit is clearly stated.[11] Most commonly, however, the Spirit's association with "tongues" is in inspiration, not something readily translated.

There is, unfortunately, a tendency to abuse. As best I understand it, the tongues in question were clearly *known* tongues - but not to the Apostles. Their hearers understood them. Regrettably, however, the tendency now is to explain that speaking is done in *unknown* tongues - which requires an interpreter (which is also a gift). This has a great tendency to be abused.

The Spirit and the Church

As the soul is to the body, so the Spirit is to the church. This brings us to a number of useful conclusions.

The Spirit and the Church Universal

Each of us has one soul; the Spirit is like the soul to the church - therefore, there is one church. Not many; one. We are One in the Spirit, for the Spirit recognizes no name on the door but the children of God within. Indeed, the word used for "church" in the New Testament, Greek *ekklesia*, means simply "assembly." This is the cause of some confusion, for the word can mean the church in its entirety or the local assembly of believers.

The Spirit has a set of specific functions in the church. One is authentication. How do you know you are dealing with God? The Spirit, by use of tongues, convinces the crowd that God is moving and working among them. More commonly this will be shown in healing. Tongues have largely faded, but healing continues.

Beyond that, the Spirit is responsible for the guidance of the church. This includes the inspiration of the Scriptures, for which Christ assured us that the Spirit would "guide you in all truth." This also implies a doctrine titled "indefectability" - the idea that the Spirit will not allow the church, the body of Christ, to remain in error indefinitely. We see that frequently. Cults come and go; the true church remains.

The Spirit and the individual Christian

The Spirit is described to us as the counselor, and the comforter. From the Spirit we therefore take counsel and receive comfort. There are other gifts given to every Christian as well:

- There is discernment of things spiritual.[12]
- There is unity with other Christians.

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[11] 1 Corinthians 12:10
[12] 1 Corinthians 2:14

- The Spirit is also a "deposit" - God's guarantee of resurrection.

Beyond these, however, the Spirit also gives us individual gifts. (Mine is teaching, I believe). These are not to be taken lightly:

- We are given gifts in power, and given the corresponding responsibility with them. But the authority remains with Christ.
- When given a gift, you are expected to use it for his purposes.
- These gifts, when combined, are designed to build up the church in unity.

Ultimately, however, the Spirit is our deposit guaranteeing the resurrection of the dead - our ultimate union with the Father. This has been so since the beginning, when the Spirit hovered over the waters[13] (some translations have "brooded") to give life. It was to the breath that Ezekiel was to prophesy to bring life to the dry bones. It is to that "breath," the Spirit, that we are to look for the promise of our resurrection.[14]

Exhortation

This is all well and interesting - but what should the Christian do about it?

- Encourage fellowship with the Spirit - by obeying the commands of Christ.
- Be one people - live in unity with your fellow Christians, and so fulfill the purposes of the Spirit.
- Live in hope - for by the power of the Spirit Christ was raised from the dead. So it will be with his church as well. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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[13] Genesis 1:2
[14] Romans 8:11

Peter's First Sermon - Acts 2:14-41

The sermons recorded in the New Testament bear little resemblance to those given in modern congregations. This may be a case of Luke, as editor, picking out the high points. It is worth the reading, however, to see how it was done by the Apostles:

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: "'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' "Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. David said about him: "'I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will live in hope, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.' "Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. 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. For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said, "'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet."' "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.
(Act 2:14-41 NIV)

The early sermons of the church seem to have three consistent themes: prophecy, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. We need to examine each of these in turn.

Prophecy

Perhaps to us today we view prophecy as something that Peter's Jewish audience would have an interest in - but we certainly don't. (Except, of course, for Revelation). But even prophecy fulfilled has its uses, for it teaches us about the character of God:

God's patience

Peter, in passing, tells us that we are living "in the last days." Therefore, the prophecies he uses are from former days - and indeed they go back almost two thousand years. The earliest comes from the days of the Garden of Eden.[15] The prophecy from Joel referenced here is one of the last. From that time until the time of Christ over 400 years had passed - years of silence from the prophets, waiting the coming of the Messiah.

The point is simple: God is patient. As the Scripture often points out, he is "slow to anger." What, after all, is time to the creator of time? He is patient - but we must not confuse patience with inaction. God is not mocked.

God's eternal purpose

In verse 23 Peter assures us that all that Christ did was according to God's "set purpose and foreknowledge." The Resurrection is not an accident, or a cover up by God of a prophet's life gone wrong. He planned it that way from the beginning. As Isaiah tells us,

"Remember this, fix it in mind, take it to heart, you rebels. Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.
(Isa 46:8-10 NIV)

This is completely opposite our current idea that - since God has not yet had Christ return - God will never act. The volcano never erupts until it erupts - but it is a volcano still.

The unity of God

Note that in this passage all three persons of the Trinity are mentioned - but Peter speaks confidently to the Jews about Jesus, knowing that they (and he) know that God is one. We see here a passing reference to the doctrine of the trinity: Jesus is described as "Lord" (equal to God) and "Christ" (the chosen Messiah, a man). But also the three separate persons are distinguished. We see here how comfortable Peter was in using all three persons of the one God.

The Crucifixion

It is a startling fact to many people that the symbol of Christianity is a cross - the cross of the Crucifixion. Crucifixion is a painful and humiliating way to die, yet millions of Christians proudly display it as the sign of their innermost belief. Why this symbol? It is for the death of Christ that we wear it. That death means everything to us. Why is the cross so important?

Atonement

Under the influence of the "gentle Jesus" metaphor, many have concluded that there is something extraneous about the cross. It is not so; the cross is necessary. God is righteous and just; it is one of his attributes and he cannot be untrue to himself. Righteousness demands atonement for sin, a lesson planted firmly in the Jews. But if all righteousness - pure righteousness - is to be fulfilled, then

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[15] Genesis 3:15

the sacrifice of atonement must be pure also. Only the sinless man *could* be the atonement we need for righteousness.

Think of it this way: suppose you are deeply in debt, several millions of dollars. We could take up a collection - but at ten bucks apiece, you're still in debt. You need a friendly billionaire. The debt is for all of us, so only the perfect one of us could pay it.

Reconciliation

God is righteous, but God is also love. His objective is not just to atone for us (and then let us be) but rather reconcile us to himself. He is not interested in burying the hatchet - he wants to eliminate the hatchet entirely. So atonement is necessary - but not sufficient. Reconciliation is required. Atonement requires that the price be paid; reconciliation that it be paid willingly.

There is no greater love than this: that a man die for his friends. Note please that in this case the dying was not spontaneous, an impulse of the moment. It was planned. Christ had all of eternity to think about it. Crucifixion is not only a painful death (so much so that breaking the victims legs to hasten death was considered a merciful thing to do) but a shameful one. It marked you (and those with you) as outside the law. Worse yet, this crucifixion is accompanied by abandonment and betrayal. That is the measure of God's love for us - a love which stretches beyond atonement to reconciliation.

Example

Christ frequently tells us to "take up your cross and follow me." If nothing else, the cross is our great example. If he was willing to do that; if we claim to be his disciples; then what is there that we should not be willing to do?

Resurrection

The third element of the sermon is the Resurrection. It is another constant of the sermons of the Bible. I once heard a radio talk show discussing the musical, *Jesus Christ, Superstar.* The panelists were a Unitarian, a Quaker and a Baptist minister. For some 15 minutes the Baptist minister's microphone was turned off while the other two pontificated. When they finally let the Baptist talk, he came right to the point: "There is no resurrection. They missed the entire point of Christ's life." The host immediately turned the Baptist's microphone back off; the world does not want to hear about the Resurrection.

"Most miserable"

If there is no resurrection, then we are idiots for going to church and acting like there is. But see the confidence of the men on the spot! These men had seen him die (and acted like it); they had to be convinced of such a great miracle. But once they were, they turned the world upside down. The resurrection is the central event of human history. That resurrection shook the world.

First Fruits

The innocent Christ cannot stay buried long. The same justice that required the atonement cannot let the innocent one stay in the grave. It is entirely in keeping with the righteousness of God that Christ is risen.

But if Christ is risen, we are faced with the physical proof of resurrection. And if he tells us that we, like him, will rise from the grave, what could possibly cause us to think otherwise? There is no other expert on the subject!

Why shall we rise? Consider that we are being clothed in Christ's righteousness - as we do his will we become his body - and therefore the just God who raised him from the dead will do likewise for us. In his good time - do recall that he is patient, and his purposes are eternal.

The power of God

The power of God is greatly displayed in the Resurrection. But we must not imagine that the power of God is beyond our reach. Indeed, it is not; for Peter here tells us that we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit - God dwelling in us; our bodies the temple of the Holy Spirit. That Holy Spirit is the power of God in our lives. Now then: does the power of God diminish with time? Can time dim the eternal flame? Then why do you look so glum? Do you not know who you are, oh ambassador of reconciliation?

Reaction

The message hit home - and the crowd asks, "what shall we do?" Peter gives them two steps:

Repent

It means simply to turn around - to go the other way. It is the inward change that counts.

Be baptized

This is the outward symbol of inward change. It is a fitting one: it is cleansing (as befits repentance); it is symbolic of death, burial and resurrection (we often say "you are buried with Christ") and it is public.

If you do these things, then, you become a part of the church, heirs of salvation. This recapitulates Peter's sermon here: You fulfill the prophecies which said that the Gospel would spread over all the earth; you are crucified with Christ (and thus reconciled to God); and you will rise at the last day, just as Jesus did in God's own good time.

That is not the end; it is the beginning of a new life. What kind of life that is, we shall see next lesson.

The Early Church - Acts 2:42-47

There are, in general, two views about the doctrines of the church. One view holds that the doctrine changes as men come up with new and brilliant insights. For example, many churches now hold that homosexuality is not a sin, but instead something which is a virtue. This view might be called the evolutionary view, meaning that doctrine evolves (i.e., changes) with time and insight as well as culture. This is the view of the Roman Catholic church, and most liberal Protestant denominations.

The alternate view might be called the developmental view. In this view, doctrine changes because the original doctrine must now be applied to a new situation. This is generally the view of the conservative wing of the church. As a trivial example of this, consider anesthetics. Should a Christian decline to suffer pain, which is (of course) ordained by God?

The two views are difficult to distinguish at times, for they often arrive at the same conclusion. Nevertheless they are different. I hold to the developmental view. In the early church no such conflict was considered possible; one held tightly to "the Apostle's teaching." This is the root of the early church's method of living: they stuck to the teaching handed to the Apostles by our Lord. This, in my view, means that the evolutionary view is wrong, for it denies the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

So, that said, let's look at the early church:

> They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.
> (Act 2:42-47 NIV)

Teaching

One of the reasons I favor the developmental view is just this: our Lord used it. Over and over again, as he lays out his claim to be the Holy One of God, he quotes the Old Testament. But we can see some other things here which distinguish the teaching in the early church - and which just might be missing today:

- Note that they did this *every day.* Once a week was six times too few.
- Nor, we may infer, did they think this a trivial work. Paul studied for three years in Damascus before setting out on his missionary work.[16]
- Teaching was compared to building the church - and the Apostle's teaching was considered the foundation laid upon the cornerstone of Jesus Christ.[17]
- We also know that the early Christians adopted and endorsed the instructional methods of the Old Testament - in particular, that such teaching was to begin in infancy.[18]

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[16] Galatians 1:6-18
[17] Ephesians 2:19-22
[18] 2 Timothy 3:14-15 (which is interesting in light of verse 16)

- This teaching needed to be strong teaching - for from the earliest days Satan attacked it with false teaching.[19]

Fellowship

It often comes as a surprise to new Christians that there is such an emphasis laid on fellowship. But consider: wasn't Jesus the original party animal? Didn't he turn water to wine for a wedding party?[20] The Pharisees sought to condemn him for only two things: blasphemy (for claiming to be the Son of God) and that he partied too much with the wrong people.

The New American Standard gives us a better idea of what was happening here. It explicitly translates the idea that the went "house to house." Fellowship was something like a floating party! Why did the Apostles put such emphasis on this?

- First, the church is often seen as an organism - something which is alive in itself. You need to be together to be one thing.
- The fellowship was "mixed." That is, they ate their regular meals with each other - but they also celebrated the Lord's Supper in these homes. So the church would then have primacy not only in spiritual matters, but in matters of practical fellowship.
- There is this aspect too: if you are eating together, it's tough to carry a grudge. Such fellowship helps in the healing of the wounds.
- Perhaps the greatest benefit is this. Suppose someone is in need, in poverty. If there is no fellowship, that one must beg for help. Picture it as writing a request proposal to the Department of Benevolence. But in fellowship such matters can be dealt with quickly, and with more hands. The person in need does not need to be made a second class Christian.
- Such needs are not restricted to financial ones - there are the spiritual ones too. We are to weep with those who weep, and rejoice with those who rejoice.[21]

Breaking of Bread

This lesson is too short to throw in any great amount on the subject of the Lord's Supper. Our Lord's example is all too clear for this; he instituted it. We do recognize some things about it, however, that may shed some light on the early church:

- It was done frequently - no less than weekly[22], and some passages suggest daily.
- It was evidently combined with the fellowship; and in so doing sometimes was abused.[23]

We are commanded not to neglect it; the early church made it the core of their fellowship and worship.

Prayer

Prayer, too, seems such an obvious contribution. Our Lord spent much time on teaching the disciples to pray. But I would point out two things which might have been missed:

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[19] 1 John 2:18-22
[20] John 2:1-11
[21] Romans 12:15 (KJV)
[22] Acts 20:7
[23] 1 Corinthians 11:20-23

- This is group prayer. We are commanded to pray alone; there is a time for public prayer. But this prayer is practiced in public in a group setting - if you will, it is a first century prayer circle.
- This is such an important part of the lives of the Apostles at least, that they appoint deacons to distribute the food.[24] Recall that feeding the hungry is strictly enjoined upon the Christian - but prayer overrides this call and the church as a whole appoints those who will specialize in this task.

Awe

Do you remember Jesus cleansing the Temple? There is a sense, an emotion, we can derive from that. It is the idea that some things are holy; they are sacred and are to be regarded and treated with awe. When man encounters the truly holy, the natural reaction is one of awe - for example, at the resurrection of the young man in Luke 7:12-16.

There should be a sense of awe in handling sacred things - a sense which has largely been driven out of our cynical society. We'd be nervous about carrying a jar of nitroglycerine; how much more should we be in awe of the Holy Spirit?

Awe is also most necessary to gain and keep a living relationship with God:

- If you are to have a relationship with God, you must begin by knowing who He is. That alone will produce awe.
- You must also set an example for others, so that the unlearned will understand by action what you know by knowledge.
- It is, at the last, a facet of righteousness. There are things on this earth that need to be treated with awe; it is right to do so, whether anyone else knows about it or not.

This sense of awe was reinforced by signs and wonders - i.e., the miraculous. There are those today who say this cannot happen; I still believe in the power of prayer. But consider: what kinds of signs and wonders were they? For the most part, they are miracles of healing. If the church today were to devote herself to the care of the unfortunate, what great things we might see!

Christian Communism

It is well said that Christianity is often at odds with wealth. Indeed, the Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head.[25] But we can see in this passage the overall view of the early church's ideas on the use of wealth by the Christian:

- It is clear from the first that those who gave to relieve the poverty of others did so as an act of love - love not so much for the beneficiaries, but as an act of love towards God.[26]
- Also, it is clear that God deals with us by our own yardstick. If we are generous to the poor, he will be generous towards us.[27] God rewards the generous.[28]
- We often say, "what goes around, comes around." Did you know that this is a Biblical principle? Indeed, Paul goes so far as to make this explicit![29]

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[24] Acts 6:1-4
[25] Luke 9:58
[26] 1 John 3:16-18
[27] 2 Corinthians 9:6-15
[28] Proverbs 11:24-25
[29] 2 Corinthians 8:10-15

- We are to give according to our ability to give.[30]
- This is so important an issue that teachers are commanded to teach this principle explicitly.[31]

This great sharing is the sign of a great common cause. One is reminded of the words of the Declaration of Independence. At the very end, the signers "mutually pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor." That is the temper of the early church.

Praise

Have you ever noticed how often the Psalmist instructs us to praise God? It is the natural reaction of the redeemed. On the return of the 72 Jesus praises God - for he had seen Satan fall like lightning from heaven.[32] Look at verses 46-47: see that this praise is a daily occurrence. Christianity is not the religion of gloom. It is the religion of rejoicing. We often confuse this (see Nehemiah 8:8-12 for a similar instance).

Results

We are told two things about this church:

- It increased in numbers by God's grace.
- It had the favor of all the people.

Perhaps this is our problem. We are so busy trying to evangelize, prioritize, and otherwise ourselves that we have forgotten to be the church. If your picture of your local church doesn't look like this one, perhaps you should consider changing the picture! "Oh Lord, reform thy world - beginning with me."

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[30] Acts 11:29-30
[31] 1 Timothy 6:18-19
[32] Luke 10:21

In the NAME of Jesus of Nazareth - Acts 3

A story is told of St. Thomas Aquinas. He visited Rome (and recall that this was before the splendor of the Renaissance) where a local priest was assigned the task of showing him the magnificence of the church buildings. At the end of the tour the guide said, "At least the church no longer needs to say, 'Silver and gold have I none!'" Aquinas replied, "Neither can she say 'rise up and walk.'" I submit there is a connection between the two. That connection is the use, lack of use or abuse of the name of Jesus. Let's see how the Apostles dealt in Jesus' name:

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. Now a man crippled from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, "Look at us!" So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. While the beggar held on to Peter and John, all the people were astonished and came running to them in the place called Solomon's Colonnade. When Peter saw this, he said to them: "Men of Israel, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk? The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see. "Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer. Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets. For Moses said, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you. Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from among his people.' "Indeed, all the prophets from Samuel on, as many as have spoken, have foretold these days. And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, 'Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.' When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways." (Act 3:1-26 NIV)

Character Studies

It would be well to begin with a look at the characters in this drama.

Peter and John

Peter and John were not particularly looking for this man. But the story gives us some insight in their lives:

- They are on their way to prayer. These are men who worship God, and so they prepare themselves spiritually for the combat to come.
- Their attention to the beggar tells us at least this: they were not looking for someone rich and famous to be healed. Indeed, there is no "respect of persons" shown here.
- Indeed, the man has been at that gate for almost forty years. How many times did Jesus pass him by? Did those who place him there simply refuse to put him in the right place and time?
- There is one touching moment: "Look at us." Peter is not about to dispense cold charity; rather, he will heal this human after they have been eye to eye.
- The phrase "I do not have" carries with it the meaning that one does not have it anywhere; not the idea that "I don't have it with me." Peter gives only what the Lord has given him - a point of some note!

The beggar

The beggar has just arrived for a day of begging. We know that he is a regular character at the gate, and evidently of some success, for the custom here was that those who carried him were paid for the job. It would be reasonable for us to presume he knows the tricks of a beggar's trade - including the idea that making eye contact was not smart, as it causes potential contributors to look the other way.

What's particularly characteristic of this man is what he does not know. His theology is incomplete; he has none of the usual steps of repentance and baptism behind him. Rather, Peter just turns, looks at him man to man, and heals him in the name of Jesus. What the beggar knew didn't matter. Who Peter knew mattered entirely.

The Church in "poverty"

Talk to any minister these days and it will not be long until you hear how the church needs money. It may be the building campaign; this, that or the other. But it is money that is the need. May I suggest that the church is never so successful or so powerful as when she is, in the world's eyes, flat broke? We tend to substitute giving money for the gift of ourselves. The church is not a building; we are the church. It is time we acted like it; and we have here an excellent example.

Deeds done "in the Name"

It matters completely *why* you do your good works. You think not? I submit the following: suppose we have an individual who is starving (and of course, is not guilty of anything, lest we become judgmental).

- You could feed that individual because the government taxes you and takes some of the money and feeds that person. The person is fed, but you are denied the joy of giving and the fruits of righteousness.
- You could feed that person because you are basically a nice person. You like doing things like that; it just comes naturally. (Perhaps you are rich, and it feels good.) Is there praise from God for doing what you like to do?
- You could feed that person at Christ's command, sacrificing to do so.

Done that last way - and done so that the person eating knows that you do this because Christ tells you so - Christ is lifted up. So which would you have? A welfare state, a transient feeling of doing good, or "well done, good and faithful servant?" And which of these three might lead your fellow man to salvation?

Preaching did not come first!

There seems to be an addiction to the idea that the preaching of the Gospel must be the first thing done. But our Lord did not say so; rather, he said that if he is lifted up (he wasn't very specific on how) he would draw all men to him. That's true at the Cross; it's true in our good deeds as well.

Some might complain that we should do such things only "for those who deserve it." But consider:

- Does God himself not cause rain on the just and the unjust? And does not our Lord use this to teach us not to judge?
- Suppose the opposite for a moment: only the worthy shall receive. What a tangled mess - who's worthy, what are the rules for worthiness, who's going to investigate…. It seems more practical to skip it; otherwise we spend all the time and effort investigating.
- "Deserving" is not a moral state (we are all sinners, after all). "Deserving" is a value judgment. You think not? Consider: she's unmarried and pregnant, and needs money and help. Deserving? Does it make a difference that she's your daughter?

Sometimes this charity will not produce the results we desire; even the best of sowers must deal with thorny or hard ground. We are not even permitted to judge the results; just to pray to the Lord of the Harvest for the time of reaping to come.

Power in poverty

Peter issues no call for money (note that the early church had no building campaigns, but people gave willingly). I suspect Peter would be shocked at the frequency with which we ask for money. I suspect it would be even more so if he looked at how often we substitute giving for doing.

It is simple, really. When the church has a lot of money, she uses it. When she's broke, she *must* rely on the power of God. Never is the church so dangerous to the world as when she is poor in money and rich in spirit.

Peter's Message

Peter asks his hearers: "Why does this surprise you?" He's about to tell them some things they already know - things you know too.

Constancy of God

God is eternal and unchanging. Of all peoples on earth, the Jews should know that best. Peter brings this to their mind:

- In the past, the prophets were sent to produce repentance and point the way for the Messiah to come. In all his dealings with man, God intended the Cross.
- In the present, he tells them the facts of the death, burial and Resurrection of Jesus, things they can plainly see and remember. Just as God intended it.
- In the future, he tells them, Christ is coming again to judge the living and the dead - just as God intended it.

Those who calculate as if God would not care might take a look at the track record.

Guilt and Sin

Peter spends much of the sermon reminding them of one thing: guilt.

- The factual nature of that guilt for them can be seen in Pilate's handling of the case. They know that Pilate washed his hands of the matter and declared him innocent - yet they still sent him to the Cross.
- Their guilt remains even though this was in fulfillment of prophecy. Just because God foresaw and allowed your sin does not make you innocent.
- Their guilt remains even though they were unknowing or ignorant. If you've ever injured someone accidentally you know the feeling; this is the fact of it.

The Redeemed

Peter draws two pictures: that of the redeemed and the condemned. The redeemed see three things:

- They see their sins "wiped out." The original means to take a wet cloth to the papyrus and wash off the ink. Our sins are wiped out and recorded no more, praise God.
- They will see "times of refreshing." The existentialist is condemned to a dreary downhill fight with death; the Christian sees the beauty of God and is kept from trouble (from time to time) so that he may appreciate the better what God has done.
- The redeemed have the hope of his coming.

The Alternative

Peter needs no words of the New Testament for this. Moses is sufficient. If you will not obey this prophet to come (Jesus, the Messiah) then you will be cut off. For such warnings the prophets come: to tell of the Messiah to come, and to warn the people to repent.

Epilog

John Chrysostom wrote two homilies on this passage. In both of them he ends his lesson with an injunction that no one of his congregation should take an oath (a common thing in those days). He felt that it trivialized the Name. I think there is much in that; in our time, however, the disease is worse. We give; sometimes we even work, for what we see as the church - but we fail to give Jesus the glory. We do his work, but not in his name. This should not be.

Remember what he said: If I be lifted up, I will draw all men to me. Therefore, Christian, lift him up in all you say and do.

Opposition from Authority - Acts 4:1-31

There is a curious alternation in Luke's writing: action, then tranquility, followed by action again. In the action we see doctrine being proclaimed; in the tranquility it is worked out. In one sense, this is Luke's way of coupling the faith proclaimed with the faith in deeds.

Here we see the doctrine of church and state restated:

The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They seized Peter and John, and because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand. The next day the rulers, elders and teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and the other men of the high priest's family. They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?" Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is "'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone.' Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. "What are we going to do with these men?" they asked. "Everybody living in Jerusalem knows they have done an outstanding miracle, and we cannot deny it. But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn these men to speak no longer to anyone in this name." Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old. On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: "'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.' Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus." After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.
(Act 4:1-31 NIV)

Make no mistake about it. Christ, preached boldly, will disturb the authorities greatly. We need to examine the attack of the world, the defense of the Christian and the character of the Christian shown here which enables his defense.

The Weapons of the State

The Power of the State

It is interesting that even the most powerful of governments find it difficult to presume themselves absolute. Perhaps this is because those governments which seize power by force understand how that force could turn against them - and those elected understand that people change their minds. The state, therefore, does not possess (and could not use) ultimate power. By virtue of being "the state" their power is limited. But it is significant:

- There is the *physical* power of the state. It is shown in this instance by the jailing of John and Peter. But note that even in this the authorities wait until the end of the day. Such power displayed nakedly is not as effective as when coupled with its next great power.
- That power is the *psychological* power of the state. By making the arrest at nightfall, the authorities intend to create a climate of fear. The intimation is that you, too, might disappear without trace.
- There is also the power of *pomp and ceremony*. Above all other things, a government desires that its claim to power be declared legitimate. From this desire we have had the divine right of kings and much else. By grand spectacle the state proclaims its authority. But note: only those in doubt of their authority must strut.

The issue: who is supreme?

The issue is quite simple, really. Who is supreme? Any state constructed by man must ultimately answer that question. It is interesting to note that there are two governments on the planet older than 200 years - Great Britain and the United States. Both were founded on the explicit principle that "the king is not above the law." States founded upon the absolute authority of the state tend not to last as long - but bring plenty of trouble along the way. Nazi Germany (6 million slaughtered), Soviet Russia (20 million slaughtered) and Communist China (who knows?) - and interestingly, these are the nations that have been held up as examples by the right and left wing in America.

The ancients understood the problem. In their vernacular, these men had no authority to act - for if you are to challenge the state, you must do so with a greater authority - a greater name. So the question, "By what name?" is just their way of asking, "Who gave you this authority?"

The limits of state authority

As noted before, the state which proclaims itself supreme is quickly limited. Above all else, it must have legitimacy - the Fuhrer is always right; the divine right of kings; or whatever else you may call it. To maintain that legitimacy is a major task for the state. To accomplish that, note the use of the "threat."

This is the clue which gives away the solution. If the state were really supreme in all areas, why would they threaten the church? After all, when the police officer pulls you over to cite you, which of the two of you sounds off with threats? You're telling him who you know in the city administration, and

he's writing the ticket. The one who threatens is the one who is not in possession of true authority. (This, by the way, is the secret of success for the ACLU. They threaten a lawsuit - and everyone caves in. To an organization which has no authority whatever.)

The Christian's Response

Reply to power: patience

There is a curious motif in the history of the church. God never opposes strength with strength; rather, he opposes the strength of the state with the weakness of the church.

- Look at the change in Peter! Faced with the same authority before which he denied his Lord, he now proclaims Him. And does a night in jail shake his resolve? What has caused this change?
- Peter has been given courage through the Holy Spirit. In that light, he can say "Fear God - Dread Naught." Indeed, so great is his courage that he acts as the one in authority.
- God's use of the church's weakness is nowhere better shown in this: whenever God wants a public hearing before the rulers, he gets it - by having his servants arrested. The man on trial is the one who turns things upside down - as we see here.

About that Authority

God makes his point about authority in several ways:

- First, and most important, note how Jesus is lifted up. It's never a case of "Jesus is my authority, and I'm the Pope, you know" - but rather all authority is acknowledged as belonging to Jesus.
- This authority is so great that Peter can do what the Sanhedrin cannot: give respect. Think about it. When that police officer on the motorcycle stops you, is he respectful? Of course; he has the legitimate authority.
- But greatest of all is the power of paradox: against these learned men in high places God sends uneducated, wrong side of the tracks fishermen.

The limitless God

You remember the threatening nature of their enemies? God makes no threats; indeed, the Apostles speak only to the facts. As we said last time, the sermon is still the same:

- The witness of the prophecies
- The death, burial and Resurrection of Jesus Christ
- The guilt of the hearers and the hope of the repentant.

Christian Character

Verse 13 gives us the clue which tells us how the Apostles were able to do this. The Sanhedrin "took note that they had been with Jesus." The key to Christian character is the imitation of Christ.

Imitation by close association

Two keys we have seen for this: prayer, and the Apostle's doctrine. By prayer and study these men maintain their association with Jesus.

Imitation in action

It is not sufficient to think like Jesus, or admire him - one must act. But see here how the disciples act:

- First, they act with *boldness*. It is not a rash behavior; rather, it is one that takes account only of what God desires. They speak out as if only one person matters: Jesus Christ.
- They act with *humility*. You do not see them proclaiming themselves to be something great. Indeed, their first concern is that all should know that what they have done, they have done in the name of Jesus of Nazareth. They are very concerned that Jesus gets the credit.
- They behave with *holiness*. They foment no rebellion, pick up no sword - indeed, they pay honor to the rulers of the people. Thus there is no place for their attackers to grasp.

Reaction upon their return

If you really want to know a Christian, listen to their prayers. In this prayer given when they return, they show three things:

- They acknowledge Christ as the one being prophesied - and in so doing proclaim the lordship of God over all things.
- In acknowledging God, they also proclaim the futility of man acting outside God's purposes.
- But it is not just in authority that God is supreme - it is in power, too.

Taken together, these three show us the relationship of the disciple to his Lord - one of humility and great strength. This, if you will, is the background. But what do they ask for? What is on their hearts?

- Having spoken boldly, they ask for more boldness! The risk to them is unimportant; what is important is that Jesus Christ is preached and praised.
- They ask - quite specifically - for miraculous signs and wonders. Perhaps we do not have because we do not ask!
- They ask that all this be done in the <u>name</u> of Jesus Christ - which name they want above all else to be praised.

Does your church have no conflict with authority? Perhaps this is well; perhaps your authorities know their place. But as soon as the state deems itself supreme (or any man deems himself supreme) there should be conflict. If we follow Him, there will be conflict. In this world you will have trouble - but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.

Ananias, Sapphira - and the Loving God - Acts 4:32 - 5:16

One of the great stumbling blocks to new Christians in our day is the concept of the jealous God. We have an image of the "loving God" - which is much weaker than the truth, that God *is* love - and when we read passages like this one, we wonder, "How could a loving God do that?" Let us examine the passage and see:

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet. Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet. Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God." When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him. About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?" "Yes," she said, "that is the price." Peter said to her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also." At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events. The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed.
(Act 4:32-5:16 NIV)

Background

For us to understand this passage correctly, we must begin with a little history lesson. Our view of land is that it is a possession, a commodity to be bought and sold without much emotion. Yet even at that you can feel an attachment to a place. We lived 16 years in our house at Hawthorne. It may seem silly, but as I walked out the door of that place, I stopped one last time to ask God to bless it, giving its new owners the peace we had known there. (My wife, as far as I know, never looked back and left with a big smile on her face. She did not like that house.)

The Jew of this time would be steeped in the laws of the Old Testament. There was a different view of land: land was held to be a gift from God. At the year of Jubilee it was to be returned, even

though this custom was no longer followed. What more natural evidence of a changed life for God that to take the one thing you are sure God has given you, sell it and bring the money into his house?

Christian Communism?

Some may ask, was this not Christian communism? In one sense it was; in another it was not. There is a very big difference between being told, "In order to become a Christian, you must sell your land and bring the money here" and the idea that once you become one you voluntarily decide to do so. It's the distinction between cause and effect.

You can see it here in Barnabas, who is nicknamed "Son of Encouragement." It is not so much that he has to do it, but that it is so encouraging to others. This is the clue: he is not doing this for himself, or for his reputation in the church - he is doing it for others, to encourage them.

Indeed, this is a very good example, as Paul points out to Timothy (perhaps with Barnabas in mind):

> Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.
> (1Ti 6:17-19 NIV)

You belong to God; but do you belong to each other

The preaching that the church is one is frequent (I've done it myself many times). But it is instructive to consider a question here from Ray Stedman:

> Here is where the problem lies with many churches today. There is unity, there is a oneness of spirit, but there is no experience of it in the soul. It is quite possible to come to church and sit together in the pews, united in a physical presence with other Christians, to sing the same hymns and listen to the same message, and relate to God individually, but to have no sense of body life, no sense of belonging to one another. It is possible to come week after week, year after year, and never know the people with whom you worship. When that happens there is no unity in the soul. This is what our younger generation today, in desperation, is trying to tell us. "There is no soul in your services," they say to the church at large, "there is no sense of oneness. You don't belong to each other. You may belong to God, but you don't belong to each other." That is what is lacking today, and what the early church so wonderfully possessed.

The early church was one in heart and mind. We are one in mind and alone in heart.

We agree in mind; we agree in doctrine, our heads go north and south together at the preacher's words - and then we have no life together. We are not one in heart. There is the key problem of our church today. We do not share each others' pains.

It is an unconscious hypocrisy. We did not intend to be hypocrites, it just turned out that way. And anything which pulls us into the lives and pains of others seems to be someone else's problem. It is not so.

God, the Jealous God

All well and good, teacher. But how is this connected to this episode which shows so clearly that God is a jealous God?

Old Testament Examples

God, in the Old Testament, does this sort of thing frequently. In each of these instances, we shall see that the example touches not only upon the jealous God but also the community of Israel:

- First, consider the story of Achan, who hid something which was to be delivered to God. The Israelites were unable to defeat their enemies - despite the active presence of God - because of his sin.[33]
- Next, consider the sons of Aaron who offered unauthorized fire at the altar - and were dead by fire from it. They were carried outside the camp for burial, because evil could not be tolerated within that camp.[34]
- And perhaps most poignant of all was Elisha's retort to Gehazi, who extorted money and clothing from a very willing Namaan. "Was not my spirit with you when the man got down from his chariot to meet you?"[35]

The Jealous God

So God is a jealous God. Why do we think this so strange? How can love be jealous? C. S. Lewis puts it this way:

> You asked for a loving God: you have one. The great spirit you so lightly invoked, the "lord of terrible aspect," is present; not a senile benevolence that drowsily wishes you to be happy in your own way; not the cold philanthropy of a conscientious magistrate, nor the care of a host who feels responsible for the comfort of his guests, but the consuming fire Himself, the Love that made the worlds, persistent as an artist's love for his work and despotic as a man's love for a dog, provident and venerable as a father's love for his child, jealous, inexorable, exacting as love between the sexes.

- Love always wants what is best for the beloved. Is it any wonder then that God, who is Love, wants us to be pure, to handle pure things in a pure way and to show that purity to the world?
- Pure love is always possessive - not in the sense that it can use the beloved, but rather in the sense that the relationship is always unique. No other father, no other mother, no other wife - and no other God.

Great sins against great love

Against such a love there are sins - great sins.

- *Sacrilege.* Sacrilege is the trivial use of holy things. You are married in a holy covenant; to take so solemn a vow, for such an important relationship, and then have a "one night stand" - that trivializes your vows. It is a sacrilege against love in the form of marriage; how can you then say it is no great thing?

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[33] Joshua7
[34] Leviticus 10:1-5
[35] 2 Kings 5; this quote is from verse 26.

- *Purity.* The pithy proverb writer of the New Testament, James, defines true religion as a combination of purity and good works.[36] One seems inner; one seems outer; both are required.
- *Hypocrisy.* It is no surprise, sadly, to see "S and S" Christians. It stands for "Saturday and Sunday"; it is the Christian who on Saturday night feels greatly superior to those around him (because he's such a spiritual guy, of course) and superior the next morning (because he alone is a man of the world, not naïve like these other Christians.)

Counting the cost

Our Lord encouraged us to count the cost of entering into the kingdom. The first unpaid bill in that cost, in our time, is the union of fellowship with our brother Christians. Nothing is compulsory in the church in this aspect; all is voluntary. We look at the voluntary and feel like we've been drafted. Consider your Lord's words well, and how frequently he talks about sharing your worldly wealth in a way far beyond the ways we see today.

Separation of the hypocrites

This passage makes clear one thing: God will separate out the hypocrites from among us, in his good time. We may see this as "distinguishing judgments" (as one ancient author put it) by which God cleans his house. More commonly, we shall know them, as we do all men, by their fruits. The important thing is to be among those who are still in the church. Get real; don't be a hypocrite.

Results for the church

Note the three results of this:

- "Great fear" came upon the church. Why not? Is not the fear of the Lord the beginning of wisdom? And should you not know the character of the God you worship?
- "None dared to join"[37] - which means that those who would have used the church as a kind of social club for the truly approved were effectively dissuaded.
- But there was great power in the church[38] - healing, and true growth.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom - in this instance it also provided a goodly amount of power and growth as well.

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[36] James 1:27
[37] verses 13-14
[38] verses 15-16

God's Providence for God's Purposes - Acts 5:17-42

Many a Christian has been puzzled by the lack of response to prayer. It seems to them that their prayers are all to the good – giving God fine instructions on who to heal; to whom salvation should be brought; and in all ways providing the Almighty with a cogent list of those things to which he ought to attend.

We forget who is God.

There is a difference between placing an order at McDonalds and a pleading before the King of Kings. The providence of God – that way in which he works in our affairs, either miraculously or ordinarily, or even mysteriously in between – is used with a purpose. We see that here:

Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people the full message of this new life." At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people. When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin—the full assembly of the elders of Israel—and sent to the jail for the apostles. But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, "We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside." On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were puzzled, wondering what would come of this. Then someone came and said, "Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people." At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them. Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name," he said. "Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood." Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than men! The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him." When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. Then he addressed them: "Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God." His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.
(Act 5:17-42 NIV)

Power: Displayed to God's Purpose

There is a very curious fact in this story. The disciples are released in the middle of the night. You will find this motif throughout the Bible: God often refuses to make a display of his divine intervention. Daniel passes the night in the lion's den alone – only in the morning does Nebuchadnezzar go to the mouth of the cave. God loves a good cartoon double take.

You can see this in the reaction of the Pharisees and the guards. If nothing unusual had happened, they'd have locked them back up without a word. If there had been a spectacular miracle, they would have bowed before it. Here, they are really puzzled.

- They are puzzled about what has happened. After all, this is their town and their jail. By such providence does God crack the façade of arrogance in the sinner.
- They are also puzzled by what is going to happen next. If, as it seems, the disciples can walk through locked doors, what else can they do? This could be very disturbing.

Why did God release them?

If God's providence is for God's purpose, then we should be able to see it here. We do. There are two reasons:

- First, so that the disciples themselves would not feel abandoned. They are dealing with their own people, you will recall. They cannot feel about them the same way they might about the Romans.
- Next, they are released that they might benefit and encourage others – especially those who are yet to be converted.

Gamaliel

This is the same Gamaliel who taught Paul. We do not know if he ever became a Christian (the Jews say not; there is no record he did). But it is a fact that God often uses those who are not his followers – even those who conceive themselves his enemies.

There are a number of reasons and ways for this. In this instance, it is sweet reasonableness. Gamaliel is a wise man. You can see how much inner conflict this situation creates for the council by the fact that they listen to his advice – and then have the disciples beaten! To compromise between reason and their hatred, they settle for beating them.

It is the usual reaction of the powerful to the prophetic. Consider Elijah: fire down from heaven and then Jezebel's threat makes him run. Things have not changed very much, have they?

God's Providence Includes Suffering

The poet Alfred Barrett, in his *Repartee*, pictures Christ and St. Teresa talking about the Christian suffering:

Smiled Christ – "Thus do I treat my friends

So must I treat you"

"No wonder Lord," sighed Teresa

"No wonder you have so few!"

Why is it that, in that same providence of God which released the Apostles from prison that he did not protect them from getting a beating for it?

Suffering keeps us humble

If everything went marvelously (by our standards) we would soon begin to believe that this was God's proper reaction to our wonderful character and personality. It is not so. Indeed, God often uses suffering as a form of cleansing judgment to prevent just such things. As Peter tells it,

> Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?
> (1Pe 4:12-17 NIV)

Suffering keeps us dependent upon God

We often forget where the source of our true strength is. God is, however, faithful and just to remind us of this. We need to remember that suffering is God's tool by which he shapes us.

- Suffering is God's tool by which he produces perseverance in his saints.[39]
- Suffering shows us – and the world – that in our weakness his strength is shown.[40]
- Suffering is his way of preparing his saints for future work.[41]

Worthy to suffer for the name

We often forget that our Lord suffered "for the Name." Because he claimed to be the Son of God, he suffered – all the way to the Cross. We are not greater than he is. We therefore may expect to suffer for the Name (if we prove ourselves worthy of it).

- Suffering for the name is a sign that Satan finds you a worthy opponent. One does not come armed with a cream pie when going into combat.
- Our Lord tells us much the same. Our reaction is to be grieved – but he says "no." He tells us, rather, to rejoice.[42]
- Indeed, suffering for the Name is a sign of our salvation![43]
- If we suffer with Him, we shall be rewarded like him. God is just.[44]

God's Providence and God's People

It is extremely important for us to recognize God's providence in our lives, for it helps mold us into proper instruments for his purpose. We can see that in this passage as well.

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[39] Romans 5:3
[40] 2 Corinthians 12:10
[41] James 1:2-4
[42] Matthew 5:10-12
[43] Philippians 1:27-30
[44] Hebrews 10:32-39

Mildness of the Apostles

One thing seems curiously lacking in the conduct of the disciples: there is no sense of venom. They seem completely unable to be vengeful. This is because they are carriers of the message of God – messengers, not the message itself. As Paul tells Timothy,

> And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.
> (2Ti 2:24-26 NIV)

Such mildness, however, hasn't changed Peter's sermon a bit. It's still the same as before (and will continue to be until the Lord comes again).

- Prophecy – "the God of our Fathers" foretold his coming.
- The death, burial and resurrection of our Lord
- Repentance
- Note one new point that Peter introduces. Not only are the disciples witnesses of these things, but so is everyone *who is obedient to the Holy Spirit.* Obedience brings its own proof. The obedient servant of God soon sees how God's providence is about him.

In all this, Peter has but one purpose: to seek and save the lost, even the members of the Sanhedrin. It is his Lord's purpose, and therefore God will place at his disposal such providential power as may be required.

Fearlessness

Perhaps Peter has been before this bunch enough that he has lost his fear of public speaking. But there is one point that is clear: God has granted him a sense of fearlessness. My reaction to the release from jail would be to leave the area as fast as possible for parts unknown – "to get out of Dodge." But Peter is obedient to the Holy Spirit (see, it works) and returns right back to the Temple to bring the world the good news.

It is the same principle: fear God, dread naught. We know that perfect love casts out fear; we also find that obedience as a habit empowers us to fear God and be afraid of nothing else.

Humility

In all this there is a lesson for all of us. It is this: humility opens the door for Christ to come in – pride shuts it. The disciples make no complaint of jail and beating, returning to their tasks the very next day. Pride would complain, "Why me? Why am I being jailed and beaten?" Humility says, "Of course; they crucified my Master; why shouldn't I receive much the same treatment." Then, remembering God's purpose, humility returns to the task.

There it is: when God calls you for a task and you suffer for it, do not complain. Rejoice that you are counted worthy to suffer for the Name – and then return to complete your task.

Growing Strong Through Dispute - Acts 6:1-10

Mention the thought of a church fight to most leaders today and they will cringe. It seems obvious that such a thing will inevitably weaken the church. But consider the early church: it is not obviously the case at all. The early church was actually strengthened by the prompt handling of a just complaint.

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen, but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke. (Act 6:1-10 NIV)

The Dispute Itself

Before we can see the handling of the dispute, we must understand a little more of the times.

The character of the dispute

- First, the dispute is not about the entire distribution of food. In these times there were two collections made to support the widows. These were taken from the customs of the Jewish synagogues. One, called “the basket”, was a weekly collection designed to afford two meals a day for a week for all the widows who could not provide for themselves (a common case). The other, called “the tray,” was collected daily for those who were sick or in other need. It is this latter collection which is in dispute.
- Note that there is an air of race (or today, nationality) to the complaint. It would be easy to dismiss the complaint as being one unique to Greeks – “and you know how those Greeks are.”
- Finally, despite the racial aspect, the complaint evidently was justified. Just because the minority is complaining does not make it false.

Comparison: Ananias

We’ve already seen one area of trouble in the church: Ananias and Sapphira. In that case God dealt with the individuals. But in this case it is difficult to place the blame upon any single person. It just “sort of happens.” You can imagine that this was something which was overlooked in the rapid growth of the church.

Hence, as the church as a whole was responsible, the church must act. It’s a very different situation – and much more like our own troubles in churches today.

Resolution: take it to the Apostles

For those who are fervent believers in church theocracy, or those who fervently espouse church democracy, there is something for you here.

- The theocrat will like the idea that the complaint was made to the church leadership – the Apostles. They're in charge, let them fix it.
- Their solution: "you choose." They lay out the qualifications for the men in question, and leave it to the church body as a whole to produce the solution.

The Solution

Replying to the complaint

If there is any one thing that is striking about the men whom the church selected, it is this: they are all Greeks. One of them is even a Greek convert to Judaism, and then to Christ. This is indeed good:

- The Greeks complained; now they have the means of solution within their power. What a great way to end dissension!
- It also is illustrating the "servant nature" of the church. The ones who are to be honored are the ones who serve; you rise to the top in the church by being the servant of all – in imitation of the Christ, the Servant King.
- It goes beyond the Apostle's requirements. They said nothing about all of them being Greek; so the church replies with something stronger than asked.
- It therefore implies to the Greeks that they are full and trusted members of the church – because these Greeks will be feeding the widows of the entire congregation.

Qualifications for a waiter

So, what does it take to be a waiter in God's kingdom?

- First, they must be men. Later on we will see deaconesses (the title here is transliterated deacon), but for now it is men. Why? I suspect it is so that the people around them will not murmur and complain – an adjustment to the times.
- Secondly, they must be believers. There is no thought of "hired hands." This is an interesting thought, because it shows clearly that the feeding of the hungry was considered to be a spiritual duty, not just an expedient. There is no thought of turning this over to a caterer.
- The men must be of good reputation. The church is a hospital for sinners – as such, those who are providing the care must be beyond reproach. Doctors, not quacks, so that the hospital will be sought out.
- They must be "full of the Spirit." This may seem an odd qualification to pass out food. But they were not "just" passing out food. They were doing God's work, and therefore must be filled with His Spirit.
- Finally, they are to be filled with wisdom. Wisdom has many definitions; I submit there is a practical one here. To be the recipient of charity is painful to the pride. To be the bearer of charity may mean that you will have need of handling that injured pride. For such an assignment, you will need wisdom.

Sending out the deacons

Ritual, even at this stage of church development, is important.

- The Apostles send them out with prayer. They trust nothing to men alone, but rather send them out with God's guidance and blessing.
- They lay hands on them. To a Jew of this time, the gesture would be instantly obvious. The priest laid hands upon the sacrificial animal before the sacrifice. It is a form of identification; it says, "We are with you in this, we will support you in this – for you are doing this on our behalf. We cannot participate physically, but we are with you."

The Effect on the Church

The Apostles' attitude

It's important to remember that the Apostles declined this work so that they could do things which were required of them. We need to see three things about their attitude:

- First, it is not a "holier-than-thou" attitude. Each of us has gifts of the Spirit, and the gestures used in sending out show how important they thing the work might be.
- Next, the issue is not one of their choosing – the Spirit does this.
- But note one thing: they act speedily. They don't wait and see if this will develop into a problem; they act.

Layers of power

There is a key mistake which is often made in the church. It says, "Let us focus on the practical work of the church. Our prime task should be feeding the hungry (or whatever)." By placing focus on works, we will soon see our congregation drying up. Power proceeds from within:

- The innermost layer, unseen but by God, is prayer. To this the Apostles dedicate themselves, and by the power of prayer the church is moved. I've never seen the gasoline exploding in the cylinders of my car – but I know what it is to run out of gas. Prayer is the hidden fuel of the church.
- Next comes the "spiritual" work – preaching the Gospel. Many complain that this is no longer relevant. It is not so. If the Gospel is not preached, the impulse to common charity will soon become an exercise in condescension.
- At the outer edge are the works of the church. When powered by prayer and layered above the Word these are great works indeed. When attempted by man's own impulses, they will soon dry up.

Results

It's interesting that the Bible records no fat widows from this distribution. Rather, these are the results of resolving the issue and maintaining the unity of the church:

- The Word increased – there were more chances for the Word of God to be heard. I suspect that the charity and care of the church left many an opening.
- The number of disciples increased as well – sow the seed, the crop will come.
- Interestingly, many of the priests became Christians. This is interesting because these are the religious experts – who should have been most satisfied with their spiritual lives. It is hard to convert a rich man, especially when he is rich in spirit. The only way is to show him the pearl of great price.
- One of the deacons, Stephen, is given the power to work miracles. More than that, he ends up speaking boldly for the Gospel.

- The test of the true church: resistance from the world. Note that those who dispute with Stephen are also Greek Jews. It seems the Gospel has spread to another element of the culture around, and it is meeting with Satan's furious resistance.

Christ prayed that we might be one, even as he and the Father were one. We see here how the resolution of a just complaint united the church – and the results that this gave.

The Martyrdom of Stephen - Acts 6:8 – 7:60

We come now to one of the great difficulties – and great glories – of the church: martyrdom. They crucified Christ, the Master. Somehow his servants feel that they should now be exempt. It is not so:

Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen, but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke. Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God." So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us." All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel. Then the high priest asked him, "Are these charges true?" To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran. "Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.' "So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. He gave him no inheritance here, not even a foot of ground. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child. God spoke to him in this way: 'Your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,' God said, 'and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.' Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs. "Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt; so he made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace. "Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our fathers could not find food. When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers on their first visit. On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph's family. After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all. Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our fathers died. Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money. "As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt greatly increased. Then another king, who knew nothing about Joseph, became ruler of Egypt. He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our forefathers by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die. "At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child. For three months he was cared for in his father's house. When he was placed outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him and brought him up as her own son. Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action. "When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his fellow Israelites. He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not. The next day Moses came upon two Israelites who were fighting. He tried to reconcile them by saying, 'Men, you are brothers; why do you want to hurt each other?' "But the

man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, 'Who made you ruler and judge over us? Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?' When Moses heard this, he fled to Midian, where he settled as a foreigner and had two sons. "After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to look more closely, he heard the Lord's voice: "I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.' Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look. "Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off your sandals; the place where you are standing is holy ground. I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt.' "This is the same Moses whom they had rejected with the words, 'Who made you ruler and judge?' He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. He led them out of Egypt and did wonders and miraculous signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the desert. "This is that Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.' He was in the assembly in the desert, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers; and he received living words to pass on to us. "But our fathers refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. They told Aaron, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt—we don't know what has happened to him!' That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and held a celebration in honor of what their hands had made. But God turned away and gave them over to the worship of the heavenly bodies. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets: "'Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the desert, O house of Israel? You have lifted up the shrine of Molech and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship. Therefore I will send you into exile' beyond Babylon. "Our forefathers had the tabernacle of the Testimony with them in the desert. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. Having received the tabernacle, our fathers under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built the house for him. "However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says: "'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things?' "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it." When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep. (Act 6:8-7:60 NIV)

There are three actors in this drama, and we shall examine each of them in turn. First, the crowd.

The Crowd

Concept of Collective Responsibility

A few years ago, in New York City, a woman named Kitty Genovese was raped and brutally murdered. This would have gone unnoticed by the world at large except for one thing: it was done entirely within the sight of hundreds of onlookers leaning out of their apartment windows. Not one of them called the police, let alone attempted to help her.

Picture yourself as one of those who watched. Do you think your conscience would rest easily by saying to yourself, "I thought someone else would call the police?" Or, "what could I do?" I think not. I suspect that those who watched bear the guilt yet today.

We, as Americans, like to think of ourselves as rugged individualists. We deny the concept of collective responsibility – but it exists nonetheless. If you think not, consider this: suppose you joined the Ku Klux Klan (God forbid). It is not illegal to join the Klan; just joining is not harmful to someone else – but is it not sinful? To join such a group with such principles declares you to be someone committed to a gospel of hatred. Is that not sin?

Fiorello LaGuardia, the mayor of New York in the 1930's, used to go down to the night courts and sit as a judge on occasion. One evening a grandmother was brought before him on the charge that she had stolen a loaf of bread. She explained that she had charge of her grandchild, and stole the bread so that the child would have something to eat. LaGuardia reluctantly sentenced her to a ten dollar fine (which he paid out of his own pocket). He then sentenced everyone in the courtroom to a 25 cent fine – "for living in a city where a grandmother has to steal bread to feed her grandchild" – and gave the money to the woman. People of that era would have recognized the justice of that fine. It is still just; we simply refuse to recognize it.

Greater knowledge, greater guilt

What makes this account all the more tragic is the greater knowledge of this crowd. They are Jews, the people to whom God has given the revelation of his plan and purpose. Greater knowledge brings greater guilt. But does this apply to us today?

- God does post warning signs – he sends preachers and prophets. America as a nation has been favored with the blessing of God – if we will just look back and see it.
- Even if we ignore our past, is it not the duty of any honest man to find the truth?
- Is it not the case that we *say* we "can't tell the righteous from the Pharisee" when in fact we, as a nation, can – but won't and don't?

Greater evidence, greater stumble

There is a recurring myth among Christians: if I only saw a miracle, or if I only saw Christ in the flesh… Consider those who did see miracles and those who did see Him in the flesh. These also were the heirs of the prophets. How did they respond?

- Some concluded that since God had blessed them so mightily they must indeed be especially worthy (despite what God told them). If you are rich, you are blessed. If you are blessed, it is by God's doing. Does God bless the unworthy? (Actually, greatly so. His rain is upon the just and the unjust).
- Some took collective responsibility and turned it into collective righteousness. "I am a Jew; God will see only merit in me, because I am one of the chosen people." Are you righteous because your parents are righteous? Having a righteous ancestor only increases your responsibility, not your favor.
- Some of us have concluded that because of our good deeds God will consider us righteous. We have it backwards.

The closer you are to God's truth, the more you need to act upon it. And the greater the sin if you do not.

Stephen

Little is known of Stephen other than what is written in Acts. But there are certain things about him which may serve as

The life prepared

So many of us subscribe to the fallacy that "if a great moment came along, I would rise to the occasion." We forget the coach's motto: "You play like you practice." Stephen practiced when he was distributing food to widows; the great moment came and he was ready.

Our Lord tells us much the same thing. He says that if we are faithful in small things, we will be faithful in big things. Character counts. The question for most of us is not, "How shall I handle this grand moment in my spiritual life?" but rather, "What shall I do in this small moment?" If you cannot be trusted in small things, who will give you charge over large things?

The ready defense

It is fairly obvious from the length of Stephen's defense that he is a man who had studied the Scriptures. From this he has produced a ready defense of the faith. He was prepared.

In particular, his preparation points along one line: that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ, the Messiah, the "Anointed One," the "Holy One of Israel." Jesus is the culmination of the Old Testament, and Stephen was ready to bring the Scriptures to witness to this. Would that we were so prepared.

Attitude towards death and dying

Courage is the root of all virtue. Just by stepping up to the speaker's platform Stephen has shown a good deal of it. What is more, he has shown us his attitude towards death and dying: he thinks it of little importance. He is much more concerned with his murderers' forgiveness than he is with his own death! That attitude lasted a long time in the church. Witness this passage from Athanasius, over two hundred years later:

A very strong proof of this destruction of death and its conquest by the cross is supplied by a present fact, namely this. All the disciples of Christ despise death, they take the offensive against it and, instead of fearing it, by the sign of the cross and by faith in Christ trample on it as something dead. Before the divine advent of the Savior, even the holiest of men were afraid of death, and mourned the dead as those who perish. But now that the Savior has raised His body, death is no longer terrible, but all those

who believe in Christ tread it underfoot as nothing and prefer to die rather than to deny their faith in Christ, knowing full well that when they die they do not perish, but live indeed, and become incorruptible through the resurrection. But that devil who of old wickedly exulted in death, now that the pains of death are loosed, he alone it is who remains truly dead. There is proof of this too; for men who, before they believe in Christ, think death horrible and are afraid of it, once they are converted despise it so completely that they go eagerly to meet it, and themselves become witnesses of the Savior's resurrection from it. Even children hasten thus to die, and not men only, but women train themselves by bodily discipline to meet it. So weak has death become that even women, who used to be taken in by it, mock at it now as a dead thing, robbed of all its strength. Death has become like a tyrant who has been completely conquered by the legitimate monarch; bound hand and foot as he now is, the passers-by jeer at him, hitting him and abusing him, no longer afraid of his cruelty and rage, because of the king who has conquered him. So has death been conquered and branded for what it is by the Savior on the cross. It is bound hand and foot, all who are in Christ trample it as they pass and as witnesses to Him deride it, scoffing and saying, "O Death, where is thy victory? O Grave, where is thy sting?"

(Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei*, V-27)

If we do not have this attitude, it can hardly be the fault of old Athanasius. Men do not die for a lie – or something they believe weakly. Stephen understood this point quite clearly.

The beauty of holiness

There is one last thing we may learn from Stephen: it is the beauty of holiness. In our own time we have seen the works of Mother Teresa and admired her for them. Why? Holiness has its own beauty, one which is not in appearance. We recognize, despite the cynicism of our age, that beauty. It is the glow of God – like Moses coming down from the mountain – shining through a human being. Stephen shows it here. As Christ on the Cross begged his Father to forgive them because they did not know what they were doing, so Stephen here asks that the Father would not hold this sin against them. It is an act of beautiful holiness.

Christ

It might seem that there is much to say about Stephen in this passage and little to say about Christ. But there is one very key observation to make. It is this: here, and here alone in the Bible, Christ is pictured as *standing* at the right hand of the Father. Elsewhere he is seated.

The importance of being seated cannot be overstated. It implies that Christ is equal with the Father (who sits in the presence of the King?) But here he is pictured as standing. Why?

- He is our *Advocate*. Think of it this way: in our courtrooms, the judge and jury are seated – but the attorneys, the advocates, rise to present their cases. It is just so here; Christ is pleading as Advocate. In this instance he is pleading (at Stephen's request) that the sin not be laid against those murderers. He can also be seen as pleading for Stephen. And in general, we need to see him as pleading for us.
- He is our *High Priest*. In this instance, he is bringing before Almighty God a sacrifice – the blood of a martyr. Much is made of this in Revelation, where the blood of martyrs is said to cry out from under the altar of God. But do remember the picture of the Old Testament: the High Priest presents the sacrifices for sin and atonement, and as he does, he must stand. There are no chairs in the Temple.

- Another picture that would be easily understood in that day, especially by the Greeks, was that of the *Umpire*. (I am indebted to St. Ambrose for the point). In those days, the umpire of a wrestling match would stand as he watched the match – and would present the victor's crown to the winner. In just the same way Christ stands to present the victor's crown of life to Stephen, as to all who overcome.

Reprise

If there would be three things I would have you take away today, these would be my thoughts:

- We are responsible in some degree for our society. We cannot close our eyes and say, "Not my fault, not my problem."
- Holiness proceeds from within; if you are faithful in little things, then God may indeed trust you with much.
- Praise God for the gift of his Son: our Advocate, our High Priest and the Rewarder of our lives.

Simon the Sorcerer - Acts 8:1-25

It is no accident that the church first encounters opposition from the world of the occult during a time of persecution. We see it here:

And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison. Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. So there was great joy in that city. Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, and all the people, both high and low, gave him 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. But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw. When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin." Then Simon answered, "Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me." When they had testified and proclaimed the word of the Lord, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages.
(Act 8:1-25 NIV)

Persecution – God's tool

Christians often seem to have a poor reaction to persecution. They may fail to realize that God has planned such things for the good of the church (which might be somewhat inconvenient for the *members* of the church). We need to see how this works.

Christian response to persecution

There is an unfortunate tendency among Christians to believe that persecution must somehow be endured – in place. Our Lord was quite specific about it. When the Gospel suffers persecution, we are not to remain but to flee – for it is the Gospel that is being persecuted.

When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes.
(Mat 10:23 NIV)

Whatever the prophetic implications of this passage might be, our marching orders are clear. Even the Apostles (who stay in Jerusalem in this passage) are called upon to flee.[45] There are a number of reasons why this might be so. Here are two simple ones:

- First, it may be the only way to get Christians up and moving!
- Second, in this case, it forces the church to cease depending upon the Apostles and depend upon the Holy Spirit.

Cultural barriers

There is another issue: our reluctance to face cultural barriers. Christ told his disciples that they would be witnesses to him in three stages: Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and then the world.[46] This is simply God's prod to get on with phase 2 of the plan.

Note, please, how this is done. Philip – who is a Greek by birth, and therefore more accustomed to dealing with Gentiles – goes to Samaria. Samaria! The land which the devout Jew despised as being composed of traitors to the Law; the people who were not even to be touched. Note that it is only after Philip's success in Samaria that the Apostles come down and "ratify" the extension of the church. Ultimately this will lead to the third phase of the expansion, the Gentile world.

Christian's complaint

So if persecution can be such a good thing, why don't we like it?

- It takes us out of our comfortable existence, and calls us to sacrifice. If, as Tertullian said, the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church, it still means we do the bleeding. I'm not even fond of having the Red Cross take some.
- It forces us to change, and to grow. Some of us have a well carpeted rut.
- Sometimes, we just don't see the good of it. We see only the negative side. We forget who is God.

Temptation of the Church under persecution

This passage also points up two temptations for the church under persecution. They are the temptation to make alliance with the local sorcerer – or to go into the business of selling the grace of God.

Alliance

It must have been tempting to make an alliance with this "great power." Philip, after all, is not an Apostle, and no doubt Simon could have made a persuasive case.

There is a scene in the book (and movie) *Keys of the Kingdom.* In it, the missionary priest (played by Gregory Peck) heals the daughter of the head of the village by his knowledge of medicine. Shortly after, the head man comes to the mission to become a Christian. "You did me the greatest favor you knew how to do; now I am going to do you the greatest favor I can. If I become a Christian, the whole village will surely follow." (Or words to that effect; it's been a long time since I saw the movie.)

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[45] Acts 14:2-7
[46] Acts 1:8

The missionary turns him down – even though the man is "sincere." Why? Because the cause of Christ must not be compromised.

How do we know the real from the fake?

- The real has the ring of truth about it. Consider how they paid attention to Philip. Think how Christ spoke, compared to the Pharisees. The cynic may be blinded, the gullible fooled – but the discerning man looks for the truth.
- The real has power to it. It demands changed lives and hearts, and those lives and hearts are no longer the same.
- The real brings true joy.

The fake also has its characteristics:

- The real exalts Christ; the fake exalts the leader. The leader always places himself between you and Christ.
- The fake also carries with it an air of power. In this time, it was demonic magic, coupled with sleight of hand, which was then misunderstood. (It is interesting to note the return of astrology, etc. today). But remember: Satan cannot create; he can only counterfeit.
- The fake will draw a crowd; the world is always listening for the fruits of God at the price of man.

Selling the grace of God

The world is not willing to welcome the grace of God – but it certainly understands a new business which sells that grace. It is a form of being worldly. We see it today in simple forms ("send in your contribution") and complex. But here we see it blatantly. Simon has given his name to *simony*, the purchase of church offices. The temptation goes beyond that. It is the temptation to sell for mere money that which God purchased for us with the blood of Christ. Or worse; to throw it out to the unthinking crowd, pearls before swine. Listen to the words of one man who paid for holding to the grace of God:

> Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.
>
> ...
>
> Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock.
>
> Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: "Ye were bought with a price," and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon the life of his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the incarnation of God.
>
> (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship)

Simon saw the Gospel and the power of the Spirit as tools to be purchased. The Spirit is not a tame Lion, but rather the very essence of God. He does as he wills.

The nature of spiritual regeneration

The passage raises another interesting question. It says that Simon believed and was baptized – and yet tried to do this. How can this be?

Misconception: sober in an instant

Let me put it to you this way: suppose you're a drunk. Suppose you stagger into the revival meeting, and there meet Jesus Christ. Hallelujah, you're saved! You're also still drunk.

The result of receiving the Gospel of Christ is not "instant perfection." It is an instant change in our relationship with God. We have changed direction; we have changed paths; we have not reached the destination. We may be walking in the right direction but have a long way to go. Fortunately, God is patient.

Possibility: failure

One of the great difficulties for Christians is the thought that someone can be saved – and then lost again. Simon, by other histories, was just such a person, dogging Peter's footsteps and debating him at every turn. Look at Simon's reaction:

- "Pray for me" – he is obviously terrified by the potential consequences of his actions. But Peter has identified the problem correctly: his heart is not right with God.
- Note that Simon himself makes no indication of how *he* will change – rather, he wants Peter to do the work for him, as it were.
- Is there real repentance here? Evidently, by other histories, there was not.

Three views

This has posed a problem for many thinkers. The Scripture frequently assures us of our eternal salvation.[47] How, then, can it be that someone who is baptized can possibly come to this terrible state?

- Some, notably Baptists, say that the original conversion never really happened. "Once in grace, always in grace."
- Others simply say this is predestination. God chooses some and not others.
- But there is a test you may apply:

We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. (Heb 3:14 NIV)

Whatever theory applies, if you hold firm to the end, you are saved.

Summary

So then, what does the teacher expect you to leave with?

- Do not despise the persecution God allows to come your way – he will build his kingdom with it.
- Keep yourself pure from the world; do not alloy Christ and Satan.

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[47] Most notably in the soaring 8th chapter of Romans.

- Remember, salvation is a journey, not a train station along the way.

The Ethiopian Eunuch - Acts 8:26-40

One of the enduring mysteries for new Christians (and indeed many experienced ones) is this: when I read the Old Testament, how do I know what is still part of God's "law" for me, and what is simply ceremonial regulation for the ancient Jew? In the New Testament, the question becomes how much in the way of instruction is related to the culture of the time, and how much is really applicable in any time?

In a sense, this passage today gives us the answer to that. *The entire focus of the Bible is Jesus Christ.*

- The Old Testament is the preparation for Jesus Christ. The ceremonial sacrifices are the forerunner of the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. Over and over again, we can look at the Old Testament and see pictures of our Lord. God was preparing one particular people for his coming.
- This is the view which allows us to separate the "forever" from the "now" in both Old and New Testament. The question is, "What does this have to do with the Atonement of Jesus Christ?" For example, if it is an Old Testament picture (sacrifices) it no longer applies, for Christ is now our sacrifice. In the New Testament, we must ask the same question: is it just something done for the church in that time, or is it related to Christ's sacrifice on the Cross? We still celebrate the Lord's Supper – but our knowledge of bacteria have caused us to go to individual cups.
- Of particular importance in today's lesson is the prophetic aspect: the Old Testament points to Christ in prophecy. Do recall that prophecy is not meant to be a road map for investors in the stock market. It is meant to be the series of clues by which you know the real from the fake.

Bearing these things in mind, we now find a man who is reading the Old Testament – and needs a guide to explain it to him.

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth." The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" [*Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." The eunuch answered, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."*] And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.
(Act 8:26-40 NIV)

The Original Vanishing Hitchhiker

One of the enduring urban legends of our time is that of the "vanishing hitchhiker." Everyone has a cousin who has a friend who had a buddy who was there; he picks up a hitchhiker and, in various spooky circumstances, finds that the hitchhiker has vanished upon arrival – but with some mysterious connection to the place where the disappearance happened. No such mystery here; Philip is directed and carried. But in the process we can see the character of an ordinary man of God. Philip will show up again in Acts, but only briefly. Let us look at his character before he goes.

The Obedient Servant

This is the same Philip who is chosen to wait on tables. Evidently he must have been a man of great faith, for God takes particular care in his instruction.

- First, he is told by an angel that he is to go down to the desert road. No particular objective is assigned; nothing is explained. It's hot in the desert, but Philip goes obediently. And note, he goes on foot.
- Next, at the proper time, the Holy Spirit himself commands him to go up to the chariot. While the presence of the Spirit must have been comforting, I think my curiosity would have been sufficient to ask, "Why?" Philip, the obedient one, does not. He is a soldier in the army of the Lord.

The Servant of the Lord

Not only is Philip an obedient servant, he knows what it is to be a servant of the Lord God Most High.

- Although this is an important person, he does not flatter him. The Spirit has sent Philip; no higher authority need apply for homage.
- Philip takes the circumstances the Lord sends him. He does not pull out his tract on the Four Spiritual Laws. Instead, he seizes upon the man's own curiosity. Something is troubling him; Philip will respond to the human being. Since every human needs Christ, Philip shows him the way from where he is to where he ought to be.

The Circumstances of the Servant

Philip, as we will see in next week's lesson, leaves Jerusalem in a time of persecution. But we need to see that he goes as God commands. It's fairly obvious. Consider:

- If you simply wanted to leave Jerusalem in a hurry, this is not the direction you would choose. The "road to Gaza" is a road to nowhere, for Gaza is a ruin at this time.
- Indeed, it is the road through the desert – a glance at a map would tell you that going down the inland route via the Jordan and crossing over at a more southerly point would be much more pleasant, especially when walking. Chrysostom tells us (relying on other accounts) that this took place in the heat of the day. Those who know the desert know that it's best to travel at night during this time of year. But Philip not only goes *where* his Lord commands but also *when.*
- Strangely enough, after this incident, he will wind up in Caesarea – which is *north* of Jerusalem. The Christian life is a journey, not a destination.

The Ethiopian Eunuch

Of all stories of antiquity, none is so strange as that of the Ethiopian Jews – a story which continues today. The legend (if it is such) is that Judaism was brought to Ethiopia by the son of the

"Queen of Sheba" – the Queen of Ethiopia who visited Solomon. The legend has it that she was pregnant by Solomon, and that the son, upon reaching adulthood, went back to learn from his father. By legend, he and his followers stole the Ark of the Covenant from the Temple (you will note that no mention is made of the Ark after Solomon's reign[48]) and took it back to Ethiopia.

The Coptic church in Ethiopia claims it descends from those Jews, converted to Christianity by this treasurer. In one of their cathedrals – barred to those who are not members of the order – is supposed to be the Ark. All this may be the stuff of legend, but in our own time Israel has airlifted thousands of Ethiopian Jews to Israel. Just because it's an old story doesn't make it automatically false.

Status of a eunuch

We must first understand that this individual is an unusual human being. He is a eunuch; he has just returned from worshipping in Jerusalem. This is rare by the test of that time:

- Being Ethiopian, it is highly likely that he is black. It would not be hard to decide that he was not native born.
- He is also a eunuch – and therefore barred from Temple worship by the Law. He would be, in the eyes of the devout, a "God-Fearer" – but not a Jew. Think about it: how do you circumcise a eunuch?
- But he is one who is willing to be taught.

Character of the man

We can deduce a great deal about this man from this little incident:

- He is in a chariot – reading aloud (as was the custom of the time, so that those around could share the scarce resource of a book). This tells us not only that he was devout – he was "redeeming the time." Like someone who listens to Christian radio or tapes in the car, he was making the best use of the time and circumstances God had given him.
- He is a man with humility. He does not challenge Philip's credentials; rather, he shares with him his immediate problem – "I don't understand this passage."
- He confesses his ignorance. It wouldn't surprise me if he even stopped once in a while to ask for directions.

Studying the Scripture

Your teacher frequently stresses the value of studying the Scripture – and here we see good reason for it:

- It teaches you your ignorance. Most of us don't know what it is we don't know – but our eyes are opened when we study the Scripture.
- It opens your mind to learning, for in the Scripture you always meet one greater than yourself.
- It gives God an opportunity to minister to you, in the form of his servants. If your mind is closed, how can he speak to it?

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[48] But see also Revelation 11:19

Some Scripture speaks to us passionately. Can you imagine how this passage must have hit a man like this? For the complaint Isaiah prophesies is this: that the Christ would have no children – cut off, is the phrase. Just like the eunuch. Do you suppose the passage hit him hard?

It is fitting that the meeting was on the road. Like Paul on the road, we see that meeting God is on the journey, not only at its end.

Nature of Conversion

From the evangelist's point of view it might seem that this would be a difficult man to convert. After all, the man has already adopted what was then the world's greatest moral code – and this despite his skin color and lack of sexuality. How then would he want to change and become a Christian?

Problems with the Law

Any moral code, no matter how great, has intrinsic problems:

- Ultimately, it depends upon force. "God will get you for that!" This leads to two things:
  - First, obedience may become only external – the heart need not be right.
  - Next, the human sinful nature soon asks, "What can I get away with?" Legalism sets in.
  - Next, if you fail at any point, you fail. It is no good saying you are not a thief if you commit arson.

That leads to other problems:

- Guilt must be dealt with, for a moral code provides no way out.
- In dealing with that code, we must have a method for "covering" our deficiencies. These are such things as
  - Blame. We blame others, we blame society, the moon – you name it, we blame it.
  - Comparison. "At least I'm not the wicked sinner like …" True. Irrelevant, but true.
  - Making it up. Viewing God as cosmic bean counter, we say, "I'll do two good deeds to make up for that one bad thing."

The answer – we come full circle from the start of the lesson – is in the person of Jesus Christ.

- No longer is there a moral code to fear and obey, but a Lord and Savior to love. The heart can now be right, and the actions follow that righteousness.
- The Law can only forget my sins. Only a Person can forgive.

There is one final thing. When this more excellent way is explained to the man, his reaction is glorious. He redeems the time; he acts – he asks to be baptized immediately. The Kingdom of Heaven – the Pearl of Great Price – is before him and he grasps it joyfully.

The Road to Damascus - Acts 9:1-31

The story of Saul's conversion is one of the more important bits of history in the early church – we see it repeated in Acts three times. It is drama on the wayside, and we should study it carefully.

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything. In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered. The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight." "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name." But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ. After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him, but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall. When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him. When the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.
(Act 9:1-31 NIV)

Saul – on the road

Saul is a man with an attitude problem. We see him "breathing out murderous threats." The language in the original is particularly intense. This is the young man who approved the stoning of Stephen. Many have speculated since that the guilt of that act was the driving force in Saul's persecution of the church. Then blindness struck and a voice spoke.

The words of Jesus

Fans of Sherlock Holmes will remember the "curious incident of the dog in the night." Inspector Gregory said, "the dog did nothing in the night." Replied Holmes, "That was the curious incident."

It is fascinating to see what Jesus does NOT say here.

- There is no touch of the glory of God in this. Jesus does not proclaim himself as the Christ, but rather simply as Jesus. There is no sense of triumphing over an enemy. It is all rather matter of fact.
- He also tells him nothing about the future. That is left to a later time.

There is a lesson in this for us. There may come a time when we see our enemies blinded and at our feet. We need to remember that our Lord dealt with Saul this way – and do likewise.

What, then, does Jesus say? He identifies himself as Jesus, the one whom Saul is persecuting – and asks Saul, "Why?"

- Jesus takes the persecution of his children personally. It is not "my church" or even "my people" but "me." But consider: if someone persecutes my children, are they not persecuting me in a very real way? So great is Jesus' love for his church that their persecution is his persecution. He feels the pain.
- He gives Saul a question; a chance for self-examination. Why are you doing this? What is driving you? "Let a man examine himself" is still good advice.
- He ends with a simple instruction: "Get up and go." He leaves the process of conversion to the church. It is interesting that once the Great Commission was given Christ never again tells anyone how to enter the kingdom of God – he has given that task to the church. Even here, the church goes to Saul to bring him to salvation.

Saul's reaction

Until Ananias comes, Saul reaches back into his Jewish roots and does two things which he is sure are blessed by God:

- He fasts. It is a sign of repentance; it is a sign that nothing is more precious to him than God, not even life itself.
- He prays. How can he not?

It is curious to note one thing. Jesus picked one particular spot to do this: the road to Damascus. There is symbolism in that:

- It is outside the territory of Israel – symbolic that Saul will bring the Gospel to the Gentiles.
- It is on the road, signifying the kind of life Saul will lead from now on, always wandering from place to place.
- He begins his ministry by suffering blindness – which he will trade for suffering to come.

Ananias

Of this man we know nothing but what is written here. Let us learn what we can.

Ananias – the anonymous

If there is anything particularly striking about Ananias, it is that there is nothing striking about him. He is distinguished by being so ordinary. Why, then, did our Lord choose such a man to bring the Gospel to Saul?

- So that Saul might know that salvation comes not through some hierarchy of priests, or powerful personage – but only through Jesus Christ. The insignificance of the messenger highlights the significance of the message.
- Note, too, that Ananias taught him nothing. Salvation is not a matter of learning, but of acceptance of what God has already done.

Ananias – the fearful

Ananias seems to be a reasonable person. The reason the Gospel has spread to Damascus is because of persecution, and here is Mr. Persecution himself.

- This is a typical reaction of anyone called by God to do the dangerous or unpleasant (remember Jonah?)
- Ananias is reacting in human terms. After all, it is no more likely that Saul has been converted than Madeline Murray O'Hair's son became a Christian (which, by the way, he did). This is highly improbable.
- Worse, God is not asking Ananias to set this man straight – he's asking him to restore his sight. A logical reaction would be, "Let's keep him blind!"

This fear is not limited to Ananias. Three years later, when Saul comes to Jerusalem, the reaction of the disciples is just the same. It took a man like Barnabas to jump out in faith and bring Saul in.

God relieves Ananias' fears, however.

- After all, the man is blind. What do you fear from a blind man? And, if you restore his sight to him, have you not made him a friend?
- More important, he is praying. A man of prayer is the friend of God, and the friend of God will not harm you.
- God has even gone to the trouble of arranging the meeting – and telling Saul the man's name! (I wonder if Ananias would have argued more if God hadn't told him that Saul was expecting him by name. Courtesy is courtesy, after all.)

Ananias – the obedient servant

Ultimately, of course, Ananias does as God commands. It is interesting to see how he approaches Saul: he calls him "brother Saul."

- He does not gloat over the distress of the man who was the enemy of the church. Rather, he welcomes him to the family of God.
- He claims no superiority over Saul, for the word "brother" implies an equal.
- He is the model of forgiveness. Despite what Saul has done, from the first moment he speaks only of what must now be done.

Ananias is conveying *mercy.* He does so not as one who has been offended personally, but on behalf of the church.

- What we bind on earth is bound in heaven; what we let loose on earth is let loose in heaven. Saul's forgiveness is now confirmed by the church.
- Why Ananias? Why not someone who had suffered personally at Saul's hands? Perhaps it is easier to forgive on behalf of the church when you are not the one suffering from the forgiven.

There is a delicious irony of names in this passage. Saul goes to the house of a man named Judas (the same as the traitor) to hear from a man named Ananias (the same as the one who died for lying to the Holy Spirit). Connecting those two names is the street called Straight Street. Perhaps it is God's way of telling us that even Judas and Ananias can be saved – walking the Straight Way.

Saul – after the road

If there is anything striking about this conversion, it is this: Saul immediately begins teaching Christ in the synagogues.

- It shows us the personal courage of the man. There is no attempt to cover up the past, or make a sliding transition – he jumps right in. It is still true: great sinners make great saints.
- The impact of this man must have been tremendous. Here is one who persecuted and now praises the Christ. The power of the reformed drug addict in speaking to those addicted is a modern parallel.
- There is a lesson in here for new Christians. You may be ignorant; you may be unsure of yourself – but you must also share the faith you have.

Ultimately, Saul winds up leaving Damascus in a basket, over the city wall. We must understand that cities at this time are walled for protection. If you wanted to catch someone leaving you would post men at the city gates. Even in his leaving there are lessons for us:

- First, when persecuted, the Christian is permitted to flee – and take the Gospel with him.
- Next, note that Saul's deliverance was by the hands of his fellow Christians. Sometimes God works in miraculous ways. More commonly he expects us to do what we can.

There is an inevitability to persecution. The stronger the Gospel, the more likely the persecution. In that sense what happened to Saul is rather ordinary. What is extraordinary is that God told him beforehand what would happen to him. Perhaps this is God's way of forging a particular tool for a particular task. Suffering forges us too.

- One reason for our suffering is so that we might distinguish Christ from an investment broker. The broker promises risk and returns. So does Christ – but he also promises persecution.
- Our suffering here is rewarded in heaven and at our Lord's return.
- Our suffering, however minor, is in some sense an imitation of Christ, the highest duty of a Christian.

All this suffering has a purpose, however. Saul was to bring the Gospel to three types of people:

- Gentiles
- Kings
- Israel

It is as if he was "working his way up." Ultimately his greatest disappointment came from his own people.

Summary

Is there a lesson for us today in all this? I submit there is:

- *Be obedient.* When God calls you to do something, do it. Do it despite what you've heard about the danger. Do it despite your anger and fear.

- *Be ready to change.* It may be you will need to change your whole life, like Saul. It may be only your point of view about one particular person, like Ananias. But be ready.
- *The war is not over when the battle is won.* It is over when your enemy becomes your friend.

God's Timing - Acts 9:32-10:23

Is it not a common failing of Christians that, like little children, they want all things "now?" The Bible teaches us, however, that God has his own timing. We see an example of it in this passage, the first of two lessons on how the church first reached out to the Gentiles.

Peter

As Peter traveled about the country, he went to visit the saints in Lydda. There he found a man named Aeneas, a paralytic who had been bedridden for eight years. "Aeneas," Peter said to him, "Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and take care of your mat." Immediately Aeneas got up. All those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord. In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which, when translated, is Dorcas), who was always doing good and helping the poor. About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. Lydda was near Joppa; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, "Please come at once!" Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them. Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up. He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called the believers and the widows and presented her to them alive. This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord. Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon.
(Act 9:32-43 NIV)

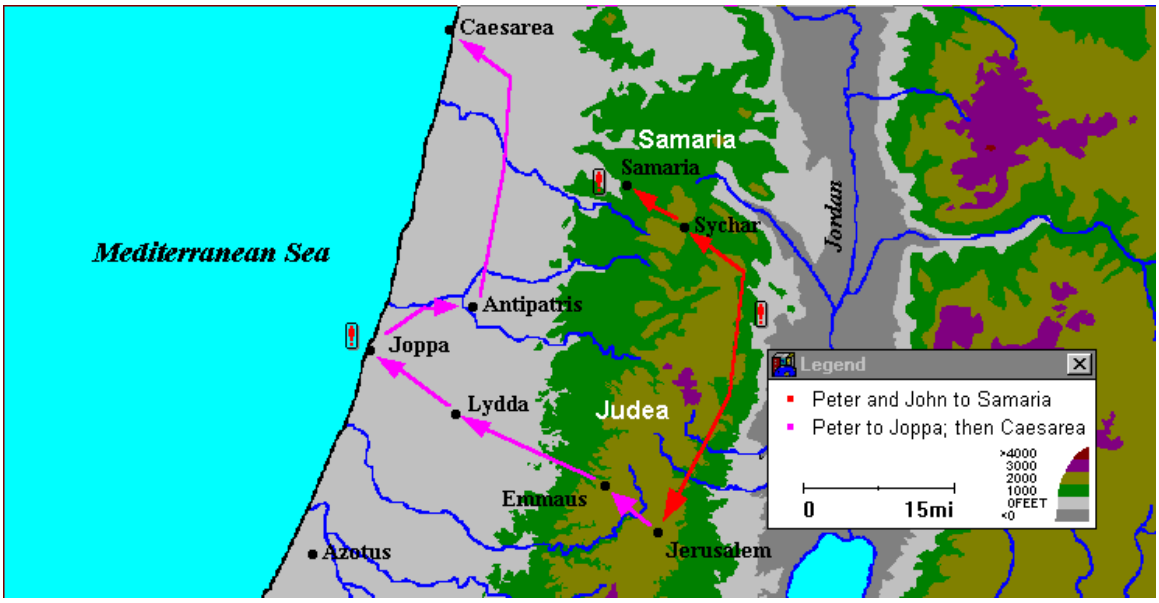
The Head of the Disciples

It is a time of peace for the church. Peter is not making a "missionary" journey; rather, this is a pastoral trip. Peter is ministering to the godly, strengthening the church with the miraculous works accorded the Apostles.

This is the second phase of the Great Commission. First Jerusalem, then Judea and Samaria, and then the world. The world is about to knock on Peter's door. But Peter does not know that; I suspect he is rather comfortable in what he is doing. Indeed, to heal the sick is one thing. We, with our technology, can do something like it. But raising the dead is entirely another matter. Would not Peter feel very much confirmed in his position? A bit on the comfortable side? Definitely where God wanted him to be?

The circumstances

Note that Peter was not necessarily planning to go to Joppa. But it would be the next stop, if you were going to the sea.



What is more interesting is this: he is staying with one Simon, a tanner. Now a tanner is one whose profession frequently makes him ceremonially unclean in Jewish Law. Yet Peter stays in the house of this man. Is this God's "coincidence?" Peter stays "some time." It is most likely that Peter was obedient to his Lord's instruction to stay at the first house that would take him in.

God's pry bar for change

Peter could not have known it, but he has placed himself in a position where God can make a radical change. He has done this through three simple things:

- He has done "the good thing which is at hand." He planned a trip; the trip was rearranged - but in each instance he is doing what is good and right. In our terms, he was going with God's flow.
- He heeds the call - of the church. No angel, nor the Holy Spirit sends him to Joppa. Rather it is the call of his Christian brothers that he is heeding. Even the Apostles serve rather than rule - just as their Lord did.
- Trust. Peter no doubt felt like a yo-yo on a string sometimes - but he knew who had hold of the string.

Cornelius

God has a gift for finding anonymous Christians and using them for his mighty purposes. Here is a man notable not for his position but for his works.

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!" Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked. The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea." When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

(Act 10:1-8 NIV)

The man of habit

Cornelius was a centurion. This was a commander of a hundred men in the Roman army, a force renowned for its discipline. Ancient history tells us that this army frequently defeated its enemies at great odds - because of its superior discipline. The rank is roughly that of a Master Sergeant. It has been my experience that master sergeants are not innovative and creative people - they are creatures of habit and personal discipline. We would do well to see this man's habits:

- **Prayer** - he is praying in the middle of the heat of the day - thus taking advantage of the time.
- **Giving** - he is a man who is known as one who gives, and gives generously. Soldiers are not noted for the fortunes they are paid.

The devout man

The word "devout" has fallen from popular favor today. There was a time that being known as "devout" was a credit to your reputation. Today we disapprove of too much zeal. But we can see some of the virtue in that word here:

- The angel says that his prayers and gifts have come up to God as a memorial offering. The word, mnemosunon, (from which we get our word mnemonic) is used only one other time in the New Testament. Jesus describes the action of the sinful woman who anointed his feet with this same word. It is not so much a sacrifice for sin and atonement as it is a pure joy in the Lord - a gift of love.
- It is interesting that the story of Dorcas being raised from the dead is in this section; she and Cornelius are much alike. Those around them regarded them in much the same way. You note that Cornelius' household also worships God.
- He is said to be "God-fearing." The expression is a technical one; it means one who prays and sacrifices to God without following the ceremonial aspects of the Law. In ancient Rome the Jews were exempt from military service in the Roman army (they would not fight on the Sabbath). It says much for a man who is attracted to this religion by its sheer moral power.

The obedient man

If there is ever a characteristic of a Roman soldier, it is disciplined obedience. This carries over into his life with God. We see that obedience in several ways:

- The example of that obedience is likely what brought the members of his household to the same belief. There is no leadership like that of example.
- When he sends three to Peter, note that they are believers too. Even his soldier attendant is described as devout. What certifies the matter is this: he trusts them with the reason for the trip. This man does not command blind obedience, but shares the vision. Like the centurion in Capernaum, he knows how to command - starting with personal obedience.
- He shares the vision - despite the fact that he himself does not know why he is sending for Peter! A large portion of the obedient life is trust in what God does not care to explain.

Peter's Vision

We must now examine the vision as Peter saw it, and a strange sight it must have been to him:

About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was

being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven. While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them." Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?" The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say." Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests. The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa went along.
(Act 10:9-23 NIV)

The value of tradition

The ancient world had a different view of tradition than we do. Tradition, if it is unrelated to sports, has a negative slant to it. They would have viewed it as the accumulated wisdom of their culture. We have to argue for tradition; they would have to argue against it. Tradition, if you will, is the vote of those who don't happen to be walking on the surface of the planet.

In short, tradition is yesterday's good idea. To handle it rightly, we must know the purpose of the tradition. The dietary laws of the Jews were handed to Moses (and greatly amplified later) so that the Jews would be separate - holy to God. But in that same Old Testament is the prophecy that there would come a time when the blessings of God would be spread to all nations.

So then Peter, confronted with this vision, has a choice to make. Does he follow the tradition, or the command of the vision? His response is recorded; let us see if we can deduce how he arrived at it.

The Vision

Note first, please, that Peter was at prayer. He was in an attitude where he would be receptive to God's call. In short, he was in the right frame of mind.

Note, however, how God takes advantage of his bodily state. He's hungry. He's just arranged to be fed lunch (cooking is woman's work, right?) So he's praying on an empty stomach. God then uses his desires to show him a new thing.

One very interesting point is this: the vision is shown to him three times. Why?

- Some say this is to show him how completely God is set upon this course - one scene for each, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- Others see it as a continuation of Peter's denial (three times) and restoration.
- Perhaps a more simple explanation is this: Cornelius sent three men.

Peter's reaction

Peter can hardly be blamed if he is puzzled. This is a symbolic vision he has been given; these things take some time to work out. The Spirit does not give him that time just yet. While he is still wondering what that all meant, the three men from Cornelius show up. The Spirit gives Peter the nudge.

Amazingly, Peter invites them in. Remember that this would be seen as a grave breach of Jewish law. Perhaps the fact that this is a tanner's house has proven useful after all!

Peter has now been brought, by a series of "coincidences," to do the unthinkable: Peter, the Jew, is going to visit a Gentile house. In so doing, he will begin the process of bringing the Gospel to the world.

Themes

This lesson is a preparation for the next section. All the action happens in the next section of Scripture. But it is useful for us to see how God prepared his servant for such a change:

- Peter placed himself in an attitude which was ready to accept what God commanded. He prayed.
- Peter is not "planning ahead for God." Rather, he is doing the task at hand, no matter how strange that task might seem to him or inconvenient it might be.
- Most of all, we see the advantage of good habits. If God is to make a difference through you, see the habits of those he has used before:
  - Prayer
  - Giving
  - Obedience.

God Opens Doors - Acts 10:24-48

There are two common mistakes Christians make when God opens his doors:

- Some Christians don't wait for God - they want to crash the doors on the run, not allowing Him to do the opening. Prayer is still a prerequisite to action.
- Other Christians find that God has opened a door - through which they are not prepared to go.

This section of Scripture shows us the right way. For that alone it is worth serious study.

The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. But Peter made him get up. "Stand up," he said, "I am only a man myself." Talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?" Cornelius answered: "Four days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me and said, 'Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.' So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us." Then Peter began to speak: "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. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. "We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.
(Act 10:24-48 NIV)

The Church Divided

The church today is much more fractured (and fractious) than the church of the First Century. This is understandable in view of our history; but even at this time the Gentiles had begun to hear the Gospel.[49] The church as whole, however, had not faced "the Great Divide." In this passage Peter faces and conquers it, as we see. But we also need to look at ourselves in the light of this passage.

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[49] Acts 11:19-20

Church Divisions Today

Most church congregations today will tell you that all are welcome in their worship services. If this is so, then, why do we see such divisions in our churches? It's my privilege to teach at a large church which emphasizes outreach. Even so, we can easily see the divisions which exist in the church today:

- *Historical institutions* - the most common source of division. There are groups of churches today whose doctrines are almost indistinguishable - but who came from different movements at different times. It is almost a point of pride with some that they will not speak to the others.
- *Wealth* - we don't like to admit it, but when you come to a particular congregation, you either "fit in" or you don't. Social class, even defined indistinctly, can be a barrier. Some congregations even take a particular pride in their social status (or lack of it). The Bible specifically enjoins us against such prejudice, but it still keeps creeping in.
- *Ethnic background* - Sometimes this is as obvious as racial prejudice; sometimes it's as subtle as a bias against those who say, "Y'all." What is so interesting about it is this: those who practice it often honestly believe that they don't. It is a lesson to us that we need to examine ourselves.
- *Language* - Sometimes this seems an insurmountable barrier (after all, not all of us can speak in tongues). But we see an encouraging sign now in that many churches sponsor a foreign language congregation, meeting in the church building.

True Common Ground

The plain fact of the matter is this: most "professional experts" in church growth will tell you that these divisions are perfectly normal, quite acceptable and the only way to mount an evangelism effort. I disagree. These things are simply "common ground" divisions. The issue is not whether or not human beings will gather together on the basis of common ground; they will. The issue is, which common ground? There is only one common ground in the church.

- First, we are all sinners. Not one of us is righteous.
- Therefore, we are all in need of salvation. We all need Christ - who is our "common ground" - or, as the Scripture puts it, our foundation.
- Therefore, we need to see the "different" not as those who do not belong in our building but rather as an opportunity.

Much of our attitude in this regard comes from our attitude towards the church itself (by which I mean the church universal). If we view the church as primarily an institution which is there to bless us, then the "different" are an impediment. If we view the church as an opportunity to serve our Lord, the different are just another opportunity, aren't they?

Barrier Busters

Brick walls, for people like me, are the necessary obstacles of life. We see here, however, the kind of people who are capable of breaking down the barriers in the compartments of the faith:

- *Humility* - Peter clearly tells Cornelius that he is only a man himself, not to be worshiped (an interesting comparison may be made with the Pope in that regard). This is humility: knowing who is man and who is God.
- *Obedience* - despite the strangeness of the request, Peter is obedient.
- *Prayer and good works* - it is no accident that God has selected Cornelius - who combines the inner faith with the outer works.
- *Readiness* - Cornelius does not know *what* Peter will say. But he is ready to listen.

God Opens Doors

Isn't it amazing how God opens doors? This is the crack in the door that will open wide to the Gentiles, but it comes in God's own time. Even Christ had very little to do with the Gentiles; in most instances in which he met one, they came to him. But now things change. We need to be alert for the timing of God.

God's Timing

There is a key phrase in the text: "While Peter was still speaking these words…" In other words, God interrupted Peter. He did not let him finish before the Spirit came upon these people. Why?

- First, to show it is not Peter who saves - it is Jesus Christ. All authority resides in him.
- Next, to show that it is not baptism that saves. Normally the gift of the Spirit is presumed to come at baptism. The Spirit comes and goes as he wills. It is the Spirit, not baptism, which gives life.
- Finally, because they are speaking in tongues - the first gift given to the Apostles themselves - no one could miss the conclusion that the Gentiles had an equal share in the Gospel.

God's Door

God opens doors for his people in two ways, as seen here:

- He opens them with his providence. Why was Peter nearby? Was it not a chain of "coincidences?" God will lead the obedient to the place of service.
- He also will deal with us miraculously, as he did here with Peter and Cornelius.

The Work of the Spirit

In this passage we can see three of the primary tasks of the Holy Spirit:

- First, there is the "indefectability" of the church. This is a long word which means simply that the Spirit will not allow the church to continue in error. The Spirit corrects the church; not always immediately, but in God's own time. The church was commanded to reach to the world at the Great Commission. She had not really done so. So the Spirit provides a correction.
- The Spirit provides revelation to the church, in this instance directly, in our lives through the inspiration of the Scripture. To allow the Spirit to work in our lives this way, we must read the Scripture - and listen to the Spirit speaking.
- One Spirit, One Lord, One Church - baptism is the sign of entry into the church. By the oneness of God we are kept one in the Spirit.

God's Method

The simple truth is that God wants the Gospel spread person to person. We may see the value in mass advertising, but God sees the value of person to person communication - the function of the church. We are to make disciples, not sway mass opinion.

Indeed, one of the most striking things about this passage is the simplicity of Peter's message to the Gentiles. We might do well to hear its main points:

- First, that we are witnesses to Jesus, the Christ. That which we have seen in our own lives, we must testify to.

- Next, he recounts the miracles and actions of Christ. As history alone we need to immerse ourselves in the Gospels.
- Get to the point: Peter speaks of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, and the power it has for all who believe.
- He proclaims the truth that Jesus is returning to judge the living and the dead.
- He tells them that all the prophets point to the Christ - as the one who is able to forgive sins.

That's not a bad message. It has lost nothing in the telling over the years.

The Challenge to Us

May I leave you with three things today? Three challenges in your life?

- Are you able to present a "ready defense" of the faith? Peter was not given a message here by the Holy Spirit - because he already *had* one.
- Are you a witness to the power of the Resurrection in your own life? Has Christ made a difference to you? If so, be ready to testify to that difference. If not, ask yourself why not.
- Are your habits subject to the lordship of Jesus Christ? Are you the humble, obedient, ready person of prayer and good works? When he calls for a change, will you respond, "Yes, Lord."

On Dispute - Acts 11:1-18

One of the many benefits of reading the Acts of the Apostles is this: we realize that being the church is neither easy nor obvious. They struggled with issues as we do; they had disputes among themselves as we do.

The problem facing the church here is one of tradition. Tradition is valuable; it is "yesterday's solution" to a problem. Most Americans reject it because it belongs to "yesterday"; we should also remember that it is a "solution."

The problem they are facing here is this: the covenant between man and God has changed, because of the Cross. What does that mean to the ordinary Christian (who at this time is Jewish) accustomed to dietary laws? We need to pick up a little history and such:

- The nature of this change has not yet been fully revealed to the church. Not until AD 70, at the fall of Jerusalem, will the Jewish ritual sacrifices be abolished. So the old, traditional method is very much alive.
- Doctrine is either directly revealed or worked out. Virtually all changes are responses to situations not originally found in the Scripture, but which apply the principles therein. This is a normal process in the church.
- This particular change was prophesied - but no date was given.
- Note too that the complaint against Peter was not taken from the Old Testament - but from the heaps of regulations added later.

The resolution of this dispute may serve as a model for us. In our learning, teaching and disputing, we should see a similar process to that shown by the early church.

The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them." Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened: "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles, and birds of the air. Then I heard a voice telling me, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.' "I replied, 'Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' "The voice spoke from heaven a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.' This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again. "Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.' "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?" When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."
(Act 11:1-18 NIV)

Peter's Defense

Anticipation

Peter clearly anticipated that there would be trouble with his actions "back home." It's easy to see why: he had the same objections himself! He's just gone through the process of overcoming his own traditional values, and he knows how hard it will be for others (who did not have the vision) to do the same.

This is a good example of putting yourself in the other guy's position. What, then, did Peter do about it?

- Note that there are "six brothers" with him - six additional witnesses. We know from the previous chapter that these were not men from Jerusalem, but Joppa. Therefore, Peter has had the foresight to bring along these witnesses, so that the facts may be carefully established.
- Why six? In Roman law the seals of seven witnesses (you have to count Peter here) made a document fully legal. I suspect that was in his mind.

Ready to change

Peter does not approach the dispute from the position (as one might imagine) of his own authority. He is ready to change (having just been through it). Note his actions:

- There is no mention of his authority as head of the Apostles. Whatever that might say about Roman Catholic doctrine of Peter as first Pope, it also tells us that this dispute was conducted God's way.
- At all points he emphasizes the leading of the Holy Spirit.
- He is very patient with his questioners. For example, in verse 14 of Luke's account (no doubt abbreviated) he amplifies the fact that Cornelius was promised salvation. Clearly, he's going into detail here.

Remembering what the Lord said

His crowning argument is his memory of what the Lord said. At all points we must bring matters back to the Scripture.

- At the very least this causes all to remember just exactly whose church this is. It is not mine; it is the bride of Christ. Therefore, we should be united in him.
- And certainly it also reminds the church of the true foundation: Christ.

The Christian Method of Dispute

A side note: rebuke and dispute

Please note carefully that we are not talking about Christian rebuke here. There is no sense that Peter was "straightening these people out." He clearly understands their difficulty. So what's the difference between rebuke and dispute?

Rebuke

- Rebuke is mandatory. If a brother is taken in sin, those who are spiritually mature must rebuke that brother.
- Repentance is required, and that repentance is very often open repentance
  - So that others will be encouraged to repent.

- So that the sinner may claim the help of the church in avoiding further trouble.
- So that the church might see the power of God.

- Rebuke carries its own temptation with it: we might fall into the same sin we are rebuking. Hence rebuke is restricted to "those who are spiritual."
- Ultimately, rebuke may be harsh to the point of excommunication. This may be necessary for the salvation of our brother.

Dispute

- Dispute is optional. One can (in general) decline the dispute. This may in fact be the best option:
  - It is an act of charity to give up one's preferences in favor of another. We are to "prefer one another in honor."
  - There is also a sense in which, as Paul comments, "why not rather be wronged?" If the dispute itself is harmful to the body of Christ, would it not be better to forego the dispute?
- Dispute within the church is generally best held "behind closed doors."
  - This is to preserve the reputation of the church before the world. It's easy for the non-Christian to misunderstand the trivial and take it for the important.
  - By taking the matter in private, we are not guilty of "instant escalation" of a dispute.
- Dispute has its own temptations - different from rebuke.
  - There is always the temptation to say, "I'm right - therefore I should win this argument." This is simply not the case. There are many occasions where the one who is right should give way to others for the sake of Christ.
  - There is also the deadly temptation of pride in dispute. Sometimes dispute becomes "a point of principle" - which is a point of pride. And points of pride usually cause self-inflicted wounds.

So how, then, should dispute be conducted between Christians?

The Christian method of dispute

Peter and the early church have modeled it for us. Christian dispute is to be conducted:

- *With courtesy* - for without courtesy as a lubricant anger quickly rises.
  - Peter does not "get up on his dignity." He does not remind them that he is the chief of the Apostles. There is no sense in his argument that he is offended by their questions; nor is there any offense given in return.
  - Indeed, the entire thrust of his argument is designed to give his opponents an easy way out. Rather than base his argument on his own authority, he rests upon God's own words. Thus he eliminates the temptation for them to rise up in pride.
  - Note that Peter's opponents follow this principle as well: the argument is about what Peter did; there is no "name calling."
- *With brotherly love* - for this is a dispute between Christians, and dispute in no way diminishes the need for brotherly love. Indeed, it increases it.
  - I am, in a very real sense, my brother's keeper. He is my fellow member of the body; his pain is mine. In that sense, therefore, I should be very careful not to inflict unnecessary pain on my own body - right?
  - That brotherly love is the command of Christ. It is always necessary to conduct dispute as if Christ were watching and caring for us. We should remind each other of his call upon us.
  - We are to "prefer one another in love" as the King James Version had it. If the matter is not an essential of the faith, we should always be ready to sacrifice our own personal preferences for those of others.

- As a side note, this certainly applies to arguments between husband and wife. How often anger rises when the love we would normally display for our fellow Christians is put aside when talking to the one we love!

- *With regard to the body of Christ* - we must never forget that we are members of the same body, and have responsibility for that.
  - We are stewards of what God has given us. It's easy to argue with "no skin in the game." We need to realize that we all have a responsibility to the church as a whole. Reverence is required.
  - This too has its application in marriage. My wife is "my body" as the Scripture tells us. Every word of dispute should pass the test of "good for my body."
  - We need to remember that neither "I'm right" or "You're right" can be the answer. The answer is "He's right." We must seek the solution which Christ would have us use.
  - There is a very good test given at the end of this passage. Have we disputed as Christ would have us do so? If so, the dispute will end with the praise of God for the solution we have been given.

Encouragement - Acts 11:19-30

Encouragement is still a word in common use, but few Christians realize the importance of being an encourager. Barnabas - the name means "son of encouragement" - is the great example of the virtue, as found in the New Testament. Let's look at his story:

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.
(Act 11:19-30 NIV)

Background

We need to know a little more about the time and the place.

Antioch

Antioch today is a small village in Syria. But at the time of this writing it was a prosperous city of the Roman Empire. Indeed, with half a million people, it was third in size after Rome and Alexandria. Its character, however, says little to its credit.

- Temple prostitution was very common here. As a trade center, its brothels were well known in the ancient world.
- It was a city which had a sacred grove which gave it the "right of asylum." In other words, if a criminal could reach this grove, the city of Antioch would take him in and protect him from his pursuers. This must have done wonders for the crime rate in town.
- The ancient reputation was so bad that when Lew Wallace, who wrote *Ben-Hur*, needed a site of wickedness in which to set his chariot race, he chose Antioch.
- All in all, it very much parallels Los Angeles today. The sights and thoughts of our area today would go very well in ancient Antioch.

The church at Antioch

Out of this area came a church which was destined to be a leader in Christianity for almost six hundred years, until it was almost completely destroyed by Islam. We can see a little of their character here:

- Despite the fact that they were not Jewish, they clearly shared the life that Jesus taught, for we see the Lord's hand was with them.

- They also proclaimed Jesus in public - so much so that the name "Christian" was applied to them. The point is not one of divine appointment; "Christ" is the Greek form of the Hebrew "Messiah." These folks spoke Greek - so what else would you call those who preached this man?
- They taught, and were taught, by the Scriptures. If you would seek the weakness of the church today, this example might serve you well.
- Finally, as we see, they were a church that shared with others, and did so sacrificially.

The character of Barnabas

We see in this brief account three chief characteristics of the "son of encouragement:"

- He is described as a "good man" - the word is a general one in the Greek - meaning one whose character gives out goodness. We might say today that he was "good hearted." An older word would be "virtuous."
- He is full of the Spirit, and thus one who follows the instruction of the Lord.
- He is also full of faith - and therefore will do extraordinary things that ordinary men might not think wise.

Not wise? After all, Saul was the man who persecuted the church. Wouldn't it be better if we left him in quiet retirement in Tarsus - out of harm's way and discreetly out of sight? The man of the world would see it that way. The man of faith sees what God can do. So the man of faith is the man of encouragement to this sinner.

The Nature of Encouragement

So then, just what do we mean by encouragement? In its roots, it means to help someone by raising their courage - the willingness to overcome obstacles. But in this passage we can see some additional things:

Encouragement is rooted in who you are

One reason encouragement is so difficult to define - and so easy to identify - is that it springs from deep inside those who are the encouragers.

- Note that the giving by the church here is according to each man's ability. The measure of encouragement is not how much you gave, but how much you had to give.
- Encouragement is given by sacrifice. If you think not, consider this: Suppose you are trying to get the money for college. The state comes along and grants you a scholarship; you are duly grateful. But then your brother gives up his hopes for college and goes to work to help you go to school. For which act do you feel the most encouragement?
- Encouragement is not just by giving of material things, but also by the things you do. None of us is too poor to be an encouragement to another.

Encouragement springs up in time of trial

Tribulation is what brought the church to the Gentiles in the first place - the persecution which broke out at the time of the stoning of Stephen. God often uses tribulation and persecution for his purposes. There are two things we know about this from this passage:

- We have no idea who the evangelists were. God uses the ordinary people to do extraordinary things.
- They do them because the hand of God is with them.

Tribulation brings another great benefit to the church. It unites the Jewish and Gentile sections of the church - for we see here no distinction between the two, and indeed it is the Gentiles who are helping the Jews. The famine in question happened about AD 44-45; as they were collecting in view of it, that pretty much dates this passage.

Tribulation is such a bother - but consider:

- As parents, we put our children into tribulation of an artificial sort: it's called Little League.
- We do that so that they will learn to deal with the situations of life. Indeed, we are quite convinced of the benefits of their suffering.
- God does the same - with us.

Personal Encouragement

So then, we are to be those who encourage others, and follow the example of Barnabas. I submit to you three questions:

"How do I identify the 'Paul' in my life?"

- One good test is natural ability. Paul is a learned man, brought up in all the right schools. Sometimes we ignore people because they don't have the "right" background - after all, I personally have never been to a Bible college. I was trained in physics. How then could I teach adults the Bible - if someone had not encouraged me to do so?
- Another test is secular experience. Many skills - such as the ability to deal well with people - are quite useful in the church.
- But the real test is this: if you are faithful in small things, you are faithful in much. Look for the one who is faithfully doing the small things.

How do I encourage the 'Paul' in my life?"

- Don't send; go. Barnabas doesn't send a letter - he takes the time and trouble to persuade in person. If you are serious about encouragement, they will know it by what you are willing to sacrifice to do it.
- Find a fitting place of service. Don't encourage someone to take "next available." Rather, encourage them to a place of service where they can be really effective. Barnabas brought Saul back to Antioch, not Jerusalem.[50]
- Be willing to overlook past failures. The truth is that we are all sinners; we all have past failures. This is no place for "you advance until you make your first mistake."

"How do we assist a 'Paul' we have encouraged?"

- Obviously, we must be willing to help. It is not sufficient to encourage someone to do something - and then stand back and watch.
- But we must also be willing to be eclipsed. Barnabas is mentioned first during the first part of Acts; then there is a switch, and Paul is mentioned first. We need to remember just whose kingdom this is.[51]

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[50] A great counterexample of this is the Peggy Eaton affair in Andrew Jackson's administration.

[51] If Barnabas was worried about this, it didn't show. After all, he went to get Saul in the first place because of the great numbers being converted. He needed the help.

- Sometimes - as Barnabas did when he argued with Paul about Mark - we need to part company with those we've encouraged. Even if the one we've encouraged seems to disapprove, we must do what God calls us to do.

The Challenge

In the next few weeks some of you will be encouraged to do things you have not done before, or have not done in a long time. Listen to the example of Barnabas here. You will not be asked to teach in front of a group; you will not be asked to preach - but you will be asked to encourage others. Take this not as a burden but as a share of the kingdom of heaven. The names of the encouragers are often lost; the results are recorded with God.

Get Out of Jail Free - Acts 12:1-19

Sometimes God acts in miraculous ways; but even in such times we can see the ways of ordinary faith.

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover. So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists. Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him. Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him. Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating." When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!" "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel." But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the brothers about this," he said, and then he left for another place. In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed. Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there a while.
(Act 12:1-19 NIV)

(It should first be noted that there are two "James" in the New Testament. The one executed here is the brother of the Apostle John. The one whom Peter references is called "James the Less" - probably because he was short - and is a near kinsman of Jesus.)

It is a curious fact, but true. The average Christian feels himself weak at prayer, and this feeling is most prevalent when praying to God on behalf of another. In intercession we think ourselves weak. Let us see, then, how the early church was so strong at it.

The Nature of God

Intercession is, by its nature, the act of asking God to do something for someone else. If this is to be successful, we must know something about God - as a person.

God allows affliction and persecution

It often astonishes new Christians to discover that God indeed allows his children to suffer - and not just from the diseases and woes that plague mankind in general, but also very specific persecution directed at them because they are Christians.

- In this instance the persecution is directed at the leadership of the church, for James is the brother of John, and with Peter these three head the church in its early days.
- The persecution is severe; for indeed James is put to death with the sword - that is, he is executed by beheading.
- Peter is sentenced, evidently, to the same fate. (We infer this from what happened to the guards.) The wait is simply to provide a bigger crowd after the Passover feast.

This surprises some that these things can happen to God's servants. It shouldn't; it was rather a common fate for those in the Old Testament. But consider: if becoming a Christian was a ticket to ease and wealth, and no source of danger, what would be the true motivation of most Christians?

God cares for his servants in his sovereign way

It always seems a contradiction, then, to say that God cares for his servants. But we see it clearly here. Consider, for a moment, the way the angel retrieves Peter. It is almost with contempt for the efforts of man. He tells him to get his sandals and cloak. There is no sense of hurry about the angel - just that slight sense of irritation with Peter that he seems to be dazed by the whole situation (which he is). The shackles fall off, the doors open by themselves, it is almost comic - indeed, I see here the divine sense of humor. "You thought one jail, four squads of soldiers, two sets of shackles and some bricks and iron gates would hold the one I have chosen to release?" Yeah, right.

God, the unexpected

If there is one thing I am sure of about God, it is this: I can never be sure of how He will answer my prayers. He seems to take a comic delight in answering them in ways I could not possibly have imagined.

Evidently I'm not the only one. Peter thought the whole thing must be a dream or a vision. Why did God do it this way? Maybe he just wanted it to hit Peter all at once - to make an impression, if you will. Maybe he wanted Peter to believe the unbelievable once again, for with God the unexpected and unbelievable become the ordinary.

How He surprises us! He never does it "my way." But I do find this: in doing it His way, He provides us with instruction, with lessons to learn. We will examine these in the next section.

Key point: Intercession begins with acknowledging who God truly is - for all personal relationships depend upon knowing the other person well.

The Nature of the Intercessor

The Old Testament Model

Christians who complain of reading the Old Testament should realize that they are reading a blueprint. In the Old Testament we see things which are to come, and which are a model of things as they will be in the New Testament.

The model for intercession is the priestly model. In the intercession of the priests of the Old Testament we can see the things we need to intercede in the new covenant:

- *Only the priest could intercede.* The ordinary man had no right to go to God in intercession. But in the new covenant, we are a kingdom of priests, and therefore each of us is privileged to intercede. Indeed, we are commanded to do so. Not just for those we love; but for all. For God causes his rain on the just and the unjust, and we are to be his imitators.
- *The priest was to be ceremonially clean.* Likewise, we must go to God in intercession with clean hands and heart. We must confess our sins, and repent, before we can stand before him with our requests. Intercession is not a request for vengeance, but deliverance.
- *The priest must come with a sacrifice.* Interestingly, the sacrifice the priest made was not in proportion to the sin - it was mandated irrespective of the type of sin. Our sacrifice, of course, is Jesus on the Cross. Unless we intercede on this basis, we intercede in vain. But we have our personal sacrifice to bring; the living sacrifice of our lives.

The example of the church

We see in the instance here just how the early church went into intercession.

- *They prayed as a group.* Christianity is not a solo flight. They held a prayer meeting in someone's home to present their requests. And it was not a short meeting, for it went on well into the night. This is prayer that is fervent; this is prayer that is ceaseless.
- *There was "closeness of need."* This fellowship of believers was praying because of their relationship with Peter; they felt his needs as they felt their own. This is the mark of believers; they pray as one because they are one. It is interesting that Rhoda does not open the gate immediately but goes back to the group with the good news. The first priority is not opening the gate for Peter's safety; the first priority is that God's people hear the good news that God has given them.
- *They did not have "great faith".* What was the first reaction of the believers? An old story tells us of the black Baptist preacher who called a prayer meeting to pray for rain. As the members arrived, his first words were this: "If you is praying for rain, where is your umbrella?" The believers did not believe Rhoda. Perhaps it is not our faith - which need be no more than the mustard seed - but God's power that counts.

The effect of intercession on the church

Christians often seem to feel that the preacher is nuts when he calls for a prayer meeting. But look at the effect this prayer meeting had!

God is glorified

How do you think this looked to the people of Jerusalem? Do you suppose they were impressed? They could hardly miss the commotion. This is one reason why we should keep in our

prayers the phrase, "thy will be done." God's power is for God's purposes; God's power is also for God's glory. Let the world see him as the result of our intercession, not us.

The division of good and evil is more pronounced

You might not think this a normal result of intercession, but it is. When God acts, man must decide: for Him or against Him? Herod is furious at the failure, as he sees it, of his guards. He will not give God the glory (more on that next week); he must find a scapegoat and so one evil grows out of another.

Compare that to Peter on the night before his scheduled execution. What was he doing when the angel arrived? Remember, this is a man who is chained up between two soldiers. He was *sleeping.* Would you be able to sleep on the night before your execution?

Fellowship grows

We have seen that Rhoda's first reaction was to tell the others. But consider what Peter's first reaction was: he went to where he knew the disciples would be (despite any danger of the place being watched). His brothers and sisters needed to hear of the goodness of God, and that was his first priority - the fellowship. (After the ruckus, I can certainly appreciate his desire to leave for another place).

Summary

- Intercession is based upon the nature and person of God - acknowledge who He is, and seek his favor.
- Intercession is something which all repentant believers may do - and should.
- Intercession produces not only the results asked for, but also strengthens the church and brings glory to God.

The pattern is before us; now, will we follow?

The Glory of God - Acts 12:19-25

By all accounts the Herod in this passage - Herod Agrippa, the son of the Herod who had Christ crucified - was a good man. He had encountered much trouble in his early life, but it had not left him a bitter man. He was not a warrior ruler, but rather a man who built public works. He was known to one and all as a generous man. Not perfect by any means, he was what to us would be a worthy man. Consider, then, his strange end:

> He had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. Having secured the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace, because they depended on the king's country for their food supply. On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died. But the word of God continued to increase and spread. When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark.
> (Act 12:20-25 NIV)

Josephus adds to the tale. He tells us that Herod arranged this appearance upon his arrival at Caesarea. The dispute was a trade dispute; Herod evidently had the ability to divert trade away from these ports of Tyre and Sidon to other, more southerly ports. It may also be that this was the time of famine prophesied and these ports were dependent upon the farmlands of Judea for food. To secure his ascendancy above them, Herod finished his negotiation trip by appearing to the crowd in a robe of pure silver, highly polished. He did so at the end of the day, when the setting sun would reflect off this robe. The cry from the crowd was no accident; Herod had hired paid flatterers to start the cry from various points in the crowd. Josephus also tells us that the pain began immediately, but lasted about five days before death. Herod knew he was to die, for he saw an omen (an owl sitting on a rope above his head, which somehow was connected in his mind with death).

It seems a small sin, to us: a politician strutting before the crowd, trying to take advantage of their superstitions. Yet history and the Bible both assure us that he died for this act. If we are to understand why, we must understand the glory of God - and how stealing it is not a good idea.

Manifestations of the Glory of God

Early in the history of the nation of Israel God began to impress upon the Jews the "glory of God." In the beginning this was a physical manifestation; later, it became more subtle:

- Moses, for example, was introduced to it at Sinai. God specifically told him that His glory would pass by - but that Moses would be hidden by God's hand, for no one could see God and live.
- At the dedication of Solomon's Temple, the priests were unable to enter while the glory filled the Temple.
- At the Annunciation[52] the glory of the Lord appeared - and the shepherds were afraid.

There is a lesson in each of these: the glory of the Lord, whatever else it might be, is holy, awesome and to be greatly feared.

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[52] Luke 2:9

Manifestation in Nature

The Psalmists tell us[53] that the glory of God is revealed in his creation. We can grasp a faint sensation of the glory of God on a starry night, deep in the desert, where the lights of man do not drown out the lights that God has created. Indeed, we are told that it is God's glory to conceal the mysteries of nature - and man's glory to seek them out.[54]

Have you ever entered a grove of redwoods just as night was falling? Did you feel the mystic sense of communion with the great "I AM?" Then you have had a touch, a small trace, of the glory of God. If this is the slight trace - imagine what the very essence of it must be.

Revealed in the work of Jesus

Jesus seems quite casually acquainted with the glory of God. On at least two occasions He specifically tells us that something has happened - something we would consider evil - for the glory of God.

- The death of Lazarus (recall that Jesus waited and did not go to him until he was dead) was for the glory of God.[55]
- The man born blind - his blindness was so that we might see the work of God displayed.[56]

Symbolism

In both Old Testament and New Testament[57] we see the glory of God portrayed symbolically in two forms:

- Light. James tells us that God is the "father of light" and the symbolism is apt. We still say "He's seen the light."
- Smoke. Often used to represent things spiritual, it reflects the nature of God - that he is spirit, and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.

Glory of God - a classification

All this is well and good - but not much help for our daily living. It may clear things up if we use a common scheme of classification for the glory of God.

- *Personal* - those attributes which belong to God alone, never to be shared with anyone.[58] In this aspect, there is something about God which we must worship, for it is found in no one else.
- *Positional* - this is easier to understand. This is the glory of Christ which he obtained by his Incarnation and sacrifice upon the Cross.[59] This is the glory that the Suffering Servant earned; in it He glorified God, and God glorified him.[60]

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[53] See, for example, Psalm 19
[54] Proverbs 24:2
[55] John 11:1-4
[56] John 9:2-3
[57] Revelation 15:8 and others
[58] Isaiah 42:8
[59] Philippians 2:5-11
[60] See John 17

- The amazing thing here is not the Crucifixion or Resurrection; it is the Incarnation. Only when we understand the glory of God, so far beyond mortal man, can we understand what a sacrifice it was for the Christ to come. As C. S. Lewis once put it, the supreme miracle is the Incarnation. All else flows from that.
- Such glory is delegated to the church - the body of Christ on earth. If you want a parallel, consider this: suppose someone murders your child. You seek justice. The offender is caught, brought to trial and convicted and sentenced. Don't you feel grateful to the judge, jury, police, prosecutor? Of course. But they are human beings like you; indeed, they've only "done their job." What you are honoring (glorifying, if you will) is justice. You're just honoring it in the persons who delivered it. So it is with the church; the glory is Christ's - but we honor it in those who serve.
- But it will not always be so - for if we live for Him, we shall reign with him, and thus share this aspect of glory.
- *Moral* - there are those aspect of God which we can imitate; those attributes of God which have a parallel in human conduct. This is well known to us; the imitation of Christ is our first duty. As such, we need to place the first emphasis upon humility, for Christ humbled himself for us. Ultimately this conduct will be rewarded. As Augustine said, "Humility is the earning of glory; glory the reward of humility." As it was for Him, so it shall be for those who follow Him.

Do's and Don'ts

God is a jealous God. He does not tolerate man taking His glory, for this is the sin which caused the fall of Satan.[61] It is the sin of pride, of saying, "I will be like God." It may seem that we could not be capable of such a thing, but this is not necessarily the case. The Pharisee is ever with us. Do we ever try to steal the glory of God? Consider:

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Have you ever met a doctor like that? Perhaps it's clearest in this attitude, but the ordinary Christian is not exempt from the problem.

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[61] Isaiah 14:12-15

- Have you ever given someone "good advice" on matters spiritual (and the really important matters of life are all spiritual) without thinking of God, let alone consulting him on the subject? Sometimes we undertake to solve problems which should drive us to our knees in prayer.
- Worse, we sometimes use God's name in our human advice. Without a glance at the Scripture or any time in prayer, we say, "I'm sure God wants you to…" (which is yet another reason to study the Scripture - so you'll know what he really wants.)
- There is also the silent condemnation; the refusal to forgive. Forgiving others brings glory to God.[62] When we refuse to forgive, we deny him the glory which is his due.

Giving glory to God

We sometimes think that this must be very difficult. But consider the opening words of the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father, who is in heaven, *hallowed* be your name." It is something which should be at the first of our thoughts: how can I bring glory to God this day?

Paul gives us a very swift answer:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.
(Rom 12:1 NIV)

It is in our daily living that we are to bring glory to God. How can this be done?

- First, by our good works.[63] Particularly in those works which help the poor and unfortunate - those who cannot repay us - we bring glory to God. It is in imitation of the One who causes rain on the just and the unjust - a moral quality - that we bring Him glory.
- Indeed, "all things" in our lives may be used to bring him glory.[64] Even the most physical of things can be used this way, for physical reality is His creation.
- By the purity of our lives we bring him glory. Do you recall when Christ said, "Now is the Son of man glorified?" It was *after* Judas left the scene of the Last Supper. Not until the evil one was cast out could the glorification of Christ begin.

Seeing the true vision of glory

We cannot see his glory as it is - now. It is yet to be revealed to us after the judgment.

- But it is a part of our hope.[65] We should look forward to it.
- It will be revealed, physically, when Jesus returns.[66]
- Indeed, the New Jerusalem will be filled with the glory of the Lord.[67]

Is it not curious? The very thing which we in our pride are so anxious to usurp - the glory of God - will be shared with us at his return. But this will be true only if we keep to His ways. "Humility is the earning of glory; glory the reward of humility."

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[62] Romans 15:7
[63] Isaiah 58:3-11
[64] 1 Corinthians 10:31
[65] Romans 5:1-2
[66] Isaiah 40:1-11
[67] Revelation 21:10-11

The Missionary - Acts 13:1-12

We enter the section of Acts in which Paul the Apostle now takes center stage. As this is the start of his first missionary journey, it seems good to take account of the character of the missionary. Let's look at the Scripture:

In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper. They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind, and for a time you will be unable to see the light of the sun." Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.
(Act 13:1-12 NIV)

Selection and Preparation

Sometimes it seems that the Holy Spirit is rather arbitrary about selecting people. This can be true; the Spirit is like the wind, he goes where he wishes.[68] But in selecting those chosen for a task we can see some sense of the selection, and the preparation, of those who are chosen.

What were they doing at the time?

There is a mistaken notion that these men must somehow have been "super saints" - and that God clearly had them marked for all to see. There is no sense of that here. Rather, we see that they were doing the work of the kingdom, quietly.

- It has been about eleven years since Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus. In that time he has been teaching, mostly in Antioch. He has not been at the center of affairs; rather, he was a teacher among other teachers.
- Indeed, the order of the players - note that Barnabas is listed first among the five and Saul is listed last - would indicate that Saul was not even preeminent at Antioch.
- But see what the church was doing when the Spirit arrived! They were worshiping and fasting - in other words, doing what devout Christians were supposed to do, not expecting anything.

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[68] John 3:8

Selection by the Spirit

There is one other key point. Even if the church had decided, as a whole, to send out missionaries, it is the Spirit who selects them. The Apostle himself does not pick his place of service, rather the Holy Spirit directs it.

How often I have wished that I had the gift of healing! Yet the Holy Spirit knows how I would be affected by such a gift, and whether or not I am fit for it. Even more, the Spirit determines whether such a gift should be given at all. We need to remember whom we serve.

Preparation by the church

You might conclude from this that the Holy Spirit does it all. This is not so. The church steps forward and confirms this action by fasting, praying and laying on of hands. This is necessary as well:

- By such action the church confirms the actions of the Spirit. Thus no one can say that this was some private vision given to Paul and Barnabas, but rather an action completely supported by the church.
- Indeed, in this action the church proclaims its unity. Even though Paul and Barnabas will be physically separated from this church in Antioch, the church is still one, and the laying on of hands confirms this.
- Even the apostles are human. They need to have the touch of other human beings to encourage them, and this is encouragement indeed.

Each of us has a task also. The Spirit will make use of us as is fitting, if we will be the obedient Christian.

The Missionary Personality

We sometimes think that the missionary must indeed be a strange personality. This is not necessarily so, as perceived from a psychological view. But from the spiritual view, we can see certain common threads in the great missionaries.

Christ is the answer

It appears that all of the great missionaries have the view that in Christ is found the answer to all the genuine mysteries of life - he is the explanation of all that God is doing. In the next lesson we shall see Paul expound this in detail.

Hudson Taylor, the great missionary to China in the 19th century, once wrote a book - a commentary on the Song of Solomon! Many Christians have puzzled over that book, wondering why a collection of erotic poetry found its way into the Bible. Taylor tells us the reason:

"Read without the key, this book is specially unintelligible, but that key is easily found in the express teachings of the New Testament. The Incarnate Word is the true key to the written Word; but even before the incarnation, the devout student of the Old Testament would find much help to the understanding of the sacred mysteries of this book in the prophetic writings; for there Israel was taught that her MAKER was her HUSBAND. John the Baptist, the last of the prophets, recognized the Bridegroom in the person of CHRIST, and said, "He that hath the bride is the Bridegroom: but the friend of the Bridegroom, which standeth and heareth Him, rejoiceth greatly because of the Bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled." Paul, in the fifth chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians, goes still further, and teaches that the

union of CHRIST with His Church, and her subjection to Him, underlies the very relationship of marriage, and affords the pattern for every godly union."

"The Incarnate Word is the true key to the written Word." In that simple sentence Hudson Taylor tells you everything you need to know about Biblical interpretation.

Lordship

If there is a second key to the missionary personality, it is the concept of "lordship". The Christian today does not encounter this outside the church, but the Roman citizen would have understood this clearly as an everyday sort of thing. Many of the early Christians were slaves.

There is a temptation - common to all who teach or preach - to say only that which tickles the ears of the hearers. Obedience commands otherwise. If you give in to that temptation, it is because of pride - you want to hear others tell you how great you are. But note Paul's humility here: "The hand of the Lord is against you." It is not Paul's power, but God's power.

Personal commitment

There is a note in all of Paul's writing which deserves mention. The word "Christianity" never occurs in his works - he speaks of the church, he speaks of Christ, but never if "Christianity." He is not devoted to a system of religion; he is devoted utterly to the person, Jesus, the Christ.

It would be well to remember how many died a martyr's death, and to whom (not what) they were devoted. Fox, in his *Book of Martyrs*, tells us of Polycarp about to burned at the stake. By the simple act of renouncing Christ he could have saved his life. His reply? "Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never once wronged me; how then shall I blaspheme my King, Who hath saved me?" The devotion is intense, and personal.

The Power of the Missionary

Shown in opposition

If you want to know how strong something is, you measure its strength by opposing it. Elymas the sorcerer - when his livelihood as court magician is about to be taken away - strikes out. He sees in Paul only another like himself. Little did he know!

Magic, as it was understood then, was very much parallel to what we would call science today. As chemistry came out of alchemy and astronomy from astrology, so was magic in their sense a blend of entreating mystic forces with herbs and potions, some of which did indeed have beneficial effect. Magic and science are twins; they both thrive in the indicative tense. "If you do this, thus and such will result." Thus magic, thus science. Christ is in the imperative; "Do this!" And as Miss Hornbuckle (my eighth grade English teacher) put it, "there is no way to get from the indicative to the imperative." Elymas sees another sorcerer with a different incantation; but he had run into the living God.

Power flows from Christ

If power is to be exercised in righteousness (and in the kingdom of God there is no other way permitted) it must be exercised in the authority of Jesus Christ. At the Great Commission Christ told the

Apostles that all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to Him - and that by that authority they were to go into all the world. What, then, can be the legitimate authority which forbids the Gospel?

But this is not just paper authority. If the authority is given, so is the power: " I am with you always, even to the end of the age." God will move the mountains of difficulty at the prayers of his servants for the cause of His kingdom.

As the authority and power are in Christ, so is the message. Do you want to know why the church today seems so polite and flabby? It is because she is trying to be "relevant." Many are the churches which preach things like "the power of positive thinking" or "name it and claim it" gospel. Paul defiantly told us that he "preached Christ crucified."[69]

The power is for the purpose of God

Note one thing: Elymas is to be blind "for a time." The blindness is not permanent. Why? Because it is God's will that all should come to repentance; the son of man came to seek and save the lost. Paul - of all people - could tell Elymas that (and I suspect he did). The power of God in the missionary is for the purpose of God, and therefore the blindness is temporary - so that God might be praised, and Elymas given the chance to repent.

One thing more: nothing has changed. The power is still there, for God is the same yesterday, today and forever. The real question is, will we be obedient so that he might raise from us those who will carry the Gospel to the world?

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[69] 1 Corinthians 1:23

Evidence - Acts 13:13-52

"How can you prove that God exists?" If you haven't heard that question, you haven't been listening. But sometimes getting the right answer starts with asking the right questions. You may ask, "Can I cross the street blindfold?" The answer is yes; that, however, ignores Howdy Doody's rule: you still cross the street with your eyes.

The existence of God is something like that. Consider, for a moment, Pascal's wager. There are four possible outcomes:

If God doesn't exist, and

- You believe – you're a happy fool.
- You don't believe – you win. But what?

If God does exist, and

- You believe – you go to heaven.
- You don't believe – you go to hell.

Maybe the question isn't, "Does God exist?" Maybe the question is, "What should I do about the evidence that God does exist?"

Sometimes the universe is so constructed that we are forced to make a decision on the basis of limited evidence. For example: You are young and foolish - and you meet the girl of your dreams. Should you propose? Will she be the woman of your life? Or are you making a big mistake? Three things are certain:

- You don't - and never will - have enough evidence to decide for certain - but there will be plenty of evidence to consider.
- Trying to get that evidence will destroy the relationship between you.
- You are *going* to make a decision - for not to decide is to decide.

The nature of the universe is such that God has provided us with much the same choice with regard to him.

- God does not provide overwhelming evidence that makes his existence obvious - but there is plenty of evidence that He exists, and has spoken.
- Somehow, He has chosen to have a relationship of love and trust; testing that relationship destroys it ("Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.")
- And, one way or another, you will decide.

Why did God do this? Why didn't He just put up a large sign - say, on the moon - that says "I AM - and you better watch out!" To understand this, we need look no further than a typical teenager's room.

If you are like most parents, you are faced with a room that looks like the residue of a tornado. You want it clean - or do you?

- If you just want it clean, you can get a skiploader and do it yourself. Mission accomplished?

- "Ah," you say, "what I really want is to have the teenager clean it up." So you can spend all day, standing over them, getting more and more frustrated. Is that what you wanted?
- No, what you really wanted was for the teenager to do it without being forced to do so.

So you see that what you want *precludes* the use of parental authority and a bullwhip. God has a similar position. He wants us to love Him, freely and completely. He has given us free will to make this possible - and in so doing, has created the possibility we will reject Him. Now then, is it "free will" if the evidence is a lunar billboard? Not to the thinking animal, man.

So God, therefore (if He is to be consistent to the Truth He is) must provide enough evidence for a decision - but not so much as to be a "slam dunk." In this passage Paul lays out for us the basics of that evidence.

From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem. From Perga they went on to Pisidian Antioch. On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and sat down. After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue rulers sent word to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak." Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said: "Men of Israel and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me! The God of the people of Israel chose our fathers; he made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt, with mighty power he led them out of that country, he endured their conduct for about forty years in the desert, he overthrew seven nations in Canaan and gave their land to his people as their inheritance. All this took about 450 years. "After this, God gave them judges until the time of Samuel the prophet. Then the people asked for a king, and he gave them Saul son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin, who ruled forty years. After removing Saul, he made David their king. He testified concerning him: 'I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.' "From this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, as he promised. Before the coming of Jesus, John preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel. As John was completing his work, he said: 'Who do you think I am? I am not that one. No, but he is coming after me, whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.' "Brothers, children of Abraham, and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent. The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead, and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people. "We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: "'You are my Son; today I have become your Father.' The fact that God raised him from the dead, never to decay, is stated in these words: "'I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.' So it is stated elsewhere: "'You will not let your Holy One see decay.' "For when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers and his body decayed. But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay. "Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses. Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you: "'Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you.'" As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath. When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to

continue in the grace of God. On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying. Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "'I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'" When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. But the Jews incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. So they shook the dust from their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.
(Act 13:13-52 NIV)

It may help us somewhat to have a map of the situation:

Types of Evidence

Paul brings to us the three major types of evidence for the truth of the Gospel:

Historical Evidence

Paul begins by reciting the acts of God throughout the history of Israel. It is no great wonder that the Old Testament is under attack in our time; it is a major witness to God's plan for mankind. (It is also no great secret that the archeologist's spade keeps uncovering the truth - a major difficulty for those who know it cannot be so.) In his recital, Paul sticks to two themes:

- He very carefully enumerates the actions of God - his generosity and love for the nation of Israel.

- He omits their rebellion! This is not a history lesson; these people already know these things. He's pointing their minds to the continuous action of God in history - which points to the coming of the Messiah.

The key point for our time is this: The incidents of the New Testament are not "isolated" or "unique." They were preceded by two thousand years of God intervening in the affairs of a particular people - for a particular purpose. It is very difficult to have a conspiracy to produce evidence over two thousand years long - and then have the chief conspirators miss the point when it arrives.

Prophetic Evidence

Paul cites a very small portion of the prophetic literature of the Old Testament. The point is simply this: In the Old Testament there are passages which point out certain unique characteristics of the Messiah. In this instance, it is that his body would not see decay. How can this be? Only by the Resurrection. But this passage was written a thousand years before Christ!

If I tell you I am in Los Angeles today (and you phone me there): then I say I'll be in San Francisco tomorrow (and you find it so) and Seattle the next day (and sure enough, you phone me there too) - you might logically conclude that I had made the travel plans in advance.

The Essentials

Paul, in this message, gives us the essentials of the faith:

- The death, burial and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ
- The forgiveness of sins by grace.

The rest is commentary.

The Burden of Those With the Evidence

Picture yourself in this situation: you are the judge in a tax case. The defendant is a widow. Her husband prepared the tax returns, and she trusted his math and understanding of the law. Unfortunately, he missed some complicated part of the tax code which carries with it a major penalty. She knew nothing of the law. Do you fine her as heavily as you would a similar offender who was a CPA?

A similar situation occurs here. The Jews are the ones who were first given the evidence of God; it is only fair, therefore, that they should be the first to receive the good news of the Messiah. But they reject it. Two things need to be said:

- God does not reject them; they reject Him. They choose to do so. Even if by not deciding.
- The Apostles then "shake dust."[70] When a people rejects God, God rejects them - so that the good news may move on to those who will accept it. For God desires that all men should be saved.

Why do men reject the evidence of God?

The question has many answers; here are three we see:

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[70] Matthew 10:14-15

- Some focus on the superficial. Jesus was a carpenter - how could he be the Messiah? Wouldn't the Messiah be born in a palace? Similarly, we hear today that Christianity can't be true, otherwise there would be no hypocrites. Such a person needs to look beneath the surface.
- Many were blind to the Scriptures. They heard them; they read them, but they did not try to understand the heart of God in them. The reached for the letter of the Law and ignored the Spirit.
- More commonly, they did not see that God wants ALL of a human being - heart, soul, mind and strength.

But out of an evil thing, God brought a greater good: from the rejection by the Jews God sent the Gospel to the Gentiles - which, by the way, is most of us!

Lessons for us

- We are now the ones with the Word. We have the evidence, and therefore our burden is all the greater.
- If we reject this Word, He will reject us.
- And if He rejects us, how much more severe will the punishment be?

I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town. "Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. "He who listens to you listens to me; he who rejects you rejects me; but he who rejects me rejects him who sent me."
(Luk 10:12-16 NIV)

The Perils of the Imitation of Christ - Acts 14

It is the teacher's task to encourage his students to be the imitators of Christ. But this is not without its dangers, as we see in this week's passage:

At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed. But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders. The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles. There was a plot afoot among the Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them. But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, where they continued to preach the good news. In Lystra there sat a man crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk. When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them. But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: "Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy." Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them. Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe. They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust. After going through Pisidia, they came into Pamphylia, and when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. And they stayed there a long time with the disciples.
(Act 14:1-28 NIV)

The Peril of Persecution

It's going to get to be almost monotonous: the Apostles are going to face opposition everywhere they go. A friend of mine once confided that this was one way he could be sure he was in the right faith; after all, if your faith is useless, Satan doesn't need to bother with you.

Persecution is inevitable

"We must go through hardships." Evidently this particular set of hardships left a lasting impression on Paul. Years later, in writing to Timothy, he refers to it this way:

You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived.
(2Ti 3:10-13 NIV)

Paul knew what he was talking about. Remember those Jews who stirred up the crowd against him? Look again at the Scripture, and you will see they came from Antioch - the place where he started from. His persecutors *followed him around.*

Sometimes we think that this should not be. After all, we bring a Gospel of peace and good news. But our Lord tells us otherwise:

"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn "'a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law— a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.'
(Mat 10:34-36 NIV)

We, if we are true to the person of Christ, will be a cause of division amongst our hearers. It has always been so.

Why the division?

Why does the Gospel divide the world?

- We are the light of the world. Have you ever turned on the light and watched the cockroaches scatter? We are reminders of righteousness in a world that wants no such reminder.
- To the proud - and our culture rewards the arrogant - we are reminders of what they are. Arrogance can put up with anything - except humility.
- We are the ones who forgive - in a world that wants vengeance.

We force a division, for no one can be neutral in the face of the Gospel. A man must decide for or against him, and that is obviously divisive.

Our actions in persecution

Today we face no persecution like the Apostles - but we face our own form of it. After all, are we not "bigoted right wing fundamentalist blue nose puritans?" We can learn from the Apostles' examples:

- We can see how they faced persecution. In reaction to the threat of persecution, they did not cower. Rather they asked God for boldness.[71]
- As the Spirit commands, they return to the town that stones them (Lystra). Of even more courage is that they flee when persecuted.[72] Whether they appear courageous or not, they are obedient to the Lord's command. Sometimes it takes more courage to appear a coward than to be one.

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[71] Acts 4:25-29
[72] Matthew 10:23

- We are commanded to pray for those who persecute us.[73] This is not, "Oh Lord, smite them dead." This is to pray for their genuine blessing, so that we may be children of our Father, who causes his rain on the just and the unjust.[74]
- Most of all, we can rejoice in the face of persecution, for it means that we have been counted worthy to suffer for the name.

The Peril of Process

Process? Yes, the way we do things. There are great temptations here: the temptations to do God's things man's ways.

Temptation: Tell them the truth - when they can handle it.

A story is told of Captain Cook, the man who discovered the Hawaiian Islands. When he landed there, the natives (never having seen such a person before) treated him and his men like gods. He was considered to be the chief god. He and his men took full (and evidently wicked) advantage of this status. But when he made ready to leave the islands, one of the natives tried to stop him. As he did, Cook let out a groan. The native cried, "He groans! He is not a god!" The islanders killed Cook on the spot.

Think of the temptation here: to be gods, at least in the eyes of the people. It is the temptation to idolatry, rationalized by, "we'll tell them the truth later- when they can handle it." Instead, the Apostles tear their clothes (a sign of great distress in that culture). Why did they not "get along and go along?"

- Because idolatry, whatever its justification (remember Aaron's golden calf?), is horribly offensive to God.
- And it is terribly destructive to men, for it prevents them from knowing the one true God - and having eternal life.

Temptation: not gods - but definitely great men

"OK," you say, "maybe not gods - but definitely great men." Do you notice that the Apostles are quite emphatic on the point? Not only are they men, they are men like the rest of us. God will not honor dishonesty. Paul at least understands the point to utter clarity. God does not use "good men" to save "evil men." He uses any man to try to save every man. Paul remembers his days persecuting the church. He of all people has no right to stand and proclaim his goodness. He frequently makes reference to this - and uses it as an example that proves that anyone who will come to Christ can be saved.

We sometimes turn this on its head. The temptation to us is to think that the Apostles and others we read of in the Bible were somehow "a breed apart." The Bible makes it quite clear that they are not; Peter denied his Lord; Paul persecuted the church; David had Bathsheba - the list goes on and on. The Bible gives them to us, warts and all, for a reason. We need to know they are "men just like us." That also teaches us that we can be men like them.

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[73] Matthew 5:43-44
[74] Matthew 5:45

Temptation: fire and brimstone

But the spirit of man is not quite through. There is also the temptation to say, "Yes, I'm no god; yes, I'm not super-saint. But you people are headed to hell!" Paul, however, takes the opposite approach. In a town filled with temple prostitution and idol worship he does not bring down fire and brimstone. Rather, he remembers that he is bring "good news" - we sometimes forget that this is the meaning of the word, "gospel." Indeed, he makes the point this way:

- In times past, God let you go your own way. He provided you with plenty of evidence in the universe, but he did not come after you in wrath. He was waiting for this good news to be ready!
- Now, however, the good news is come. Decision time is here. (There's that division again).

The Peril of Pride

If Satan cannot have you by means of the flesh, or by the world, there is always the deadliest weapon in his arsenal: pride.

Temptation: I'm the source of my goodness

Have you ever had anyone tell you that you're the finest Christian they've ever met? (In my case this usually means the person is either a hermit or possessed of very poor judgment.) Teachers and preachers must deal with the problem of praise. For if we are doing our tasks well, someone will eventually come up and say, "thank you."

Now, if you take this as a sign that you are doing what you are supposed to be doing, and doing it well, this can be very encouraging (and I thank my students for it). But if you do not give God the glory - and here is the time to do it - the temptation is to begin to believe that you are the source of your own goodness. In short, I'm good and I've made myself that way. Now, just to identify this attitude will usually cure it. But if it doesn't, consider this: if someone is looking at me and seeing God, should I not step aside to show them the true, Living God? If I won't, I will soon cease to be good - and quickly cease to be thanked.

Temptation: I'm good, you're not

If you want the real definition of pride, it's this: I'm better than you are. It's an ugly attitude in everyone else (but feels good to me). It also tends to make you highly ineffective in personal evangelism.

The Apostles' example

In this passage the Apostles show the true position of the Christian worker;

- Pride does not enter into their decision. If they are persecuted, they flee - and return later at the command of the Spirit, without fear.
- They appoint elders with prayer and fasting. This shows that they know they are not indispensable. Someone else must carry on the work, and they must be confirmed in the humbling rite of prayer and fasting.
- They return to Antioch - to report to the church. They are men under authority, like the centurion. They know their place; they know their task; they know their Lord.

Do we?

Testing God - Acts 15:1-31

It is one of the constants of the Scripture: Satan alternates his attack. Last lesson we saw the attack of persecution; this week, we shall see the attack of internal dissension - and how the church is to deal with it.

Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses." The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are." The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: "'After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' that have been known for ages. "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath." Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers. With them they sent the following letter: The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings. We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul—men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell. The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message.
(Act 15:1-31 NIV)

Testing God

In verse 10 there is a curious concept: testing God. The idea seems a little absurd to the modern mind (as if we could put God into a test tube). But the meaning in the original was clear. Let's see if we can understand it in modern terms.

Suppose that you (being possessed of far more money than sense) decide to test your relationship to your wife. Not content with having a private detective follow her about, you hire someone to attempt to seduce her - just to see if it will work, of course.

These things make for good romantic comedy - largely because such an action is absurd. When your wife finds out, she's going to be furious because you treated her as if she were a rat in a laboratory maze. In short, you have a very good chance of destroying your relationship with her by testing it.

There is the same thought here. To test God is to try out the relationship as if it were a completely impersonal thing, as if He would have no opinion on your experimentation. This is exceedingly unwise.

How we test God

You might ask, "How could a Christian test God?" Here are some ways you might want to consider:

- In this instance, the party of the Pharisees is saying, "God can't save these people without Moses." In other words, they are attempting to place their limit upon God.
- This might be because they are so confident of their own wisdom! "My wisdom and learning are so great that …" is also a form of testing God. (You will certainly test his patience with it!)
- Reducing God to a set of rules is always such a form. By reducing him to rules, you are reducing him from a Person to a source of magic. He desires a love relationship with you, not the kind of relationship you have with your automatic teller machine.

In all these instances we attempt to treat God as less than he really is. Like the man who "tries out" his wife, it produces a reaction of anger.

Why would we do this?

Most of us would not be foolish enough to attempt the experiment described above on our wife's chastity. Why, then, are we foolish enough to test God?

- One reason is familiarity. We have the image of "Me and Jesus in the telephone booth." We know he's such a buddy that he won't mind.
- Another is pure presumption. We, after all, are in charge of the relationship. God is at our call. We mistake his loving kindness for our rights.
- A third reason - particularly when we place limits upon him - is a lack of faith.
- Ultimately, the worst possible cause is arrogance. This kind of arrogance comes from looking into the non-essentials of life as if they were essential. We look at earth and ask why this should not be heaven. So we tell God that if he really loved us, he'd buy us a Mercedes.

How the church resolves disputes

There is a certain dignity to the way the dispute is resolved. By warning the others not to test God, the argument has been placed on the right plane: what does God really want us to do here? We will return to that; now, let us look at the style in which the argument is resolved.

Gentleness, not anger

Gentleness is the mark of great strength. The Chihuahua barks at the Great Dane, not the other way around. Gentleness is strength shown politely and courteously. It is indeed a great virtue, greatly ignored today.

- Gentleness is not just stupid indifference. There is no sense of indifference to the result, nor is there any sense that the content of the result should be sacrificed to politeness.
- Gentleness is also not a desire to be liked. This is not a popularity contest.

The leader speaks last

It is a curious thing. There is so much debate over who the "leader" in the church in its early days must have been. If Peter was the first Pope, he submitted here to the bishop of Jerusalem - James. But this is perfectly natural:

- Peter and Paul testify to their experiences with the Gentiles. They are more in the character of witnesses than attorneys. James testifies as to what the Scripture says. Thus we see that the truth of experience, the truth of the Scripture and the truth from the Spirit must all agree.
- As elder (bishop), James proposes the solution to the problem. His is the authority to ultimately resolve the debate, after having heard all parties fairly. Note that Peter and Paul both submit to this authority, for it is ordained of God.

Out of evil, greater good

Augustine tells us that God does not permit an evil unless he can bring from it a greater good. We see that here. The heresy proposed was an evil, the evil of legalism. From it God produced harmony in the church at Jerusalem and we also read that the Gentile Christians read the letter, and were glad.

The Nature of the Resolution

The first thing we need to see about this: how light is the burden! They did not seek to resolve all possible problems, write a manual for Christian living - they stuck to the point. They solved only the problem they needed to, so that the burden on other Christians might be as light as possible.

Indeed, it is fairly easy to trace out their reasoning. Each of the items on their list of "don'ts" relates to idol worship. Idol worship is a common (and horrible) way of testing God in this time. It says, "God, I don't trust you to handle this situation by yourself. I'm going to go over to that idol over there and hedge my bets." The parallel in marriage is, "Honey, I love you and all that, but Tandeleya is a lot cuter, so I'm going over to her for this evening's festivities - see you in the morning." If you can predict your wife's reaction to that, you can predict God's reaction to idol worship.

How, then, do these commandments relate to idol worship?

- They are not to eat food sacrificed to idols. Remember that a sacrificial animal was not, generally, totally burnt on the altar - it was cooked. Some of the meat then belonged to the priest; the rest was returned to the worshiper for celebration (no refrigeration - sacrifice a cow, throw a barbecue). Eating food sacrificed to idols gave the appearance of worshiping that idol.
- They are to abstain from blood. Some hold this means they are not to commit murder (and thus kill what was made in the image of God - remember how the blood of Abel cried out from the ground?). Others see in this a reference to pagan rites in which blood played a prominent part.
- The are not to eat the meat of strangled animals. This appears to be a ritual prohibition copied from the Jewish law. It is also an injunction against animal cruelty - and again there may be some pagan ritual involved here. We see that even today in some cults.
- They are to refrain from sexual immorality - the most common form of which was temple prostitution. They might not have been sufficiently instructed in the Gospel to see the purity of marriage, but at least they should not commit adultery and support an idol's temple with it.

All these commandments are taken from the Jewish Law; indeed, they were selected, it would seem, as those which fit the occasion. This also goes some way to placating the party of the Pharisees - who could at least say, "Well, we had it partly right!"

The essence of the solution

It is tempting to conclude that "the Law" - any form of rules and regulations - is evil. This is not so. In Romans 14 we are taught that one who needs such rules and regulations is to be regarded as a weaker brother, and respected as such. We are to honor those regulations so that we do not burn out a brother's conscience.

The greater good here, however, is this: these other Christians were purified by faith, as we are. They therefore stand equal before God, Whatever burden we lay on them must be only of the most needful type. Christ never rose up in anger at prostitutes and tax collectors - only those who tested God by turning his temple into a market.

Lessons for the Christian

- All of us are sinners - weak under the Law, strong in Christ alone. Therefore, lay no unnecessary burden upon your brother in the form of Law.
- It is not for us, the weak, to test the Omnipotent. The great sin of testing is idolatry - the worship of things rather than the creator.
- The church is in "the reconciliation business." In its arguments, it is to reconcile as we have been shown here. We are to reconcile with the Scriptures, by the Spirit, and in the authority of the church.

On Failure - Acts 15:35 - 16:5

Do you know why people put on masks when they come to church? It's because we fear failure. We don't want to fail; we don't want others to think that we have failed. But consider: dealing with failure - especially the failure we all have called sin - is one of God's principal concerns. We see the beginning of it here:

But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord. Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. He came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was a Jewess and a believer, but whose father was a Greek. The brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers. (Act 15:35-16:5 NIV)

Preliminary: the definition of failure

What is failure? Many of us define it in an emotional sense - we did not get what we wanted. But I submit that the real definition is more complex:

- First, we must have a goal, and it must be a good one. It must be something which we "should" do or have. For the Christian, we are given goals - we are told to preach the Gospel and to make disciples, to attain personal holiness. But sometimes the goal is the problem, for we do not have a good one.
  - Sometimes the goal we set is a wrong goal. We set our eyes on things of this world, material things. We set our eyes on personal goals, such as marrying a good looking woman regardless of her character. We decide that we should be arrogant. These things, when achieved, fail to satisfy because they are the wrong goals.
  - Sometimes we fail to accept the good and righteous goals God gives us. We will not present our bodies as living sacrifice, for example.
- Next, we must know what that goal truly is.
  - It should not be too fuzzy ("I want to be happy.") Rather, it should be something that we can recognize clearly.
  - It should not be too crisp, either. Things like "I'm going to marry that woman on thus and such a date" may cause failure simply because we did not give God the room to work his plan in our lives.
  - Sometimes, however, God does not reveal *his* goals for our lives. In such an instance, the goal is simplified: we must trust him.
- Finally, failure consists then in not meeting such a goal. We fail in many ways in meeting such a goal, and it is convenient to be able to classify the causes of our failures. Consider, for example, a convoy of ships trying to deliver goods from New York to London:

- If something is wrong with an individual ship, it may sink. It may collide with other ships. So it is with us; if one of us is out of control or hurting, all of us may be damaged by it, and be prevented from reaching our goal.
- Even if the ships are operating correctly, failure to keep order in the convoy will cause collisions and sinkings. So, to avoid failure, we need to keep not only ourselves in right order, but also our relations with others.
- And finally, if the convoy is not pointed in the right direction, the convoy fails. If the goal we have is not one God wants for us, the failure is inevitable.

All this is preliminary. The real question is not, "what is failure?" The real question is, "what are we going to do about it?"

Failure in Others

It so often comes as a surprise that other people fail us. We expect so much; we see how easily the failure in others comes about; so we feel completely let down and disappointed. The Scripture provides us warning about this, however:

- Even Christ was betrayed, by Judas. He was denied by his disciples. And he knew it would happen.
- The church is warned to expect failure in its midst. Remember the parable of the wheat and the tares?

We deal differently with failure in others

Chrysostom, commenting on this passage, says "the gifts are diverse." God in his wisdom saw fit to make Barnabas a man with the gift of encouragement but Paul without. The wisdom of this differing gift is easily seen.

- Paul, the man with the driving energy, sees the work to be done. So God has raised up one for whom the work is paramount, and nothing will get in its way.
- Barnabas, the son of encouragement, considers the person to be paramount.

So it is that both the work and the person are provided for. Paul still holds a high opinion of Barnabas; the argument is sharp but the parting is friendly.

There is a lesson in this for the church. Some of us cannot deal well with failure. But God will raise up those who can, and they will deal with it. So when we fail, we should expect some Christians to dispense with us; others to uphold us.

We are not consistent in dealing with failure

Circumstances change; people change; time passes. Paul does not consistently throw away people like this:

- Onesimus was a runaway slave - a criminal in his time. Yet Paul sends him back to Philemon, begging Philemon to forgive and restore.[75]
- Later, Paul will specifically ask for Mark to join him, because he is so useful.[76]

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[75] Philemon 10-19
[76] 2 Timothy 4:11

So we see that today's failure maybe tomorrow's success. It is not too much of a stretch of imagination to think that Mark was redeemed because of the care of Barnabas and the lessons learned in failure.

We should deal with failure in God's way

So how does God teach us to deal with the failures of others?

- We are commanded to withhold judgment.[77]
- In our forgiveness, we are to be unlimited (as God is).[78]
- We are to think of ourselves as Christ's ambassadors, the ambassadors of reconciliation.[79]

Failure in Ourselves

Many of us have much greater difficulty in dealing with our own failures than in dealing with the failures of others. This is good. It means that our own failures have at least had the beneficial effect of making us more forgiving, less judgmental and more inclined to reconciliation than otherwise would be the case. So we need, therefore, to deal with our own failures.

Failure is inevitable with human beings

Paul tells us of the struggle of the two natures.[80] We see that our sinful nature and our spiritual, God-filled nature are in conflict, and that it is inevitable that we will fail - even the greatest of us.

We fail in different ways. Some through the flesh; some through the temptations of the world; some - the most deadly way of all - through pride. My failures are not the same as yours - but they are real none the less. The question is not, "Will I fail?" The question is, "What should I do about it?"

Wrong Ways

We have a number of human ways to deal with failure. Here are just a few:

- Anger. Jonah was angry because - after having predicted doom for Ninevah - the Ninevites repented. Just like he thought! Just like God to do a thing like that![81] So he reacted with anger, and wanted to die.
- Sometimes we react with panic - and stop everything. We see a leak in the side of the ship, and running panicking to the bridge. A good captain will then send someone down below to plug the leak - and sail on.
- Sometimes we give up. We just quit. But listen to a little story - a true one:

Imagine, how easy it would have been for this young man to have bowed his head and given up. He failed in business in '31, he was defeated for the legislature in '32, he was elected to the legislature in '34. His sweetheart died in '35, he had a nervous breakdown in '36, he was defeated for speaker in '38, he was defeated for election in '40, he was defeated for Congress in '43, he was elected to Congress in '46, defeated for Congress in '48, defeated for Senate in '50, defeated for vice president in '56 and for Senate in

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[77] Matthew 7:1
[78] Matthew 18:21-22
[79] 2 Corinthians 5:13-21
[80] Romans 7:18-25
[81] Jonah 4:1-11

'58. But fortunately he was elected president in 1860. His name was Abraham Lincoln. He proves that failure need not be permanent.

The Right Way

Psalm 51 gives us the eternal model to deal with failure:

- Confession - admitting that we have failed, and asking God's help.
- Repentance - turning from the things that caused our failure
- Restoration - going back to the task
- Service - doing what God wants us to do.

Peter is the great example of this. He denied his Lord - but led the church. In all these things, the Christian has one great weapon: prayer. Our greatest cause of failure is that we will not commit our ways to the Lord, and lean on him for strength.

How God Deals with Failure

God's righteousness demands perfection; his love redeems failure. Let us therefore examine the methods of God in dealing with human frailty.

Prevention

God first attempts to prevent failure;

- He warns us to "count the cost" before undertaking anything.[82] By doing this, he lets us know what we should expect in his service.
- We are directed to pray, "lead us not into temptation." There's a reason for that!
- Our greatest resource for prevention is the Scripture, for in it we find God's warnings and his guidance, all for our profit.

Correction

If the prevention fails, correction must follow. We see again how God works:

- We see the patience of God in that he corrects his people repeatedly. It is not just "once only" but over and over again.[83]
- We, the imitators of Christ, must do likewise.[84] In other words, God has provided the church as a source of correction so that we might be turned from our sins to our successes.
- Indeed, God has empowered the church with church discipline, so that the correction may have teeth in it.

God turns evil to good

We see this clearly here. From one team of evangelists he now has two! Indeed, we know from church history that these two teams both worked well, each suited to its own mission field. God has given us other examples, as well:

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[82] Luke 14:28-35
[83] 2 Chronicles 36:15
[84] James 5:20

- In the parable of the Prodigal Son,[85] we see that the Father (God) *runs* to greet his lost son. From the depravity of feeding pigs to the feast at the Father's house, failure turns to success - with God.
- Paul himself is an example of just such a redemption.[86]

Ultimately, God deals with our failures by his sacrifice

Does it seem that God is unfair? Indeed, He is! Remember that Christ went to the Cross not to redeem the righteous (the successful) but the unrighteous (the failures). Recall the parable of the vineyard.[87] Not everyone worked a full day, but all were paid for it. God takes the late and the lazy and rewards them in the kingdom. It is his generosity, not our failure, that counts.

We have not yet seen the fulfillment of all his redemption. But the time is coming:

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.
(Rev 12:10-11 NIV)

His part - the blood. Our part - the testimony of what He has done for us. So shall we overcome.

Summary

I can think of no better way to put it than this story. It happened in the days when twenty-five cents would buy you a decent meal, but it is still timely today:

A beggar stopped a lawyer on the street in a large southern city and asked him for a quarter. Taking a long, hard look into the man's unshaven face, the attorney asked, "Don't I know you from somewhere?" "You should," came the reply. "I'm your former classmate. Remember, second floor, old Main Hall?" "Why Sam, of course I know you!" Without further question the lawyer wrote a check for $100. "Here, take this and get a new start. I don't care what's happened in the past, it's the future that counts." And with that he hurried on. Tears welled up in the man's eyes as he walked to a bank nearby. Stopping at the door, he saw through the glass well-dressed tellers and the spotlessly clean interior. Then he looked at his filthy rags. "They won't take this from me. They'll swear that I forged it," he muttered as he turned away.

The next day the two men met again. "Why Sam, what did you do with my check? Gamble it away? Drink it up?" "No," said the beggar as he pulled it out of his dirty shirt pocket and told why he hadn't cashed it. "Listen, friend," said the lawyer. "What makes that check good is not your clothes or appearance, but my signature. Go on, cash it!"

The promises of the Lord do not depend upon our righteousness, nor our lack of trouble. They depend upon the name of the Lord, which cannot fail. It may be that we do not cash the check - but the check is good nonetheless. Bring your failures to the Lord; he will redeem.

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[85] Luke 15:12-24
[86] 1 Timothy 1:12-17
[87] Matthew 20:1-16

On Hospitality - Acts 16:6-15

It is a rare thing in our day to hear a sermon or lesson on the subject of hospitality. It is not mentioned too frequently in the Scriptures - largely because all took it for granted that righteousness included hospitality. We see such an instance here, and it gives us a chance to examine the virtue of hospitality.

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day on to Neapolis. From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days. On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.
(Act 16:6-15 NIV)

God's Will

One of the most frequent of questions for the new Christian is this: "How do I really know God's will in my life?" There are a number of answers to this:

- One predominant way is in the doctrine commonly held by Christians. It must be noted that among those who believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, the basic doctrines are almost always the same.
- A second method is by obedience to teaching and preaching. Notice that I said "obedience" - not dispute. By attempting to obey, you will quickly run into God's correction of your teacher's errors. (It would be wise, when you do, to point them out).
- Sometimes God simply opens doors. Note the phrase here, "sailed straight to Samothrace." No one, in the ancient world, would do this unless the wind was absolutely set in that direction. Otherwise, you would hug the coastline for navigational purposes. This is God's confirmation of the vision.
- Rarely, but not never, does God speak in visions. If you are constantly visited by visions I would question their source. But the Macedonian call is genuine enough. When God whispers in the darkness, shout it from the housetops.
- Another, and neglected, way is this: by our care for others. This is simply another form of obedience. Recall that Abraham[88] entertained guests who brought him the word of the Lord. What's really interesting is that he was sitting by the opening of his tent, as if waiting for them. He expected visitors, and welcomed them gladly, and by so doing learned God's will.

That form of hospitality we shall study in this lesson.

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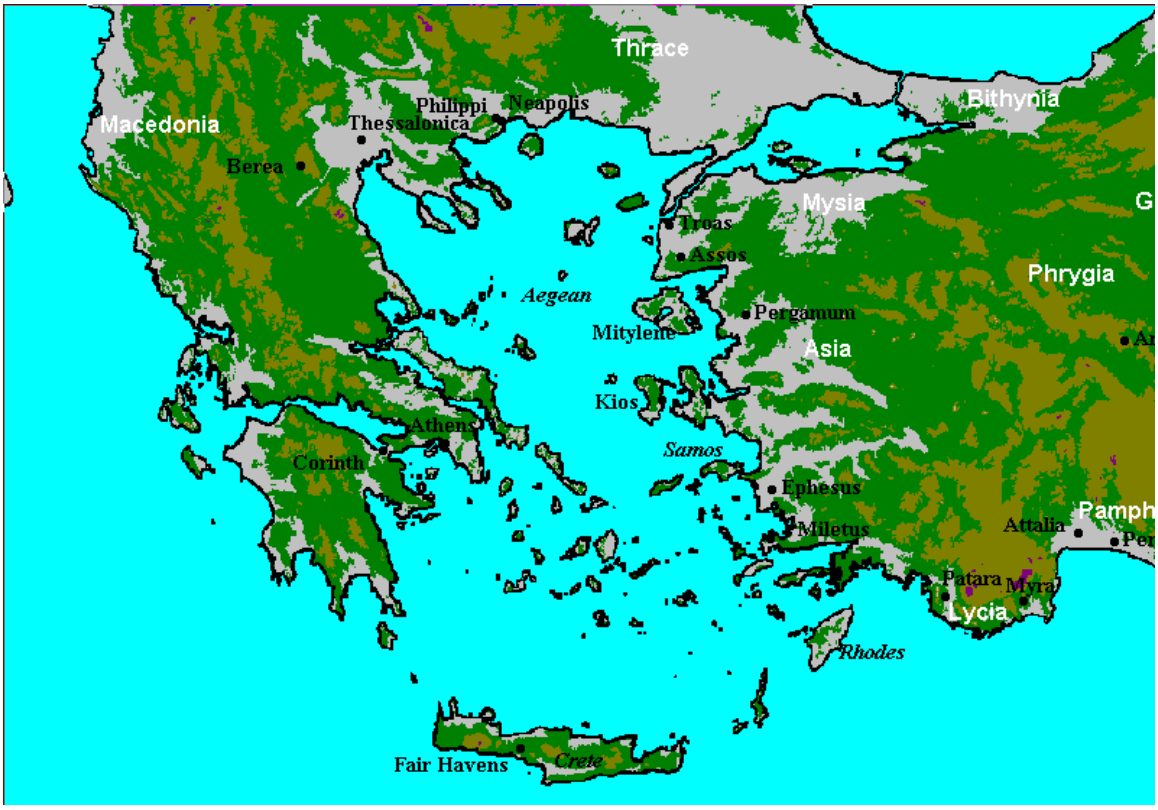
[88] Genesis 18:1-15

Philippi

To understand the story correctly, we must know a few things about the ancient world, and in particular the city of Philippi.

- Philippi is a Roman Colony. That means that it was founded and populated by the invading Romans. The settlers would usually be retired soldiers and their families. Hence, this was not really a Greek city at all. It was, however, a key connection point in the Empire (see the map below, with particular attention to the topography.



Paul and Silas went down by the river to meet with those who would be praying. This tells us that there was no synagogue in that city, for the rabbinical law commanded a prayer meeting on the Sabbath where there was no synagogue. This also tells us that the number of Jews was very small, for it takes only ten adult male Jews to form a synagogue.

Lydia, the "seller of purple"

It is interesting to see the difference of view between ancient and modern scholars concerning this woman. Barclay, writing in the 20th century, considers her to be of high estate. She sells this rare cloth to the nobility (the process for making this cloth was very tedious, and the cloth very expensive). So she would be a rich woman, and thus in Barclay's view a prominent member of society. Not so Chrysostom. He sees her (living in the 5th century) as being a tradeswoman, one who must work with her hands, and therefore (while rich) not socially accepted in upper society.

One thing is certain: her heart has been prepared for this coming. We often forget that God is at work. In any group there are those whom God has prepared for his message. Lydia is one such, here.

Lydia persuades them

There is a curious fact here. Lydia goes to the trouble of persuading Paul and his companions to stay at her house. Today we might think that it would be the other way around; the invitation would be sufficient. Indeed, when our Lord encounters Zacchaeus he announces that he will be going to his house. It's as if the guest is doing the host a favor! Lydia might have seen it that way. Her argument - "if you consider me a believer" - points to two very noble attitudes which we would do well to emulate today:

- First, it is an honor to host a guest. This is particularly true if that guest is one whom God has appointed to the ministry.
- Next, we are "saved to serve." So many Christians kick back and relax after their salvation! We could take a lesson from this one.

Why did they need persuasion?

If Lydia's persuasion is odd to our ears, how much more difficult is it to understand why Paul and his companions would need it! We must remember that there are no hotels or inns in these days, other than those that would be associated in most minds with prostitution. It was not uncommon for a traveler to "camp out" in the city - much like our homeless today. This makes it even more difficult to understand. Why did they need persuasion?

- Our Lord instructs his travelers to "see who is worthy."[89] She's convincing them of that.
- It may simply that they wanted to be sure that she was sincere, not just muttering polite mumblings.

Hospitality

It is interesting to note that the ancient laws of the church[90] absolutely forbade a priest from conducting a feast in a church building. (It's the equivalent of forbidding pot luck suppers in the fellowship hall today). The reason, I suspect, is that some priests were abusing the practice to fatten their bellies at the expense of the devout. But there is an exception: hospitality to strangers and travelers. If a visiting speaker or wandering monk arrived, such a feast could be celebrated in the church itself. This speaks much for the virtue of hospitality.

Ancient Jewish Law

The Law of Moses was quite explicit. Hospitality was a sacred obligation, and there are many examples of it. Perhaps the greatest was King David, on the run from Absalom. Ittai, the Gittite, is with him as a stranger - so David suggest that he might find better hospitality with Absalom. So seriously did David take his obligation to hospitality that he would add strength to his rebellious son's cause with it. Why was this so strong a command?

- The ancient Jew was reminded that he was "a stranger in a strange land" as he was in Egypt. This memory - call it a family tradition, if you will - was very strong with them.[91]

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[89] Luke 10:8
[90] The Canons of Carthage, also Canons of Hippo.
[91] Exodus 23:9

- There is also a sense of family involved here. If you do something for my family, you do it for me. As the children of God, the Jew would recognize that God rewarded those who were good to his children.[92]

Hospitality the mark of a mature Christian

Hospitality is one of the marks of the mature Christian. We can see this in a couple of places:

- One of the qualifications for an elder was that he would be given to hospitality.[93]
- A more frequent example would be given by widows. Only those who were known to be good Christians were to be supported by the church - and one test of such was hospitality.[94]

The character of hospitality

It is important for us to remember that hospitality must be cheerfully given. It is not something to be forced upon someone, nor offered in the hope that the invitation will be declined. Peter tells us[95] that we are to offer hospitality "without grumbling." It's an interesting passage in two respects:

- First, the word he uses for hospitality is unusual. It literally means, "love of strangers."
- The warning is given in the context of the end times and the swift return of Jesus Christ. Perhaps he is warning us that in the last days persecution will come, and Christians will need such hospitality. Or perhaps it is just a warning that when our Lord returns, our hospitality will be brought to light.

More than this, we are specifically cautioned to welcome those who are engaged in God's work.[96] Those who labor full time for the Lord are to be welcomed as a sign of favor upon the house.

The warnings of Christ

It is interesting that Peter places his warning in the context of end times. It brings us to the idea that hospitality has another side - the spiritual side.

- We are explicitly taught that by providing hospitality we may entertain the angels themselves without being aware of it.[97]
- More than that, we should learn the lesson of the Old Testament. As the ancient Jew was a "stranger in a strange land," we walk a similar path. "This world is not my home, I'm just passing through." Hospitality eases that passage for many. By providing hospitality we proclaim, in a very practical sense, that we are pilgrims, not permanent residents.
- Finally, there is the explicit warning of Jesus himself. In Matthew 25:31-46 our Lord explicitly declares that our hospitality is one of the aspects of our Christian walk which will be judged on the last day.

Consider it well, Christian. When the Son of Man returns, what will you tell him about the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the down and out? Your doctrine may be sound, but if it has no effect upon your life, He will know it. "By their fruits you will know them," says our Lord. What does your hospitality say about you?

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[92] Proverbs 19:17
[93] 1 Timothy 3:2
[94] 1 Timothy 5:10
[95] 1 Peter 4:9
[96] 3 John 1:8
[97] Hebrews 13:2

The Midnight View - Acts 16:16-40

Most of us spend our days in a rush. We seldom have the chance to stop and consider things from an eternal perspective. It is a pity, for in so doing we may prepare ourselves for what God can do with us. Paul and Silas evidently had a different view, as we shall see here at Philippi:

Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. This girl followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so troubled that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her. When the owners of the slave girl realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice." The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family. When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order: "Release those men." The jailer told Paul, "The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in peace." But Paul said to the officers: "They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out." The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed. They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city. After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and encouraged them. Then they left.
(Act 16:16-40 NIV)

The High Calling

Little noticed in this passage, and seldom commented upon today, is an interesting name of God - the phrase "Most High God." It is almost always worth taking the time to examine the titles of God, for they teach us much. This title is quite unusual:

- In the New Testament, it is used - exclusively - by the demons. It is the name by which the demons doomed to hell refer to God Almighty.

- Excluding a few references in the Psalms, it occurs twice in the Old Testament. One such is in Daniel - where it is the name by which God reveals himself to Nebuchadnezzar.
- The other - where it is rendered "God Most High" is with Melchizedek![98]

It is, in short, the name by which God reveals himself to the powers of this world. And it is with the powers of this world, and the suffering they cause, that we must deal.

Why did the demon speak this way?

It might seem, at first glance, that it would have been more damaging for the demon to have pronounced these men to be some sort of horror. But we must remember that Satan cannot divide his kingdom, and that he is the father of all liars.

- One very good reason to proclaim Paul and Silas this way is to enhance the credibility of the demon. Satan may even resort to telling the truth - if it will make it easier to pass a lie later on.
- Another reason is quite simple: terror. One thing is quite clear about these demons - they are terrified of the living God.
- A third reason is this: it may be that Satan wished to tempt Paul into an alliance with this demon possessed girl, and thus compromise his witness.

Why Christ - and Christians - reject such alliances

It might seem convenient at first to have your worst enemy testify on your behalf. But surely we should be wary about that!

- Remember that those who dabble in the occult and magic are in it for one reason: personal gain. They want to manipulate the things of the spirit for their personal benefit. If you will, it is spiritual greed. If only for the sake of those who could be saved, we should reject such an alliance.
- It may be clear to us that there is evil and light. But it is not clear to the world, and it is our duty to make it clear. We must not let error so intermingle with truth that the world cannot separate them.
- Finally - if you need anything more - it is an alliance with Satan himself. Ride the horse if you must, but never ride the tiger. For when you wish to dismount, the tiger will still be hungry.

It is interesting here that the demon referred to has a name - "python" - in the Greek. Perhaps it is just a coincidence (the translators do not so render the word literally in any major translation) but we should beware the python squeezing out the truth.

How Paul deals with the situation

Paul's conduct here is an example for us.

- He refuses to become entangled with the demon; he rejects the testimony of the Father of Lies.
- Eventually, however, he becomes so troubled - the Greek can also be translated "grieved" - that he must do something.
- Even at that, you can see the patience with which he has approached the problem.

Ultimately, however, the miraculous escalates the warfare! Satan, confronted with the power of God, reacts. (Those of us who pray for the ability to do miracles might well study this passage and ask if we really wanted it that much.)

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[98] Genesis 14:18-22

The power of this world

You might think that the girl's owners would be impressed with the miracle. It is not so - the dollar is mightier than the miraculous in their minds. Look at the effect this has!

- They have thrown away - practically without thinking - eternal life and salvation *after* they have lost the revenue from the girl!
- So bad is their condition that they must resort to lies to stir the mob. Emotions have ruled over sense - but is it not the way of the world that anger should triumph over sense?

Suffering for the Name

Christians often wonder - and ask their teachers - why God permits suffering in this world. The problem is not a trivial one. This teacher begs your indulgence that he might answer a simpler one: how God uses suffering.

- Our Lord himself, Jesus Christ, suffered. He suffered for our sake; producing our eternal salvation. Is it too much to ask that we suffer in return?
- God frequently uses suffering to shape an instrument to a task. Tribulation creates patient endurance (perseverance).[99]

The Christian's reaction to suffering

"That's all well for Jesus," you might reply, "but I'm the one being asked to suffer now." True enough. Well, then, you may as well learn to suffer in the proper style:

- Do not yield to the temptation to react in Satan's way. Do not overcome evil with evil, but overcome evil with good.[100]
- Do not, if possible, suffer alone. Even Job had comforters of a sort. We are all one body, and we should suffer together.[101] Paul had Silas.
- Do not compromise.[102] Satan will certainly offer you relief from suffering (or what appears like it) in return for joining him.
- Remember our hope in Jesus Christ. Even if you die from this suffering, you will rise again.

One of the wisest of Christians put it this way:

VERY soon your life here will end; consider, then, what may be in store for you elsewhere. Today we live; tomorrow we die and are quickly forgotten. Oh, the dullness and hardness of a heart which looks only to the present instead of preparing for that which is to come!

Therefore, in every deed and every thought, act as though you were to die this very day. If you had a good conscience you would not fear death very much. It is better to avoid sin than to fear death. If you are not prepared today, how will you be prepared tomorrow? Tomorrow is an uncertain day; how do you know you will have a tomorrow?

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[99] Romans 5:4
[100] 1 Peter 3:9
[101] 1 Corinthians 12:26
[102] Job 36:21

What good is it to live a long life when we amend that life so little? Indeed, a long life does not always benefit us, but on the contrary, frequently adds to our guilt. Would that in this world we had lived well throughout one single day. Many count up the years they have spent in religion but find their lives made little holier. If it is so terrifying to die, it is nevertheless possible that to live longer is more dangerous. Blessed is he who keeps the moment of death ever before his eyes and prepares for it every day.

If you have ever seen a man die, remember that you, too, must go the same way. In the morning consider that you may not live till evening, and when evening comes do not dare to promise yourself the dawn. Be always ready, therefore, and so live that death will never take you unprepared. Many die suddenly and unexpectedly, for in the unexpected hour the Son of God will come. When that last moment arrives you will begin to have a quite different opinion of the life that is now entirely past and you will regret very much that you were so careless and remiss.

How happy and prudent is he who tries now in life to be what he wants to be found in death. Perfect contempt of the world, a lively desire to advance in virtue, a love for discipline, the works of penance, readiness to obey, self-denial, and the endurance of every hardship for the love of Christ, these will give a man great expectations of a happy death.[103]

Paul's example

We can readily see these things in Paul's example. Not just in his midnight song; witness his kindness to the jailer:

- By his silence he could have let the man kill himself - and then went on his way, escaping. Rather, he denies himself that exit, and saves the man's life.
- In front of the magistrates the next day - when things are going all Paul's way - he makes no accusation, and thus spares the man from punishment.

In this, Paul turns down the weapons of evil, and triumphs over them using the weapons of righteousness.

Triumph Through Suffering

Who's really winning here?

Does it not strike you as odd that Paul and Silas are "singing in the midnight hour?" Just who is victorious here?

- The jailer is commanded to put them in "the inner cell" - the safest place. Then he fastens them in hand and foot. The greater the restraint, the greater the miracle.
- The prisoners' reaction? They have been counted worthy to suffer, and great things are happening for God's kingdom. They sing praise to him!
- The jailer shows us that he has seen this attitude. When the earthquake hits, and then he finds no one missing, his feeling is not relief - but awe.
- Then God turns an enemy to a friend. The jailer is not saved and then dismissed; the jailer is "saved to serve." Not only does he wash their wounds, but he serves them a meal.

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[103] Thomas à Kempis, Imitation of Christ, I-23

Paul, leaving in triumph

There are some points of style for those who would wish to use righteousness to triumph over evil.

- Paul makes no point of his trial or Roman citizenship - until after the punishment has been delivered. He turns suffering to triumph in this way.

Many years ago, while taking my MBA, I took a course in business law. There were ten students in the course. The professor announced that he would give one "A", two "B's", three "C's" and four "D's." (Evidently his way of weeding out the unfit.) As it happened, I got the "A."[104] As a "C" or "D" meant dropping out of the school for most of these students (who were in their first semester) I felt this arbitrary and unfair. I took the matter to the Dean of the college, who took appropriate action. The reason he took me seriously was this: I had put up with this course, endured it and triumphed - and I was complaining on behalf of the others. The same thing likely happened here. Can you imagine how the authorities felt? They weren't really impressed with the miraculous - but they did not want to get into trouble. Paul took that and no doubt put the fledgling church in good graces with the authorities.

- Ever courteous, Paul does not simply leave. He stops at Lydia's first. This is to reassure her, and the brethren, of his safety, and to provide his blessing as he goes.

Lessons for Us

All well and good, teacher, but what shall we do?

The midnight view

We must learn to cultivate the "midnight view." Paul and Silas, in jail at midnight, were singing praises to God. Why? Let's look at it from their point of view:

- The enemy is in a panic - he has resorted to mob violence and emotions. When cooler heads prevail, how great their advantage will be!
- As the miracle shows, God is clearly on the march in this town. That alone is cause for rejoicing.
- In particular, they have been accounted worthy to suffer for the Name. It is an honor, and they receive it like a Medal of Honor winner.

The world would call their situation bleak. God shows them the edge of triumph.

The power of paradox

In all things, God shows us the power of paradox. That which we think certain, he calls a vapor. That which we think weak, he uses to overwhelm us.

- We see here the model of grace. The bound (Paul and Silas), are the channels of grace to the unbound (the jailer), and so release the true bonds of sin from this man and his family.
- In this we see that God's weakness and foolishness are stronger than anything man can devise. This has not changed since.
- In our suffering it is important that we see an occasion that God might be exalted. If we humble ourselves and lift him up, he will exalt us. It is a paradox.

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[104] This is the entire extent of my accomplishments in the field of law.

The matter is one of point of view. Twilla Paris once sang of "forever eyes" - the eyes through which one sees eternity. The plight of Paul and Silas is either miserable or wonderful - depending upon which eyes you use.

The Incarnation - Acts 17

Paul, in our lesson today, brings his first noted message to the Greek world. Up until this time his efforts have always started with the local synagogue. Now he is in Athens, the home of Greek philosophy, and his approach changes. In that change we will see some subtle differences of approach, and the revealing of Jesus as the Incarnation of God.

When they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ," he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women. But the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other brothers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go. As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men. When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, they went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up. The brothers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. The men who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible. While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.) Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. "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. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. "For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he

commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead." When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." At that, Paul left the Council. A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.
(Act 17:1-34 NIV)

Jews and Gentiles

It is instructive to see how Paul approaches these philosophical people, by way of comparison to the Jews. We so often assume that the way to speak about Christ is to start by opening the Bible. This Paul often does when speaking to the Jews - but not to the Greeks.

Appeal to what they know

In the early section of this chapter Paul is speaking to the Jews. In his speaking to them, he appeals to them this way:

- First, that the Resurrection was prophesied by the Old Testament - thus tying them back to the truth they know.
- Next, that Jesus was in fact the promised Messiah - again going back to the Old Testament.
- Note that he uses no miracles in these cities. His appeal is to the things they know, not to a sense of wonder.

To the Greeks as well he appeals to what they know - and what they care about:

- These are a people who are full of intellectual curiosity - and the intellectual power of the Gospel is supreme.
- They are religious in a sense - and obviously hunting for the right answer amongst the gods.
- Paul goes so far as to quote one of their own poets - to show them that the truth he is bringing is the completion of the truth they themselves have discovered, and the solution to its many problems.

But whether appealing to prophecy or intellect, one fact is central: the Resurrection.

More pain from the Jews

It is fascinating to observe that in the earliest days of the church the Apostles suffered far more from the Jews than from the Gentiles. Indeed, it was often Roman justice that restrained the Jews from mob violence. It is very puzzling. God has spent over two thousand years hammering into the Jews just what kind of God he is, and when he arrives, they reject him.

- The rejection is that of works rejecting faith. The Jew is stuck on the rules and regulations, and the unbridled mercy of God just doesn't fit into their preconceived notions.[105]
- But in all this, as throughout the history of the Old Testament, there is a faithful remnant of the people of Israel.[106] These have watched and prayed, and they rejoiced to see the Messiah's coming. Who are these people? The Bereans give us the example here, those who diligently searched the Scriptures were the ones most likely to accept their Lord.

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[105] Romans 9:30-33
[106] Romans 11:1-6

- Ultimately, however, God takes this rejection by the Jews - an evil thing - and turns it into a greater good, the salvation of the Gentiles.[107]

Many who read Paul's writing on this subject hold that the time for the conversion of the Jews is not yet arrived - but that when it does, it will herald the return of the Christ in glory.

Care of the church for its leaders

We cannot pass this passage by - though it seems an incidental point - without noting the care that even the youngest of the church have for the leaders in the church. This is evidence of true worship for God, for it shows concern for the things of God. We see two examples here:

- Jason is a newly minted Christian - but he puts up bail for Paul and Silas, then takes the loss to himself and sends them out of town quickly. Even the newest Christian can learn to sacrifice.
- The Bereans are another example. They keep Timothy and Silas, so that they might learn more. Paul they send on his way, to keep him out of trouble.

In both of these we see the echo of Christ - those willing to sacrifice for the kingdom of God.

The Revelation of God - to the Greeks

Paul reveals God to the Greeks in terms they would understand. We may amplify this a bit, trusting that Luke only gave us the highlights of Paul's speech before the Areopagus.

God, the Creator

His first point is simple, and very deep. God is to be seen as the creator of all things:

- He needs nothing from man - for He is self-existent, the uncaused cause.
- He is the one who created all things.
- He is Lord of the Universe - not a creator who wound up the universe and set it spinning in space, but its active ruler.
- He is not only active ruler, but active sustainer. Why should gravity work tomorrow the way it does today? Only because the sustainer of the universe never changes.
- His rule is so minute that he determines the times and events of men's existence.

This is an awesome beginning. If Paul stopped here he would have had their nodding attention - but no change in their lives, just in their concepts.

God's relationship with man

So many today are willing to concede the existence of God - but not the God who cares about man. The uncaring God who set the worlds and stars in motion is just fine, but we want nothing to do with a God who would want a relationship to man. Paul corrects that notion quickly:

- To repeat, God *needs* nothing from man - but that does not mean that He *wants* nothing from man.
- Indeed, Paul tells us, his set purpose is that all men would seek him out. So it is that we search after meaning in our lives.
- But it is not sufficient just to solve the intellectual puzzles of life. We must not only seek him in our minds, but reach out to him - in our actions.

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[107] Romans 11:11-15

- God is said here to be the source of life itself. Without him, life - spiritual or biological - does not exist.
- Indeed, we not only live in him, we have our being in him. We borrow from God the very idea of existence itself.
- Because of all this, he is not a distant God, hard to understand or reach. He is said to be "near us." But how?

The Incarnation

How can God be said to be both the cosmic creator and "near to us?" The ultimate answer to this is in the Incarnation - the coming of Jesus, the Christ. Is he near to us?

- He became a man like us, so that we might become like him - children of God (even their poet knew it). As a human, he was very near to us indeed. The relationship is like a circle; he becomes human that we might become like God. In him we live, the echo of the Incarnation.
- The God who controls the times and events of history inserts the ultimate intellectual answer to the meaning of life - The Word. As the man Jesus touches like any other man, the Word Jesus reaches to the depths of the mind and beyond.
- And is God superior to all things, Lord of Creation? Though humble even to the point of death, He rises from the grave - Lord over even death.

What Shall We Do?

All of intellectual debate is useless unless translated into action. Paul shows us here what we should do:

- *Recognize* God for who he is - creator and Lord, sustainer and lover of our souls.
- *Realize* that the time of ignorance is over - the Word has come, and the choice cannot be avoided.
- *Repent* - and note that Paul uses the word "all" in regard to that - so that we may draw closer to him, reaching out to him.

The Judgment

Paul ends his argument with a curious argument - that the Resurrection implies the coming judgment. We might expand upon it this way:

- Christ, as the perfect man, is fit to judge, and no one else is. Therefore God has accorded judgment to him.
- He was dead - and Lord; therefore he is Lord of the dead. He is alive - and Lord; therefore he is Lord of the living.[108]
- The keys of death and hell are his; therefore he has the power of judgment.

The early church argued (as perhaps Paul did here) that the bodily resurrection of the dead was absolutely a requirement for the judgment. Think of it this way: if judgment is to be passed, must not the accused be in court to defend himself? Then turn it around: you will be raised at the last day - to face judgment, heaven or hell, reward or damnation. The results of that day for you depend upon your dealing with the Lord of Judgment now.

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[108] Romans 14:8-9

The Tent Maker - Acts 18:1-17

The city of Corinth had an evil reputation in ancient times. Located on an isthmus, it joined the two halves with a skid-way over the land over which boats were hauled. It was thus a meeting place of many cultures. It also was the home of the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of sex. Each night over a thousand priestesses went into the city as temple prostitutes. So evil was the reputation of the place that in ancient plays when a drunken, immoral character was called for, the stereotype used was the Corinthian. We see here how Paul establishes himself in this wicked place, and the church turns it upside down for God.

After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. But when the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized. 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." So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God. While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him into court. "This man," they charged, "is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law." Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to the Jews, "If you Jews were making a complaint about some misdemeanor or serious crime, it would be reasonable for me to listen to you. But since it involves questions about words and names and your own law—settle the matter yourselves. I will not be a judge of such things." So he had them ejected from the court. Then they all turned on Sosthenes the synagogue ruler and beat him in front of the court. But Gallio showed no concern whatever.
(Act 18:1-17 NIV)

The Tent Maker

The Christian today often hears of a "tent making missionary" - one who provides his own support, working at a trade to support himself. Indeed, in Islamic countries, this is often the only kind of missionary who can legally enter the country. It sometimes causes dissension in the church, for there are those who claim that a minister should be a tent maker. Benjamin Harrison (the president) once remarked that it was a disgrace to any Christian Church to hire a paid minister. To understand this more fully, we must see that both the tent maker and the paid minister are both ancient concepts.

Two models

The Jew of this time - and certainly Paul - would have understood two different models of support for those engaged in full time service to the Lord:

- First, the priest of ancient Israel was to be supported. Detailed instructions for his support were provided. Indeed, a sign of restoration was that the priests were provided for as the Law

specified.[109] The priest had no choice about service - it was hereditary. The people had no choice about supporting him.

- Contrasted to that was the example of the rabbi. It was considered a mark of piety to support yourself entirely while still performing the duties of a rabbi. Paul himself expressed a similar thought[110] - that he "did not want to be a burden." We can certainly understand that idea.

Interestingly, if a rabbi was not able to support himself - for example, due to age - it was considered a mark of piety for a Jew to support him. Paul mentions that this was done for him at Corinth.[111] This was subject to abuse. It often happened that a husband would leave his estate to the synagogue, with the proviso that his widow be provided for during her lifetime. The rabbi who abused this - who "devoured widow's houses" was severely condemned by our Lord.[112] Please note too that becoming a rabbi was considered voluntary - and therefore might require one to become a tent maker. Paul was trained as a rabbi; it would seem natural to him. But this is not the end of the matter.

The role of the church

In this matter there is much potential for abuse. Abuse is best corrected by sunshine and light; the church must perform its role.

- Because we have examples of both models, it is left to the church to decide which model is appropriate under various circumstances. The issue is not "which model is right" but "which model is appropriate under these circumstances."
- I know of a church which supported a prostitute (and her daughter) so that she might cease her trade and learn another way to make a living. If the church can do that (and who could deny such a thing?) then surely the higher calling of preaching the Gospel deserves a similar support.
- Finally, we must consider that the matter is well settled in this: every Christian is to call upon the Lord for his food and drink.[113] The minister is just a specific method of this.

Keeping the eye on the ball

How, then, are we to determine which method is appropriate?

- Sometimes, as in the case of Islamic countries, the "commercial connection" is the most fruitful. Here Paul works with fellow tentmakers - which gives him an introduction to the commercial society of the city.
- Sometimes the worker must voluntarily forego all compensation - all the aid to which he is entitled - for the sake of the Gospel. Paul did that for a time here.[114]
- Sometimes the worker foregoes the compensation as a gift - for, as Paul notes in this context, it is more blessed to give than to receive.[115]
- Finally, it sometimes is necessary for the spread of the Gospel that no charge of corruption be possible. The tent maker must server as a model to his students.[116]

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[109] 2 Chronicles 31:4-20, for Hezekiah's example.
[110] 1 Thessalonians 2:9
[111] 2 Corinthians 11:9
[112] Mark 12:38-40
[113] Matthew 6:31-32
[114] 1 Corinthians 9:6-15
[115] Acts 20:34-35
[116] 2 Thessalonians 3:8-9

Do not be afraid

It sometimes appears to us that the missionaries of the New Testament were fearless souls, experiencing neither doubt nor fear. It is not so; otherwise why would the Lord come to Paul and tell him, "Do not be afraid?" We need to examine this more closely, for it bears greatly on our own work.

Satan's attack is certain

So many of us consider Satan's attack to be a surprising thing, as if he somehow picked us out at random. Consider that the more successful you are for Christ, the more Satan will want to attack!

- After the high point of His baptism by John, Jesus went away into the wilderness - to be tempted. If it applies to Him, it applies to us, certainly.
- Paul was no stranger to this. If you look at his prior experiences, his consistent pattern is that he is about to be beaten and run out of town half dead. This does not normally make one more likely to speak out.

Satan's methods

Satan uses a variety of methods in his attack. For many of us this comes in the form of the classic temptations: flesh, the world, and pride. But Paul shows us two more here:

- There is the pressure of physical attack. Paul's ministry has no lack of such things.
- But for many of us, the attack is not physical, but spiritual. We fear that we will fail. Fearing failure, we never try.

Our defense

Our defense, as always, is in the Lord.

- *We need to keep our eye on the ball.* The Lord tells Paul in this instance that he has many to be saved in this city. His work will be done - the only question is who will do it - and what God has decided, who can say no?
- *It does not matter if we succeed or fail.* Often in the Old Testament, God tells his prophets not to worry about success or failure.[117] The important thing is obedience; God will provide such success as might be needed.
- *We need to pray for courage* - both for ourselves and for others. Indeed, Paul often asks others to pray for his courage.[118]
- *We need to remember that He will deliver us.* Paul, at the end of his experiences, tells his young follower Timothy that he is certain God will deliver him.[119] It is the voice of experience. Trials we will have, but ultimately God will lead us through fire and frost - home to Him.

God's Providence

So often our fears come from looking ahead when we should be looking to God. Look at this example; see how God - without the miraculous - saves.

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[117] See, for example, Ezekiel 2:6-8
[118] Ephesians 6:19-20, for example.
[119] 2 Timothy 4:17-18

- *God often uses the ordinary methods to save us.* Here Paul is taken before Gallio. We know quite a bit about Gallio, for he is the older brother of the Roman philosopher Seneca. Seneca was the tutor of Nero, and Nero will execute both brothers. Gallio was noted as a just and fair man, given to charity. It is no surprise then that he refuses to intervene in what, to him, must be a dispute confined within a religion.
- *God will use "coincidence"* - that is to say, his providence. Thrown out of the synagogue? No problem, the fellow next door becomes a Christian. Indeed, the phrase "next door" in the original Greek implies that there was a common wall between them. God will not be denied his harvest.
- *God will turn evil to a greater good.* Remember that guy Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue? When the Jews have their case thrown out of court, they turn on the head man (Sosthenes) and beat him. You might not think of beating to be a form of evangelism - but it is! Sosthenes becomes a Christian,[120] and quite prominent at that.

Lessons for the 20th Century

There are, it seems to me, some lessons for us in here.

- First, the question is not "should a minister be a tent maker?" The real question is, "why are so few of us tent makers ministers?" After all, the word "minister" is the same word used for "servant." Each of us who must earn his way in the world faces this question. How often we identify ourselves (especially males) with our job! Do we live to work, or do we work to live and then serve?

  Consider it well. If Jesus Christ were to appear before you in bodily form and ask you for 24 hours of your undivided service, you would not have the guts to refuse. But barring the bodily appearance, what's different between that and calling him "Lord?" Should you not then be a "tent making minister" wherever that finds you?

- Next, do your fears prevent you from doing this? But of what consequence are they? If you ask, "Who will provide?" does he not answer, "Consider the lilies of the field?" If you ask, "what if I fail?" does he not answer, "I asked for your obedient service; success is mine to award. I look upon the heart, not the results."
- Does it not boil down to this: that we fear to serve because we do not trust him to provide? Is this not simply a lack of faith? Here then the words of the father described by Mark:

Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"
(Mar 9:24 NIV)

[120] 1 Corinthians 1:1

A Model of Unity - Acts 18:18 - 19:10

The unity of the church is something seldom discussed these days - it seems that new denominations and fellowships (partitions however you describe them) spring up daily. How is it that we have come to the point where another split in the body of Christ is considered the normal way to handle things? That I cannot answer; but perhaps the example given here may spur us to consider the unity of the church to be a desirable thing - and give us some tips on how to achieve it.

Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchrea because of a vow he had taken. They arrived at Ephesus, where Paul left Priscilla and Aquila. He himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. When they asked him to spend more time with them, he declined. But as he left, he promised, "I will come back if it is God's will." Then he set sail from Ephesus. When he landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church and then went down to Antioch. After spending some time in Antioch, Paul set out from there and traveled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples. Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately. When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. On arriving, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. For he vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ. While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." So Paul asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?" "John's baptism," they replied. Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve men in all. Paul entered the synagogue and 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. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.
(Act 18:18-19:10 NIV)

A Time of Transition

One of the impressions most Bible believing Christians have today is this: the Old Testament Law was completely abolished in the early church. On the day of Pentecost, all that went out the window, and the Apostles starting worshiping just like we do (including the amplified bass guitar). One of the benefits of studying Acts is that it corrects that impression. The transition was a gradual but guided one.

Why a gradual transition?

Moses got forty years in the wilderness to change the Jews - and it still wasn't enough. But even after two thousand years under the Law, the Jews were not ready for instant change to the New Covenant. The Spirit, therefore, brought about this change more gradually. Why?

- First, this makes it a more comfortable transition for the Jews. One point in particular is this: the older generation dies off - leaving newer Christians who have experienced only the transition. So the Spirit does not require the experienced Jew to jump through new hoops. Keeping the ceremonial law did such people no harm, as long as they were willing to listen to the Spirit's teaching.
- For the Gentiles, this smoothes the transition as well. They are not burdened with keeping the entire law - just those parts which they would see as a reasonable form of righteousness. Thus, there is no requirement for them to make the transition to Jews and then to Christians.
- It also emphasizes the fact that Christ did not come to destroy the Law, but to be its culmination.[121]

The parallel to the Christian experience

Many new Christians could learn from this. We often begin a new Christian's life by handing him or her a massive set of rules, correcting every possible problem on the first day. The Spirit does not do this, nor did He do so to the early church.

- We are not expected to be pure and righteous on the day of our conversion. We are expected to have changed direction. Our righteousness is Christ, not our own worthiness.
- In my experience, the Spirit brings problems to mind and example as they are to be dealt with. As a young man I had many vices which later were removed - but I was not ready to deal with them at the time. There were other, bigger things to be dealt with first.
- Why would the Spirit deal with us in this way? Because God is merciful.

John the Baptist - an example of this

We see in this passage much mention of John the Baptist. He is an example of this kind of transition - an example just before Christ. Look at his message:

- God offers forgiveness for those who are willing to repent.
- The outward sign, or symbol, of that repentance is baptism.
- There is one coming who will complete this message

The first two points are still true; the third has been fulfilled (and will be fulfilled again). John's message is not "wrong" - it has been superceded by something infinitely better. But see how those who received the baptism of John found the Good News to be so wonderful! If you will receive the partial, or incomplete, message of God, how much more ready will you be to receive all of it?

Building a ship

Permit the teacher a metaphor. Building the church, or becoming a Christian, bears a strong resemblance to building a ship.

- First, the keel must be laid. This is parallel to the Law of the Old Testament. For the church, it was the basic training needed. For the Christian, it is the hearing of the word as preached.
- Then the ship must be launched. Indeed, the trip to water is like baptism for the individual and Pentecost for the church.
- But even after launch, the ship is not yet ready. It must be "fitted out." This is like the church in transition at this time, or the Christian learning and growing in the Spirit.

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[121] Matthew 5:17

- Finally, the ship is ready to sail - as the Christian matures, more and more he performs the works of the faith.

A ship that has no unity is full of holes - and sinks. The Spirit, shown here, guards the unity of the church by allowing gradual transition to a fuller understanding of the purposes of Christ.

Apollos - unity in the heart

We may see in this minor character, Apollos, an example of the unity of the church as it should be.

What do we know about him?

Very little. He is mentioned slightly here and in a few lists in other places, but even church historians have very little to say about him. (Even the detailed Catholic Encyclopedia has nothing to say about him). But we do know a few things:

- He is from Alexandria. That is a center of Jewish intellectual (and mystical) thought. So it is likely that he is an intellectual of the time.
- Martin Luther saw in him the author of Hebrews - but there is no other support for this theory.
- He was the cause of faction in the Corinthian church, though unwillingly.[122] Evidently, he left that area and had to be persuaded by Paul to return[123] - the sign of a man who would do nothing to undermine the unity of the church.

Characteristics

We can see some other things by his actions:

- He was greatly knowledgeable about the Scriptures. There is no substitute for this in a teacher. If you don't know the landscape of the Bible, you will soon stumble.
- More than that, he was very teachable. Indeed, there is an interesting point here. Note that Priscilla is mentioned first, then her husband. People are listed in order of importance. It would have been viewed as a very humbling thing for a scholar to accept instruction from a woman. He was willing to do that.
- The man is fervent - even though he has only a partial knowledge (what an example for the young Christian!) The man is on fire for God, to the point that he travels to teach what he knows. There is an interesting parallel here to Cornelius. Both of them were men of God who knew only a part, not the whole. But by their purity of heart and desire for God they drew the Holy Spirit to them.

The unity of the church depends in great measure upon the teachable-ness of its teachers.

The role of the teacher in the unity of the church

Consider: is it really the layman who causes the faction in the church? Aren't most of those in the pew willing to "take the preacher's word for it?" This lays a heavier burden on the teacher, to be sure. For if a teacher is prone to factionalism, then he carries students with him.

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[122] 1 Corinthians 1:11-12
[123] 1 Corinthians 16:12

The perils of pride

Why, then, do teachers participate in factionalism? Surely they know the prayer of Christ that we may all be one? Perhaps the peril of pride is the chief cause. For a teacher - if he's any good at all - will soon hear his students praising him for his lessons. This can be taken in two ways:

- It should be taken as encouragement. For if the teacher hears about his lessons, it usually means that the students have been encouraged and uplifted by them - perhaps even corrected. This is good.
- But this can be twisted from, "It was a good lesson; it served the Kingdom well, God be praised" to "I must be a wonderful fellow to have done it."

Once, in another church, I delivered a lesson on the Lord's Supper. As a part of that lesson, we actually served the Lord's Supper in the class (with the knowledge and permission of the elders of that congregation). The next week the president of the class approached me and asked that we serve the Lord's Supper in class every week! This was misguided praise for a good lesson (it's a lot easier when the topic is that powerful). I stalled them for a week (I'm a chicken) and then said no - for to say yes would have been, ultimately, to split the church. Would it have mattered that my lessons were more eloquent than the preacher's sermons, or vice-versa?

Pride is a deadly disease to teachers. You can get to the point where you sneer, "I'm more humble than you are!"

Successive imitation

Teachers must remember that they will be imitated. We often make a point of saying what sinners we are (it being less than useful to deny it with your wife around). We should recognize that imitation is a normal form of learning. Indeed, Paul explicitly encouraged it:

> Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.
> (1Co 11:1 NIV)

As Christ imitated his Heavenly Father[124], teachers should expect to be imitated.

The role of the Spirit

We cannot deal with the unity of the church without speaking of the role of the Holy Spirit. The tail of a lesson is too small a space to do this justice, but there are three things which should come to mind.

- The ancient church believed in the "indefectability" of the church - that is, the Holy Spirit will not allow the church to *remain* in error.
- We are all united, but we have differing gifts, and this is the work of the Spirit.[125] We should not quarrel over this, but accept this as a blessing.
- We are all one - interchangeable in Christ Jesus - but we are all parts of the body as well. This too is the work of the Spirit, for it is the same Spirit in each of us which gives us the differing gifts.

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[124] John 5:19
[125] Romans 12:6

The role of Love

Ultimately, failure in unity comes down to failure in love. If there is a first duty of teachers, it is that we encourage all to love one another, so that by this all men may know that we are His disciples. St. John Chrysostom put it this way, speaking of the Spirit:

> But the musician is the Might of Love: it is this that strikes out the sweet melody, singing a strain in which no note is out of tune. This strain rejoices both Angels, and God the Lord of Angels; this strain rouses the whole audience that is in heaven; this even lulls (evil) passions--it does not even suffer them to be raised, but deep is the stillness. For as in a theatre, when the band of musicians plays, all listen with a hush, and there is no noise there; so among friends, while Love strikes the chords, all the passions are still and laid to sleep

Let us love one another, so that the world may know we are His.

The Name - Acts 19:11-20

It is a curious thing in our time. When I was a child, it was considered socially graceless to use the name of Christ (or God) as an expression of anger. People were not particularly offended in a religious sense; it was simply impolite. (Do you remember the old Superman series, and Perry White's "Great Caesar's Ghost?") Now, it is considered "punctuation." Where did this sense of politeness, now long since gone, come from?

- Search the Old Testament. Every time you see the phrase, "the name of the LORD, you will notice that it is in small capitals. That means that it is a translation of the Hebrew word we now use as Jehovah. It is a personal name - God's first name, if you will.
- In the New Testament, the same phrase translates the Greek word *kurios* - which means "supreme authority." It is usually coupled as "name of the Lord Jesus" - which again is a personal name. I have in my possession a version of the Bible in Hawaiian and English. I am told that the early missionaries introduced the "S" sound into Hawaiian simply for the purpose of pronouncing the name. It is a personal name.

We don't like it when our own personal names are misused. How much more, then, should God care for his own Name? We shall see such care here today.

The Demon

God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them. Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, "In the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out." Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. One day the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?" Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding. When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas. In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power. (Act 19:11-20 NIV)

(One should note that the kind of miracles worked here are a specific fulfillment of John 14:12)

The Jewish Priests

The Jews who "went around" (the word actually connotes a vagabond) were a familiar site at this time. Over the years they developed the legend that their wisdom, by which they exorcised demons, was handed down from Solomon (the tale is still common in the occult world today.) This band must have been particularly noteworthy, as there would be a "seventh son" in it - and the son of a chief priest (which would be one of the 24 courses of priests). They did this, generally, for money, but Jesus acknowledges that their work produced real results.[126] Here, however, they try something new - imitation of one of their competitors, it would seem. In that imitation we can see their problems:

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[126] Matthew 12:27

- Like most believers in magic, they are convinced that the "right incantation" will do the job. They've seen Paul do it "in the name of Jesus" - and assume that the words are all that is required.
- Their motive is money, not faith. Indeed, it seems they never considered faith a necessity at all. If you want to know how this would sound today, consider any fraudulent televangelist.
- They get what they deserve - which has some interesting implications, considering that God uses a demon to deliver it.
- They get what they deserve - in God's style. They did this indoors, but they are exposed for their fraud in public.

Why didn't Paul confront these exorcists?

It's not that Paul is shy about confrontation. Meekness in front of a crowd, an unwillingness to confront Satan's emissaries - these are not noticeable in his character. So why then does he not confront them? Why does God keep him from it?

- First, so that no one will mistake his confrontation with envy. To confront them directly might have given the impression that he and they were actually in the same "business." To avoid confusing his hearers, Paul leaves them to God.
- Next, so that the Spirit might do His work. Sometimes we forget that we are not alone.
- Finally, so that all might be saved. Paul could have made them enemies of the faith. By allowing this method, there is a chance that these men might be saved.

The demon's attitude

Even a servant of the father of lies may inadvertently teach us something of the truth - especially when good comes from this. What can we learn from this demon's behavior?

- The demon does not mock the name of the Lord - indeed, he would not dare. Recall that whenever Christ encountered a demon, the first reaction of the demon was to scream in terror. This demon begins by acknowledging Christ - he can do no other - with a word that implies a deep knowledge.
- He also knows Paul - the word would imply "acquainted with" - which is a great honor to Paul. When the enemy knows you by name, you are honored indeed. This explains no small amount of Paul's suffering, by the way.
- He also knows the difference between incantation and faith. He sees no faith. Therefore these exorcists, being evil, are the lawful prey of the Evil One - and the demon turns on them.
- But God does not permit evil to arise unless he intends to bring a greater good from it. From this evil we find that many are saved.

Witchcraft

The counterfeit of science

It is important to remember that Satan creates nothing. He is a created being, and only man is the creating creature. But he can twist and counterfeit that which God creates. Indeed, this might be the very definition of evil - twisting and counterfeiting that which is good, for all things which God created were created good. So magic tells us that if we chant this incantation and propitiate that demon, we will get what we want - an "if-then" indicative, just like science. "Magic and science," said C. S. Lewis, "are twins."

The counterfeit of faith

Here we have seen the use of an incantation which, in the mouths of the faithful, would have produced the desired result (and often did). By imitating (counterfeiting) the reality of faith, witchcraft promises the results of faith. In fact, in can only deliver counterfeit results, as we shall see.

The back door: the occult

In our own time we have seen many trapped into the occult by the assumption of, "what harm could there be in it?" In our own neighborhood, two of the girls told my daughter that they were going to cast a spell on a third girl. Neither - I talked to one myself - thought anything of it. She had no idea what she was dealing with. How is it that people who would never think of juggling jars of nitroglycerine would deal with something far more dangerous - the occult?

- There is the desire for knowledge. We want to be the ones in the know, those who are sure of where they stand. Is this not particularly true in our personal relationships? And doesn't the ouija board seem harmless?
- There is the desire for power. The next promotion, the next business deal, influence, fame - all these seem desirable. And who wouldn't want the edge - after all, the other guy is talented too, but I have a secret weapon.
- There is the desire for freedom from guilt. To be vindicated, or at least absolved, by someone powerful may soothe the conscience.

All these are counterfeits. By these Satan tempts us to give ourselves to him in this life so that we may die forever. It substitutes the partial for the whole, the counterfeit for the real, the cheap fake for the real thing.

The necessity of burning the books

It sometimes surprises readers of this passage that the new Christians burnt their books on the occult and magic. These, after all, could have been sold. Why did they have to be burned?

This is an outward sign of inward transformation

- The new Christian often feels as if he'd like to testify - but has nothing to say. It is not so; look at the powerful testimony without words that was made here.
- They are testifying to what they know. They don't yet know all that they need to know of the faith, but what they do know, they testify to.
- And they do it in a way that speaks loudly to the people they know best - those who are also in the occult.

Like burnt bridges, burnt books strengthen the resolve

- There is the obvious point that once the books are burnt, it is much more difficult to go back into the life of the occult - you'd have to buy all those expensive things again! It's a sign of life long commitment.
- These things are not cheap. The new Christian can, by doing this, offer a devotional sacrifice to the Lord.

This is the destruction of that which is used for evil

Satan can only twist - but man can create, and he can create that which is evil. By its destruction, that much more evil is removed from the world. A book burnt cannot be read by its next victim.

Worse than a demon

You might ask, what does this have to do with me? I'm not into the occult. But do you not see that demon possession is not nearly as terrible as possession by sin?

Chrysostom - who was familiar with the demon possessed on a daily basis, living in a time where Satan openly displayed his power - tells us this. A man attacked by such a thing as demon possession would often have moments of lucidity, when the power of the demon was in abeyance. In those moments, the man would feel deeply ashamed. He would be ashamed of the pain he had caused; ashamed of the humiliation of his family and loved ones. Demon possession at least can be recognized for the evil it is. There is no pride in being possessed by an evil spirit.

But sin - ah, that's different. How often we take pride in our sins! Do you think not? Consider this: do you know someone who is owned by his rage? A person who constantly goes into extravagant fits of anger? Do they not justify themselves by their pride? "At least I fixed his wagon!"

Perhaps you don't think that applies. But which is worse: an anger on display, out of control, which may produce consequences - and God will use those evil consequences to bring forth a greater good; or a rage which burns inside the heart, eating it out, a concealed fire that hollows out what once was a living tree?

Consider it well. The time of repentance is always near. Today is always a good day to return to the Lord's way. Burn the books, whatever they may be, and commit yourself to Him. You call yourself a Christian, a follower of the Christ. Does your life honor His Name?

Making a Buck - Acts 19:21-41

One of the constants of human society is this: somebody who needs to make a buck will move others, by whatever arguments are at hand, to oppose anyone who stands in his way. We see that here with a silversmith named Demetrius:

After all this had happened, Paul decided to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia. "After I have been there," he said, "I must visit Rome also." He sent two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, to Macedonia, while he stayed in the province of Asia a little longer. About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way. A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in no little business for the craftsmen. He called them together, along with the workmen in related trades, and said: "Men, you know we receive a good income from this business. And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that man-made gods are no gods at all. There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited, and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty." When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" Soon the whole city was in an uproar. The people seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul's traveling companions from Macedonia, and rushed as one man into the theater. Paul wanted to appear before the crowd, but the disciples would not let him. Even some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, sent him a message begging him not to venture into the theater. The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there. The Jews pushed Alexander to the front, and some of the crowd shouted instructions to him. He motioned for silence in order to make a defense before the people. But when they realized he was a Jew, they all shouted in unison for about two hours: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" The city clerk quieted the crowd and said: "Men of Ephesus, doesn't all the world know that the city of Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image, which fell from heaven? Therefore, since these facts are undeniable, you ought to be quiet and not do anything rash. You have brought these men here, though they have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess. If, then, Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a grievance against anybody, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. They can press charges. If there is anything further you want to bring up, it must be settled in a legal assembly. As it is, we are in danger of being charged with rioting because of today's events. In that case we would not be able to account for this commotion, since there is no reason for it." After he had said this, he dismissed the assembly. (Act 19:21-41 NIV)

Background

No one really knows today what the temple of Diana looked like. Diana is the Roman name for the Greek Artemis. In classical mythology she was the goddess of the hunt; by this time in Ephesus she had transmuted to the goddess of fertility. Her festival, celebrated in May, was a month long orgy, and people traveled great distances to be in on the party. We do know some things about the temple and its worship:

- The temple itself was the fourth such on the site, and it was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Little but the base and some broken pillars remain today. It was so famous that one man (in 356BC) set fire to it - simply so that his name would be remembered as the man who did it. The Ephesians responded by making it a crime to mention his name.

- It is generally believed to have been centered around a large, lumpy meteorite - which was therefore (in their minds) an image thrown down from heaven. It's a little difficult to transmute this into the goddess, but the lumps in question were long thought to be breasts - which was thought to be the origin of Diana becoming a fertility goddess.
- Recent research indicates, however, that the lumps shown on the little copies made by Demetrius and his trade might very well have been something quite a bit more gruesome. It seems that one way to worship this goddess was to cut the testicle sac off of a bull and present it as an offering to this fertility goddess. They were evidently hung on this meteorite.

Demetrius

We know from ancient history a bit about Demetrius and the others here. The implication from the original language is that Demetrius is an owner of a shop which makes and sells these devotional images of Diana. He moves the workers in his and other shops to this riot. The shrines themselves are small silver boxes, the outside of which resemble the Temple in various ways. Inside might be found an image of the goddess.

Paul

Paul was not looking for this dispute. Indeed, it can be seen that he has not paid any particular attention to Diana; she's just one more of the gods and goddesses made by man. Paul, in fact, is thinking of leaving town anyway. What's on his mind?

- He has left behind, in Corinth and other cities, many new Christians, and he is anxious to instruct them further in the way.
- More than that, he longs to go to Rome - the center of the known world. From there he can see the cause of Christ exploding over the empire.
- But first there is a duty he must perform. He must carry a gift from the churches in Asia Minor (now Turkey) to the church in Jerusalem, which is in a famine at this time.[127]

So Paul, not looking for trouble (but as usual always ready for it) is about to leave town anyway. He was not, however, looking to leave at the front of a riot. We see here both the evil in the attack and God's goodness in his care for the saints.

Evil Displayed

Demetrius is ever with us, for wherever money is mixed with religion, the profiteer is ready. Indeed, one of the roots of idolatry is the love of money - first, that in seeking a partial god most seek financial gain through spiritual influence, and next that there are always those willing to sell trinkets to the devout.

But if you want to start a riot, you will need more than greed. The motive is money, but the method is different:

- First, he appeals to their superstitions. The logic is faulty (as the town clerk shows eventually) - if Diana is so great, what need has she of this riot? But they don't see it that way. So he arouses the faithful who really believe in Diana.

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[127] 1 Corinthians 16:1-4

- But an even greater appeal is at hand: conservatism. These people are changing things! Why, they don't even participate in the annual orgy! What kind of wild-eyed radicals are these people, anyway?
- But - and this is always useful - the real kicker is local pride. The chant is not "Great is Artemis" but "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians." Root for the home team, and don't let these outsiders fool you!

You can see why most of the people[128] did not really know why they were there. If they did, they'd have gone home.

Religion and Art

Religion and art are intertwined throughout history. Indeed, at the start of the Jewish nation, with Moses, God commands the use of artistry in the Tabernacle and in the Ark. So we cannot really say that art has no place in Christianity. (Indeed, we may have much to learn about this from the Eastern Orthodox.) But we also know that art may be misused in the faith. Indeed, we see three kinds of art and artist:

- There are those for whom their art and their worship of God are so intertwined that they cannot be separated. Art is an expression of the self, and if it is given in praise to God, then it is worthy indeed. Athanasius tells us that in music we are closest to heaven, for only then does the whole of the heart, mind, body and soul come together praising God. How can we recognize such art? I give you the "Notre Dame" test: do you know the name of the architect who designed that cathedral in Paris? Neither does anyone else - he did it for the glory of God.
- There are also those supremely talented individuals - such as a Michaelangelo - who take a commission from the church to produce art. That this is great art cannot be denied. Its greatness comes from the skill of the artist in moving the saint to praise God, not in the inherent worth of the artist.
- Then - and by far the most common, unfortunately - there are those who make their living producing art which is neither great artistically nor spiritually. Demetrius is a prototype of such. We see this today. Go to your nearby Christian bookstore. On prominent display you will find three kinds of items:
- You will see books recently written, giving you the latest in pop psychology and the "Gospel of Wealth." You will have to look on the bottom shelves for sound doctrine.
- You will see cutesy folk art pictures, usually with Bible verses painted on them or someone's devotional thought. Pay some attention to the price tags, and compare them to similar items in a secular card shop. The benefits of competition are seen at the card shop.
- Music - again, the latest in fashion - will be on display. Some of the greatest music ever written was made to praise the Lord; you will not find it here.

Does this mean that all such books, artwork and music are nothing but trinkets? Not at all. But there are two problems that we can see:

- Sometimes this art crowds out from our view the purposes of God. If we have a picture of Christ over our table, do we see it as Jesus blessing us - or as a reminder to feed the hungry? If the art moves us toward Christ, it is blessed.
- The peril is not just for us - but for the artist. You cannot use the road to heaven as a shortcut to the drugstore. Churning out Christian art is not the same as being a real Christian.

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[128] verse 32

God's Goodness Displayed

Before we begin, it must be made clear that God does have expectations of the worker - even the artistic worker:

- First, whatever we do, we are to do it as if to the Lord.[129] This alters many common attitudes. We are not working "just to make a living." Rather, God has permitted you the job you have so that you might turn it into service for Him.
- We are to work hard.[130] Laziness is not a virtue.
- We are to work wholeheartedly.[131]
- And we are not to worry about the results - for God will provide.[132]

Now, picture the artist doing this. Now you can see the architect of Notre Dame hard at work. Work, seen through the eyes of Christ, is a sacrament.

God's providence

In this day we often think of the government as the enemy of the church. Sadly, it is often so. But it should not be. Here, the town clerk exercises a proper function of the government in quelling this riot. We are taught to ask for peace in our time; why? So that the Gospel might spread more easily.

Paul - the model of the Christian: completely fearless, continually cheerful and constantly in trouble - wants to talk to these people. We see a riot; he sees a lot of people to preach to all at once. From his actions we can see some lessons:

- First, note again he has not directly assailed the temple, the goddess or the silversmiths. Rather, he has put forth Jesus Christ - and all else follows naturally. It is a lesson for those who criticize first and then preach the Gospel.
- It is also a lesson in humility. Paul accepts the advice of those who care for him, and lets wisdom overrule courage.

Our Trials

It does seem that Paul has more than his share of troubles for the Gospel. Why, then, is this permitted? Is it not so that God may bring a greater good out of the troubles?

- First, in our afflictions we are more likely to think of things eternal than things of this world. "Depend upon it," said Samuel Johnson, "when a man knows he is to be hanged in a month, it concentrates his mind wonderfully." When things are going well the sermon seems too long; when things are perilous, we listen attentively. Indeed, if the illness is grave enough, we may come to the point of understanding that to be with Christ is gain.
- Affliction makes us attentive to God. You think not? Let me make you a comparison. Suppose, on the same day, you attend both a wedding and a funeral. At the wedding there will be champagne, there will be crude innuendoes of what will happen in the hotel that night, there will be much laughter and forgetting of sorrow. The ministers words on the seriousness of marriage will be over quickly, and the party will be long. But at the funeral - while there may be as much food, and at

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[129] 1 Corinthians 10:31
[130] 1 Corinthians 4:12
[131] Colossians 3:23
[132] Matthew 6:21-23

some as much drink - the attention of all is pointed at the common fate of man. From which of these two events do you think your spiritual life will profit the most?

Sometimes we long for life to make sense. Why do I have this job, this career? Why can't I be a rich man? Why am I suffering? If only I had this, that or the other! God says, trust me - and I will make sense of it. Perhaps not now, perhaps not soon - but at the end of all things, you will see and receive your reward.

Preparation - Acts 20

Sometimes the life of a great Christian says more in action than in words. Such a passage we have today:

When the uproar had ended, Paul sent for the disciples and, after encouraging them, said good-by and set out for Macedonia. He traveled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people, and finally arrived in Greece, where he stayed three months. Because the Jews made a plot against him just as he was about to sail for Syria, he decided to go back through Macedonia. He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy also, and Tychicus and Trophimus from the province of Asia. These men went on ahead and waited for us at Troas. But we sailed from Philippi after the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and five days later joined the others at Troas, where we stayed seven days. On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight. There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were meeting. Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead. Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "He's alive!" Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight, he left. The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted. We went on ahead to the ship and sailed for Assos, where we were going to take Paul aboard. He had made this arrangement because he was going there on foot. When he met us at Assos, we took him aboard and went on to Mitylene. The next day we set sail from there and arrived off Kios. The day after that we crossed over to Samos, and on the following day arrived at Miletus. Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus to avoid spending time in the province of Asia, for he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible, by the day of Pentecost. From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. When they arrived, he said to them: "You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus. "And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace. "Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. 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! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. "Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: "It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all

wept as they embraced him and kissed him. What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship.
(Act 20:1-38 NIV)

Note, in verse 28, that Paul tells these shepherds of the church are to keep watch first over themselves. Paul's life displays that inner watch.

View of Life

It is an extraordinary thing. Paul considers his life "worth nothing." It is a view which needs to be examined. His approach to life is that of someone who is completing an appointed task - preaching the Gospel. If and when he completes that task, all is well; life itself is a trivial consideration compared to the mission that God has given him.

How can this be? Most of us cling tenaciously to life through pain and suffering (even though God may be using that pain and suffering to bring us to the realization that we shouldn't). We see living itself as the goal; he saw living as a means to the goal. How could he ignore what we see so clearly?

Perhaps it is because he saw something else clearly: the Resurrection. If we really believed in the Resurrection, what would our attitude be towards death?

Innocent of the blood of all

The phrasing seems curious, but remember that Paul is steeped in the Old Testament. He is recalling a passage:

"Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to a wicked man, 'You will surely die,' and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked man and he does not turn from his wickedness or from his evil ways, he will die for his sin; but you will have saved yourself. "Again, when a righteous man turns from his righteousness and does evil, and I put a stumbling block before him, he will die. Since you did not warn him, he will die for his sin. The righteous things he did will not be remembered, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the righteous man not to sin and he does not sin, he will surely live because he took warning, and you will have saved yourself."
(Eze 3:17-21 NIV)

Such a warning will make a man very thorough. Note two things about Paul:

- He proclaimed ALL the Gospel. He did not leave out the unpleasant pieces, or those which were politically incorrect.
- He proclaimed the Gospel to ALL. Despite the prejudices of the time (which were every bit as severe as in our day) he spoke to all, as those who could become the sons of God.

This is what it means to be innocent: you did the best you could with what you had - you held nothing back from anyone.

No favorites

There is a singleness of purpose to Paul. His purpose is not to favor his friends, or influence others for his own gain, but to preach the Gospel.

- Why does he preach all night? So that he might not neglect the people of Troas; they might hear as much as possible.
- Why does he avoid Ephesus? So that he might not be delayed in the Spirit's purposes.

In both instances we see that Paul has a single purpose, and whether or not the people be favorites or a new audience, he must do as he is commanded to do.

Solitude

In verses 13-14 we see Paul going on alone. There seems no reason to do so; he will meet the ship at the end of the walk. But recall that our Lord often went out alone to pray and to commune with God.

It is a picture of the Christian walk. On this pilgrimage we call life, we must sometimes walk alone - with God. Thus we are strengthened in prayer and communion.

Actions

Sense of Urgency

It is curious how our reactions to an event change with time. Contemporary writers see in this passage a long and obviously boring sermon - after all, the young man fell asleep during the message. (It happens in this class too). Chrysostom, writing many centuries ago, sees it differently. He notes that (from a people who would normally go to bed with the sun) that they were so zealous for the word that they would stay up all night to hear it. It seems Paul's sense of urgency was contagious. If he was willing to teach all night, they were willing to listen. (There's an example in here someplace).

Humility and tears

How few of us are passionate for Christ! Perhaps it is because we are not humble; in our self-assured pride we put Christ in a little corner of our lives marked "Religion - open on Sundays only." Not so the Apostle; passion for Christ drives out pride. Note the humility of the man:

- His humility is in words. He has not hesitated to preach *anything* needful, even his own conversion story. Nor has he hesitated to preach to large audiences or small (house to house).
- It is also in action. The people of Troas, unknown to him, are not too unimportant to preach to; the people of Ephesus not too important to pass by.

Material things

It is an interesting phrasing: Like Samuel in the Old Testament,[133] he proclaims to one and all that he has taken nothing. But he exceeds that:

- Not only has he taken nothing, he has worked with his own hands to provide for himself - and his companions!
- Far from taking, he has not even coveted (desired) what they have.

How is this? Perhaps he sees clearly what is important and what is not.

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[133] 1 Samuel 12:3-5

Reaction to attack

A wise Frenchman once said that it takes more courage to appear a coward than to appear a hero. There is a plot by the Jews; what does Paul do? Attack? Call the police? No, he goes on his way. Why?

- So that the occasion for evil might pass - why give the Devil a helping hand?
- So that his attackers might have another chance to hear the Gospel from another person. Any personal issues would thus be eliminated.

Indeed, Paul exhibits prudence in this - he takes seven other men with him.

Farewell Instructions

Paul also gives the elders at Ephesus some farewell instructions - and these are profitable for us as well.

Keep Watch

There are two senses in which we are to keep watch:

- First, we are to watch over ourselves. Notice that this is mentioned first; if we do not do this, how can we watch over others? How then shall we do this? There are two ways. First, in prayer, meditation and study, we must watch over our own spiritual lives. Second, we must watch over each other, being submissive and accountable to each other.
- Then we are to watch "over the flock"- over those whom God has committed to us, whether those be a study group, a family, or just the friends we know. Those appointed as elders (overseers in this translation, also bishop) have specific responsibilities. But anyone appointed a shepherd understands this: the shepherd takes complete responsibility. If the person is in your charge, you cannot say, "not my job." You can always ask for help - but you cannot leave it alone.

Warnings

Always - throughout the history of God's people - the weeds are in with the wheat. The false prophets here may be the Nicolaitans.[134] If so, it appears that a sect arose which promoted the doctrine of "antinomianism" - the idea that grace exempts a Christian from following moral law, so eat, drink and be merry. But whatever the problem was, we see two sources for it:

- Those from the outside. In our day these are those who have their own version of reality, and quote the Scripture as it suits them. Start with the answer, and work back to the verses to support it.
- Worse are those from the inside. These betray the trust of the church and lead many astray. But, says our Lord, "by their fruits you shall know them." Be on guard!

The preventives

How, then, shall we prevent these evils from happening while fulfilling our duties? Paul again tells us. He commits these elders:

- He commits them first to God. Here again is the inner life of prayer, meditation and communion which inoculates the Christian against the wolf bite.

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[134] Revelation 2:6

- He then commits them to the word of grace. There is no substitute for regular, sustained study of the Scripture.

  And what is the result of this?

- They are built up in this life, becoming strong.
- They receive an inheritance (it is more blessed to give than to receive) in the life to come.

  Shepherds, watch yourselves. Build yourselves up, and receive the inheritance to come.

New Testament Prophecy - Acts 21:1-16

One of the great dividing points (after the issue of tongues) in Evangelical Christianity is the issue of prophecy. We see in this passage an example of prophecy in the New Testament. We shall then examine three things:

- Prophecy in the Old Testament - as background to this passage
- Prophecy in the New Testament, and
- Are there prophets today?

After we had torn ourselves away from them, we put out to sea and sailed straight to Cos. The next day we went to Rhodes and from there to Patara. We found a ship crossing over to Phoenicia, went on board and set sail. After sighting Cyprus and passing to the south of it, we sailed on to Syria. We landed at Tyre, where our ship was to unload its cargo. Finding the disciples there, we stayed with them seven days. Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. But when our time was up, we left and continued on our way. All the disciples and their wives and children accompanied us out of the city, and there on the beach we knelt to pray. After saying good-by to each other, we went aboard the ship, and they returned home. We continued our voyage from Tyre and landed at Ptolemais, where we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for a day. Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied. After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, 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 this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'" When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done." After this, we got ready and went up to Jerusalem. Some of the disciples from Caesarea accompanied us and brought us to the home of Mnason, where we were to stay. He was a man from Cyprus and one of the early disciples.
(Act 21:1-16 NIV)

Review: Old Testament Prophecy

It must be remembered that there is a change of covenant - the basic working relationship between God and man - at the Cross. So the activities and abilities of the Old Testament prophet may not be entirely applicable. But before we can decide that, we need a convenient classification of those abilities and activities:

Types of Prophecy

In the Old Testament, we see the prophets engaged in two kinds of activities:

- **Foretelling.** In this activity, we see the prophet predicting the future. This can be done in one of two ways:
  - *National* foretelling relates to the nation of Israel, and by extension to the people of God. In particular, this type of prophecy is most related to the coming of Christ, which is the central event of the entire Bible. This type of prophecy usually relates (in symbolic terms) great events on the scale of nations, kings and empires. It is particularly focussed on the people of God; it is not a comprehensive "future history" but rather the particular perspective of the people of God.

- *Personal* foretelling relates to specific individuals. It may be a pronouncement of warning; it may be the announcement of doom. On occasion, it is the foretelling of good news.

- **Forth-Telling.** In this activity, we see the prophet warning. It is the picture we most commonly associate with prophecy: the courageous prophet in the king's face.
  - The most prominent activity, however, is the giving of commandment. It is by the prophets, particularly Moses, that God explains the Law to the people. This "laying down the law" is a major prophetic activity. It usually includes the consequences of disobedience as well. This is a national form of forth-telling.
  - There is also a personal form of forth-telling. It comes to individuals (most commonly the king) and it either serves to warn them, pronounce doom upon them - or encourage them in righteousness and faith.

The last of the Old Testament prophets is found in the New Testament: John the Baptist. He foretells the coming of the Christ (in ministry), and tells forth the message of repentance. He does so to the nation, and to individuals.

What, then, is the difference between Old and New Testament prophecy? This might just be our first clue: in the NIV version of the Old Testament, we find this phrase - "the word of the Lord came to…" - 98 times. It occurs not once in the New Testament. The reason? The Word of the Lord has come - to us.

New Testament Prophecy

We must face the fact squarely that many preachers firmly teach that there is no such thing as prophecy in the church today. I disagree - but to understand this, we need to examine three things:

- The types of prophecy permitted in the New Testament church after the time of the Apostles.
- The "proof text" used to prove that prophecy does not exist now.
- Restrictions on the New Testament prophet.

Types of prophecy permitted

Using the classification we devised in the start of this lesson, we may ask: "Are all forms of prophecy permitted after the time of the Apostles?" The answer is clearly, "no."

- Foretelling, in the national sense, is complete. John the Apostle assures us that there is nothing to be added to his Revelation:

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.
(Rev 22:18-19 NIV)

So we must conclude that any prophecy relating to the second coming of Christ, and other great events surrounding this, are not permitted. National foretelling is out.

- Similarly, the giving of commandment (as Moses did) is also restricted - for now that the Word has come, the revelation is complete.[135]

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[135] Hebrews 1:1-2

So we conclude, then, that prophecy in the New Testament, after the time of the Apostles (we must exempt John's Revelation) is purely of a personal nature, either foretelling or forth-telling.

The proof text

One can understand why preachers would not want to allow the existence of prophets. They can be messy people to deal with (John the Baptist never made anyone's best dressed list) and rather stubborn. The usual (indeed, only) proof text for this is this:

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.
(1Co 13:8 NIV)

The argument is then made that the Bible records no instance of prophecy being passed on by anyone but an Apostle; the Apostles are all dead; therefore, there is no prophecy.

To understand the problem, however, we must begin with this: prophecy is not a gift of the Apostles - but of the Holy Spirit. As one of the Apostles quoted:

"'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.
(Act 2:17-18 NIV)

The question, then, is one of "when." Look at the proof text again. Many non-Pentecostals are perfectly content with prophecies ceasing and tongues being stilled - but they forget the third comment about knowledge passing away. If this has happened, why is there still preaching?

The answer, simply, is that these will all go away. But when? To understand that, we must read the entire passage:

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.
(1Co 13:8-12 NIV)

So they fail "then" - when we shall see "face to face." And when do we see our Lord face to face? At His return. And at his return tongues, prophecy and knowledge will cease, for all things will be revealed. The partial will become whole. Until then, as the Spirit provides, these things continue. So there shall be prophecy. But under what conditions?

Restrictions on New Testament prophecy

We should be wise about this: prophecy is to be treated with great caution. Our Lord explicitly warns us about this:

"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?
(Mat 7:15-16 NIV)

So we shall have false prophets (which does not eliminate the existence of true ones) - but we'll know who they are by what they produce. How shall we know?

One way is this: do they produce disorder and a lack of harmony in the church? Paul is rather explicit about this restriction on prophecy:

The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. As in all the congregations of the saints,
(1Co 14:32-33 NIV)

We are indeed taught to explicitly test the prophets. One such test comes from the Old Testament: if the prophet is not 100% correct in prediction, that's not a prophet of God. Other tests?

- They are to acknowledge the head of the church, Jesus Christ.

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.
(1Jn 4:1-3 NIV)

- They are to acknowledge and be subject to the leadership of the church, starting with its Apostles, and the writings of those Apostles, the New Testament.

If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command. If he ignores this, he himself will be ignored. Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.
(1Co 14:37-40 NIV)

The Living Word of God has come, and the prophet must acknowledge that, like his Old Testament forebear, the word has come to him.

Prophets Today

We have shown, at most, that prophets *may* exist today. We have not shown that they *must* exist today. The matter is not one which we decide; it is a matter for the Holy Spirit.

And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues.
(1Co 12:28 NIV)

Note that the phrase is "appointed" - and the God does the appointing, not us. For us to say they cannot be appointed today is bordering on blasphemy. But it also means that God does so at his choice. What then, determines his choice?

Faith

The first requirement for a prophet is faith. If you will, only the faithful need apply for the job, for as Paul tells the Romans:

We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith.
(Rom 12:6 NIV)

The Purpose of Prophecy

One solid question is this: why *would* God want a prophet in his church? Paul tells the Corinthians this:

> But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be edified.
> (1Co 14:3-5 NIV)

The prophet is there that the church may be edified. There are three primary activities:

- *Strengthening.* The word in the Greek is translated either "strengthening" or "edification". It is a word that comes from architecture; it roughly means to put the roof on the house. You can see it as completing the structure of the faithful Christian.
- *Encouragement.* This is the same word that is used to describe the Holy Spirit as a comforter. It means to come along side and build up in courage and strength, to equip someone for a task.
- *Comfort.* This word also implies one who comes along side, in this instance to give consolation and comfort, as one might to a friend in grief.

Perhaps we have missed the point. Perhaps the prophets are among us, quietly and in order, doing the work of the New Testament prophet, with no fanfare or fuss. Where the teaching of the church is Biblically sound, what is the need of a prophet to proclaim God's teaching? But wherever God's people need strengthening, encouragement and comfort, the New Testament prophet will be sent by the Spirit.

The Primacy of God - Acts 21:17-22:30

If there is any striking characteristic of the great saints, it is this: they put God first in all things. This section of Scripture gives us some good examples of this attitude. It's a bit long - but worth it.

When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers received us warmly. The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs. What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law. As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality." 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. When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, shouting, "Men of Israel, help us! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple area and defiled this 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.) The whole city was aroused, and the people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut. While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar. He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. Then he asked who he was and what he had done. Some in the crowd shouted one thing and some another, and since the commander could not get at the truth because of the uproar, he ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. When Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great he had to be carried by the soldiers. The crowd that followed kept shouting, "Away with him!" As the soldiers were about to take Paul into the barracks, he asked the commander, "May I say something to you?" "Do you speak Greek?" he replied. "Aren't you the Egyptian who started a revolt and led four thousand terrorists out into the desert some time ago?" Paul answered, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city. Please let me speak to the people." Having received the commander's permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the crowd. When they were all silent, he said to them in Aramaic: "Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense." When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet. Then Paul said: "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as also the high priest and all the Council can testify. I even obtained letters from them to their brothers in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished. "About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, "Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?' "'Who are you, Lord?' I asked. "'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me. "'What shall I do, Lord?' I asked. "'Get up,' the Lord said,

"and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.' My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me. "A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. He stood beside me and said, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very moment I was able to see him. "Then he said: 'The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.' "When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance and saw the Lord speaking. "Quick!' he said to me. "Leave Jerusalem immediately, because they will not accept your testimony about me.' "'Lord,' I replied, 'these men know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.' "Then the Lord said to me, "Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'" The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, "Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!" As they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, the commander ordered Paul to be taken into the barracks. He directed that he be flogged and questioned in order to find out why the people were shouting at him like this. As they stretched him out to flog him, Paul said to the centurion standing there, "Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn't even been found guilty?" When the centurion heard this, he went to the commander and reported it. "What are you going to do?" he asked. "This man is a Roman citizen." The commander went to Paul and asked, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" "Yes, I am," he answered. Then the commander said, "I had to pay a big price for my citizenship." "But I was born a citizen," Paul replied. Those who were about to question him withdrew immediately. The commander himself was alarmed when he realized that he had put Paul, a Roman citizen, in chains. The next day, since the commander wanted to find out exactly why Paul was being accused by the Jews, he released him and ordered the chief priests and all the Sanhedrin to assemble. Then he brought Paul and had him stand before them.
(Act 21:17-22:30 NIV)

Appearances

There is a certain attractiveness in appearing bold and unconventional. The teenage rebel is a fixture in films; and Hollywood could not do without the "mature" adult who defies the "prudes." But the church is where reality truly strikes, and we know that we have a duty to others.

Relationship between Paul and the church at Jerusalem

You can see the primacy of God in the way that Paul brings his report to the church. He does not report to them as if he were an independent force; rather, he is reporting as a missionary dependent upon them. Indeed, his report is not about what he did, but what *God* did.

James, in return, points out what God has been doing in the church at Jerusalem - and that this has brought about a difficult situation. There is no note of condemnation; indeed, James is quite specific that this is a local problem, and he is appealing to Paul as a brother to help them with it. Both are concerned for the unity of the church; both are concerned that the faith of others is undamaged.

The issue: how to deal with the weaker brother

James outlines the problem quite simply:

- God has been pleased to provide many converts to the faith among the Jews.

- These people still follow the Law of Moses. This is not prohibited to a Christian, nor is it required - but their faith does not yet allow them to dispense with it. They sincerely believe it is necessary.
- They also think that Paul doesn't follow the Law. Note that the problem is not with what Paul is teaching the Gentiles; it's what they've heard about his teaching the Jews.

Note the response: it is *not* to teach these Christians to be Gentiles. Rather, it is to show them - in action - that Paul is following the Law! We need first to take a look at this vow:

The vow in question is a form of the Nazarite vow. It requires the Jew to abstain from meat and wine for 30 days; to worship daily in the Temple for seven days, and on the last day to present certain ritual (and expensive) sacrifices. It is a vow of thanksgiving, of praise to God. Most men could not afford to do this, as they were day laborers. They would starve before they could complete the vow. But a rich benefactor might share the vow with them - participating as they do - and pay their expenses. This was a doubly pious act for the Jew: first for the vow itself, and secondly for the charity which allowed others to give this act of devotion to God.

The principle Paul and James are following is clearly laid out in Romans:

Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.
(Rom 14:1-8 NIV)

James and Paul see the weaker brother. Rather than proclaim their own correctness of doctrine, they accept those weaker brothers and try their best to strengthen their faith and promote harmony within the body of Christ.

We often see such things and say, "doesn't this set a bad example? Isn't Paul being inconsistent?" We ought not to worry so much about it. Rather, we should give glory to God by tending to his body, the church, in all things.

Imposters

Hidden in this passage is another problem: the Roman commander mistakes Paul for some revolutionary. We often hear that we must do this or that "to preserve the character of our witness." In other words, we don't want to have others mistake us for the frauds around us. Hear John Chrysostom on the point, however:

Then let us not grieve that heresies exist, seeing that false Christs wished to attack even Christ both before this and after; with a view to throw Him into the shade, but on every occasion we find the truth shining out transparent. So it was with the Prophets: there were false prophets, and by contrast with these they shone the more: just as disease enhances health, and darkness light, and tempest calm. There is no

room left for the Greeks to say that (our teachers) were impostors and mountebanks: for those (that were such) were exposed. It was the same in the case of Moses: God suffered the magicians, on purpose that Moses might not be suspected to be a magician: He let them teach all men to what length magic can go in making a fantastic show: beyond this point they deceived not, but themselves confessed their defeat. Impostors do us no harm, rather do us good, if we will apply our mind to the matter. What then, you will say, if we are partners with them in common estimation? The estimation is not among us, but with those who have no judgment. Let not us greatly care for the estimation of the many, nor mind it more than needs. To God we live, not to men: in heaven we have our conversation, not on earth: there lie the awards and the prizes of our labors, thence we look for our praises, thence for our crowns. Thus far let us trouble ourselves about men--that we do not give and afford them a handle against us. But if, though we afford none, those choose to accuse us thoughtlessly and without discrimination, let us laugh, not[1] weep.

The point is simple: we are not to be concerned with what others think. We are to be concerned with Christ's command. We are therefore concerned with what other Christians think, with a view to keep them from being weakened in the faith. So we appear inconsistent - but in fact we are consistent towards God, keeping him first in all things.

Paul's Defense

Paul's defense before the crowd also shows the primacy of God.

Humility

Note first that Paul is really not arguing or speaking in arrogance:

- There is no sense of "you idiots" in his speech.
- He asks them to hear his "defense" - the word in the Greek implies a pleading tone.
- He stresses his one-ness with them: he learned at the feet of Gamaliel, and he learned the Law "of our Fathers."

All this is to gain their hearing. He doesn't need them to listen to him; he needs them to listen to his message - again, the primacy of God.

The point: to win all we can

Paul's purpose here is to win all that he can to Christ. These are the Jews, the people he loves. It is likely enough that most of us would have run from the situation. He sees it not so much a mob as an audience - full of his brothers.

To this audience he now offers his *personal* testimony. This is an example to us as well.

- First, I am (like Paul) a witness to what has happened to me. I cannot speak directly to what Paul experienced, but I can certainly speak about what has happened to me.
- Paul's method is simple and effective: look at Paul before meeting Jesus, and after. Each of us has the same story. What am I without Christ? What can I not be with Him?

Exalting Christ, not himself

Even in his account, he tells us of the supremacy of Christ:

- "Who are you, Lord?" - Instantly he recognizes that supremacy.
- He tells them that he has seen "the Righteous One" - which to the Jews meant the Messiah.

- He is told to "call on the name of Christ" - and the Jew is to call on the name of God alone. Therefore, he is explicitly telling them that Jesus is divine.

The Vow

The center of this lesson, however, is one of the most solemn ways in which we honor the primacy of God - by which we put him first. It is "the vow." We do not use the word very much anymore - except in the context of weddings. Very well, let us examine the concept of the vow, seeing how it is used to put God first - and then see if there are lessons for us in our lives.

Definition

My dictionary contributes three points. A vow:

- Is a solemn promise to God,
- To perform some specific act or sacrifice,
- For some specific purpose.

So, in this instance, the solemn promise is to perform ritual sacrifices for the purpose of thanksgiving. Similarly, the wedding vow is a solemn promise (to God, as well as to each other) to cling to each other only, for the purpose of creating a godly family.

A vow must be acceptable to God

We may vow - and God might not be pleased. If we put him first, we will fulfill our vows in his way. The Old Testament gives us two principles:

- First, the sacrifice to be presented must be without defect:

When anyone brings from the herd or flock a fellowship offering to the LORD to fulfill a special vow or as a freewill offering, it must be without defect or blemish to be acceptable. Do not offer to the LORD the blind, the injured or the maimed, or anything with warts or festering or running sores. Do not place any of these on the altar as an offering made to the LORD by fire. You may, however, present as a freewill offering an ox or a sheep that is deformed or stunted, but it will not be accepted in fulfillment of a vow.
(Lev 22:21-23 NIV)

Notice that last line: it must be acceptable to fulfill the vow. It is holy; it is set apart. It will not do for me to place my wife after another woman, or after my career. It is not acceptable to God.

- The sacrifice must not come from sinful activity:

You must not bring the earnings of a female prostitute or of a male prostitute into the house of the LORD your God to pay any vow, because the LORD your God detests them both.
(Deu 23:18 NIV)

Would you accept an expensive gift from your wife if she earned the money as a prostitute? To ask the question is to hear the answer.

It is not sufficient to make the vow. The fulfillment must be acceptable to God, for he comes first. If you are putting your career ahead of your wife, no amount of money from that career will be an acceptable sacrifice for your wedding vow. Put God first.

A vow must not be rash

Have you ever been to a wedding where you knew that the couple were going to regret this - and soon? It is not good to take wedding vows lightly, for God is holy, and what is promised to him is holy:

(It is a trap for a man to dedicate something rashly and only later to consider his vows.
(Pro 20:25 NIV)
When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow.
(Ecc 5:4 NIV)

If you place God first in your life, you will consider wisely, well and long before making promises to him - including wedding vows.

God does, however, understand that sometimes we cannot perform our vows because we do not have the means. In that instance, he provides that - under his authority - the vow may be reduced or revoked.[136] The key is this: "under his authority." We are not permitted, for example, to release ourselves from marriage. But under his authority, we are permitted divorce in case of adultery.

Take God seriously. Put him in first place in all things:

- Put him in first place in your relations with others. Do not cause the weaker brother to stumble, but do what is necessary - however inconsistent it might appear - to uphold that brother.
- In your testimony to the world, do not defend yourself. Rather, exalt Him.
- In your vows - your promises to God - take Him seriously. Be quick to perform, and do so righteously.

In all this there is blessing, for as the Psalmist tells us:

For you have heard my vows, O God; you have given me the heritage of those who fear your name.
(Psa 61:5 NIV)

Put God first - and receive the heritage of those who fear his name.

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[136] Leviticus 27:8; Numbers 30:12-14

Testimony - Acts 23

The word "witness" conjures up a number of meanings to the Christian: in a court of law, as witnesses to Christ, even "Jehovah's Witnesses." In today's passage we shall see just what it should mean to the Christian. Consider the testimony of Paul the Apostle:

Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, "My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day." At this the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth. Then Paul said to him, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!" Those who were standing near Paul said, "You dare to insult God's high priest?" Paul replied, "Brothers, I did not realize that he was the high priest; for it is written: 'Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people.'" Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, "My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead." When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.) There was a great uproar, and some of the teachers of the law who were Pharisees stood up and argued vigorously. "We find nothing wrong with this man," they said. "What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?" The dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them. He ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force and bring him into the barracks. The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome." The next morning the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. More than forty men were involved in this plot. They went to the chief priests and elders and said, "We have taken a solemn oath not to eat anything until we have killed Paul. Now then, you and the Sanhedrin petition the commander to bring him before you on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about his case. We are ready to kill him before he gets here." But when the son of Paul's sister heard of this plot, he went into the barracks and told Paul. Then Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Take this young man to the commander; he has something to tell him." So he took him to the commander. The centurion said, "Paul, the prisoner, sent for me and asked me to bring this young man to you because he has something to tell you." The commander took the young man by the hand, drew him aside and asked, "What is it you want to tell me?" He said: "The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul before the Sanhedrin tomorrow on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about him. Don't give in to them, because more than forty of them are waiting in ambush for him. They have taken an oath not to eat or drink until they have killed him. They are ready now, waiting for your consent to their request." The commander dismissed the young man and cautioned him, "Don't tell anyone that you have reported this to me." Then he called two of his centurions and ordered them, "Get ready a detachment of two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at nine tonight. Provide mounts for Paul so that he may be taken safely to Governor Felix." He wrote a letter as follows: Claudius Lysias, To His Excellency, Governor Felix: Greetings. This man was seized by the Jews and they were about to kill him, but I came with my troops and rescued him, for I had learned that he is a Roman citizen. I wanted to know why they were accusing him, so I brought him to their Sanhedrin. I found that the accusation had to do with questions about their law, but there was no charge against him that deserved death or imprisonment. When I was informed of a plot to be carried out against the man, I sent him to you at once. I also ordered his accusers to present to you their case against him. So the soldiers, carrying out their orders, took Paul with them during the night and brought him as far as Antipatris. The next day they let the cavalry go on with him, while they returned to

the barracks. When the cavalry arrived in Caesarea, they delivered the letter to the governor and handed Paul over to him. The governor read the letter and asked what province he was from. Learning that he was from Cilicia, he said, "I will hear your case when your accusers get here." Then he ordered that Paul be kept under guard in Herod's palace.
(Act 23:1-35 NIV)

What is Testimony?

It is a maxim of English law that legal memory begins with the reign of Richard the First - Richard the LionHeart. This is not because of the splendor and virtues of that prince, but because of the work of his father, Henry II. Henry borrowed the idea of the jury from the Franks - and made it the sole province of the king, which meant the king's courts gave better justice than the barons. In those days a jury was composed not only of bystanders but also of the witnesses. The witnesses told their tale, and all together came to an agreement on the facts. Our conception of a witness and jury being separate came much later. Their idea carries with it an important truth: the witness must be willing to act as well as talk.

Witness - meaning of the word

It surprises many Christians to learn that the word translated "witness" is originally, in the Greek, the root word for *martyr.* One fine example of this is Stephen, the first martyr and surely a model for the witness. There are three things we might point out from his example:

- He was willing - and prepared - to testify in words. His defense takes up more than a chapter in Acts, and it is a recitation of the facts leading up to the time of Christ.
- He was willing to act - for as they stoned him, he forgave them.
- He was willing to die. It is this that impresses us, and we need to discover the secret of this willingness.

Old Testament examples

The Old Testament provides us with a rich history of the idea that important events require testimony - for the memory of man is short. More than that, however, God lays in the Old Testament the ground work for the coming of Christ. Physical examples abound:

- The Ark of the Covenant was referred to as the "Ark of the Testimony" - the container (ark) which contains the evidence. The Tabernacle itself was similarly called the Tabernacle of the Testimony. Boundary stones were laid as witnesses; when the Israelites crossed the Jordan, they set up twelve stones as a testimony to the event.
- Frequently we see the Israelites themselves called together as a group to witness some declaration. "We are witnesses," they would declare.[137]
- Indeed, we even see the use of ritual and symbolism as witnesses. The disciples are told to "shake dust." The transfer of the sandal in Ruth signifies the transfer of the inheritance. Even today we take Communion as a witness to the death of Christ on the Cross.

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[137] Joshua 4:22

Christian Testimony

It is surprising, therefore, that so many Christians believe that testifying to Christ is someone else's job - usually the preacher's. It is not so. We are explicitly called to testify to Christ:

"I tell you, whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God. But he who disowns me before men will be disowned before the angels of God.
(Luk 12:8-9 NIV)

More than that, it is the natural reaction of the Christian to the Good News - remember the woman at the well?[138] A great sinner, but the salvation was greater. She could not resist the opportunity to testify. Indeed, if you are truly a Christian, testifying to it is, in a sense, perfectly natural:

It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak,
(2Co 4:13 NIV)

What's interesting about this passage is the section of the Old Testament from which Paul is quoting:

I believed; therefore I said, "I am greatly afflicted."
(Psa 116:10 NIV)

Testimony seems to carry with it affliction. As we shall see, this is the real reason most of us do not testify to our Lord.

Forms of testimony

The most commonly thought of form of testimony is preaching. Indeed, this form is explicitly commanded.[139] But there are two other forms of testimony that are fairly common (in addition to those already mentioned)

- Most of us are familiar with the concept of "lifestyle evangelism." It is interesting, however, that the Scripture sees this as defensive - that the faith might not be slandered.[140]
- It is also called for in the matter of church discipline, where the second step involves two or three witnesses![141] You can picture the risk in this!

Difficulties

We are quick to raise objections:

- "I am not an eloquent person"

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God.
(1Co 2:1 NIV)

- "I'd be embarrassed to bring the subject up."

So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God,

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[138] John 4:28-30
[139] Matthew 24:14
[140] 1 Peter 2:15
[141] Matthew 18:16

(2Ti 1:8 NIV)

Here is our real problem. We do not wish to "join in suffering." We forget that witness equals martyr - or more likely, we remember. We need to understand the power of the Gospel:

They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.
(Rev 12:11 NIV)

Note the source of power: the blood of the lamb - and the word of their testimony. By these they overcame Satan.[142] We need to be connected to the power of the Resurrection if we are to do this.

The Resurrection

Paul, in our passage here, goes to the root of the matter. He is on trial for his belief in the Resurrection - a resurrection he has seen with his own eyes. His belief extends back to the earliest days of the Bible:

I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!
(Job 19:25-27 NIV)

Some will say this is just a man talking. Isaiah makes it clear:

But your dead will live; their bodies will rise. You who dwell in the dust, wake up and shout for joy. Your dew is like the dew of the morning; the earth will give birth to her dead.
(Isa 26:19 NIV)

If you needed a clearer picture than this, God gives you one. Ezekiel walks in the valley of the dry bones - and sees them clothed with flesh.[143] We have the risen Lord, evidence of the resurrection to come. To testify to Him is to declare the resurrection to come.

New Testament - the nature of the Resurrection

In such a lesson as this we can be but brief. But there are some things we do know about the resurrection to come:

- The body we have now will be transformed into a new kind of body.[144] What kind? We don't know.
- We shall be like the angels.[145]
- And - most significantly - there are at least two separate resurrections. The dead in Christ shall rise first.[146] Why? The Judgment.

The Judgment

The resurrection is the beginning of God's ultimate judgment on this world. We have known this since the days of Daniel:

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[142] Indeed, see Rev. 15:5-6 to see that from the Tabernacle of the Testimony proceed the seven plagues of God.

[143] Ezekiel 37:1-14

[144] 1 Cor. 15:42-44

[145] Matthew 22:30

[146] 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18. Scholars disagree on the total number. For example, Hal Lindsay lists as many as six separate resurrections.

Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.
(Dan 12:2 NIV)

Indeed, the New Testament teaches us that those who do not awaken to everlasting life are doomed to the second death:

I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.
(Rev 20:4-6 NIV)

Impact

All well and good, some may say, but what impact does this have on the here and now?

- The resurrection is proof of the divinity of Christ.[147] If He is God, then should you not listen to him, even now?
- It is also our spur to imitate him:

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.
(Php 3:10-11 NIV)

Some will not be convinced, even by the resurrection of Christ. Remember Lazarus and the rich man?[148] But we of all people should be - and do our best to convince others.

Finale

Do you believe that God is just? That he is fair? Do you ever ask him why the wicked seem to go unpunished? The court of God's justice is not yet adjourned. It will hold its final session when all are resurrected.

Consider this well, for there will be two kinds of accused in that court.

- There will be those who throw themselves on the mercy of the court. Their only plea will be based upon the death, burial and resurrection of our Lord. To the merciful, God will have mercy. To those who will not judge, for they are sinners themselves, God will decline to judge.
- There will those who will stand proudly unrepentant - "I did it my way, and I wouldn't change a thing." Like the judges in our court, mercy is for the truly repentant - and punishment for the defiant.

I once sat in a court, waiting for the trial of a friend. As a first order of business he dealt with many men who had been convicted of drunk driving. Those who were in court that day were those who had completed the prescribed course of rehabilitation, whose records were clean of further offense.

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[147] Romans 1:4
[148] Luke 16:31

There were many names called who were not present. For each of these, the judge instructed the marshal to issue a warrant for their arrest, so that they might begin serving their sentences. But for those present, he would review their records, pronounce them released, and say: "You may now say that you have never been arrested." When I first heard this, I thought it absurd. But then I realized what having a criminal record means to a potential employer. Indeed, more than that, what that judge was doing was a small picture of the day of judgment. To those who repent, he will pronounce them innocent. To those who do not, there awaits only the second death.

The books of God are not closed - yet. Repent while there is still time.

Two Years - Acts 24

This section gives us a bit of history that takes two years to complete - and in the process gives us some insight on human nature, with and without Christ.

Five days later the high priest Ananias went down to Caesarea with some of the elders and a lawyer named Tertullus, and they brought their charges against Paul before the governor. When Paul was called in, Tertullus presented his case before Felix: "We have enjoyed a long period of peace under you, and your foresight has brought about reforms in this nation. Everywhere and in every way, most excellent Felix, we acknowledge this with profound gratitude. But in order not to weary you further, I would request that you be kind enough to hear us briefly. "We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect and even tried to desecrate the temple; so we seized him [*and wanted to judge him according to our law.*] [*But the commander, Lysias, came and with the use of much force snatched him from our hands*] [*and ordered his accusers to come before you.*] By examining him yourself you will be able to learn the truth about all these charges we are bringing against him." The Jews joined in the accusation, asserting that these things were true. When the governor motioned for him to speak, Paul replied: "I know that for a number of years you have been a judge over this nation; so I gladly make my defense. You can easily verify that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship. My accusers did not find me arguing with anyone at the temple, or stirring up a crowd in the synagogues or anywhere else in the city. And they cannot prove to you the charges they are now making against me. However, I admit that I worship the God of our fathers as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. 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, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man. "After an absence of several years, I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts for the poor and to present offerings. I was ceremonially clean when they found me in the temple courts doing this. There was no crowd with me, nor was I involved in any disturbance. But there are some Jews from the province of Asia, who ought to be here before you and bring charges if they have anything against me. Or these who are here should state what crime they found in me when I stood before the Sanhedrin—unless it was this one thing I shouted as I stood in their presence: 'It is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today.'" Then Felix, who was well acquainted with the Way, adjourned the proceedings. "When Lysias the commander comes," he said, "I will decide your case." He ordered the centurion to keep Paul under guard but to give him some freedom and permit his friends to take care of his needs. Several days later Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was a Jewess. He sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. As Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, "That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you." At the same time he was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him. When two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, but because Felix wanted to grant a favor to the Jews, he left Paul in prison.
(Act 24:1-27 NIV)

Felix, the slave Governor

One of the more interesting characters in this history is Felix. We know this man from secular history, particularly Josephus. His entire character may be summed up in this: he is the first Roman governor who has risen to the rank from being a slave, and he carried a slave's mentality with him. Tacitus, the Roman historian, summed him up this way: "He exercised the prerogatives of a king with

the spirit of a slave." His brother, Pallas, was a favorite of the Emperor Nero, and in this way he obtained his freedom and began his rise to power. But he was a slave.

Slave to fear

You have to look no further than the opening speech of Tertullus. He appeals to three things that a Roman governor would fear, knowing that his fear would override his duty to Roman justice:

- He accuses Paul of being a revolutionary. If so, that is one thing a Roman governor would stamp out quickly.
- He accuses him of being a ringleader of a messianic sect. False messiahs abounded at this time, and most of them were insurrectionists.
- He accuses Paul of defiling the Temple. This is an appeal to support the Vichy of the time, the collaborationists.

Note that Paul has at no time done any of the things to which Tertullus alludes. But the lawyer, lying through his flattering lips, hopes that the fear of these things will override Roman justice.

Slave to lust

Felix is on his third wife. Drusilla is the daughter of Herod Agrippa, and by all contemporary accounts, a raving beauty. This might not be so bad, except that he seduced her from her prior husband - who was a king in his own right. He was Azizus, King of Emesa. Drusilla influenced Felix to keep Paul in prison (again, by contemporary records); this is not surprising as she is Jewish. And Felix was her slave.

Slave to anger

It is the measure of Roman justice that it is impartial. The incident that ruined Felix's career - and produced the coming of Festus - was this: A Jewish riot broke out in Caesarea. In such a case the riot is to be stopped, and the instigators punished. Felix went much further: he ordered the troops to sack the Jewish section of town, plundering the inhabitants. It was this incident that caused his removal, as the Jews protested to Caesar. No wonder he was trying to curry favor with them.

A man such as this is not fit to govern. If you need any more evidence, consider that this man heard Paul preach on righteousness, self-control and judgment - so that Paul might get the hint that he should provide a bribe! Character counts.

The Character of Paul

Contrast that character with the character of Paul. Here is a man accused of three things:

- Being an insurrectionary
- Following the Way
- Profaning the Temple.

To the first and third charges, he simply says: please investigate. The facts are obvious. It is the first defense of the Christian against the slanders of the world to point to the facts.

To the second charge, his defense is simple: I believe the same things my accusers believe. I just know more about it. So until being a Christian is a crime, what's the problem? You accuse me of being a Christian. Fine, I am one. What's the problem with that?

Such a defense is credible only if the defendant is credible. Let's see how Paul establishes that credibility.

Paul's preaching

Most of us, when pulled over by the traffic cop, tend to be very pleasant people (there are exceptions!). We don't wish to offend the officer. Even if we think the ticket undeserved, we will tend to be most understanding. By that principle, Paul should have flattered Felix constantly. But compare his opening statement to that of his opponent. Paul says the only good thing he can say about the man: he's been in office a long time. But see that Paul also preaches righteousness, self-control and judgment - not the topics most likely to please Felix. But consider the effect: there is no evidence whatever that any of Paul's Roman judges considered him guilty - just a political problem.

The attraction of righteousness

There is a curious pattern throughout the Bible. The wicked ruler, especially the one who is weak willed, is fascinated with the preacher of righteousness. Herod could not resist John the Baptist; Isaiah went from the pit to the palace frequently; and Paul is called on for two years.. And what did he preach? Nothing but the core of the faith:

- His preaching centers on the Resurrection - the resurrection of Christ, and the resurrection of the dead.
- He is careful not to soft-pedal anything about the judgment to come. Do we hear hellfire and brimstone here?
- No doubt his character enhanced the message - as the message enhanced the character.

The uses of the world

Paul does not commit the two opposite errors of Christians in trouble. One error is to despair, and thus put trust in the world. The other is to get cocky and tempt God, saying "God will deliver me; I can just sit back and wait." Paul does neither. His character is shown in two things:

- First, he does not hesitate to use the rights that are due him. He is a Roman citizen; he is entitled to appeal to Caesar. So he does.
- But in the process, he waits patiently upon the Lord. There is no hint of complaint here - despite two years in prison. What is two years to eternity?

Looking back upon it, it is easy to say that God is in control. But did it look that way at the time? There is only one defense against such despair: integrity. Take it with me in three steps:

- P. T. Barnum put it most simply: you cannot cheat an honest man. By his integrity Paul will not offer a bribe - and so his words hit home to a man who cannot conceive of anyone having such integrity. Perhaps that fascination is really a longing for righteousness.
- Take the principle one step further. Can the one who depends upon God be truly injured? I think not, for all this world is trivial. We are open to injury from Satan's cause only as we permit it. The martyr at the stake knew this; perhaps we should listen to his tale more often.
- The weapons of this world - all of them displayed here - will not bite upon the one who picks up the weapons of heaven. If you will overcome evil with evil, you live by the sword, and will be overcome by it. If you will overcome evil with good, the Evil One has no weapons which can bite through your armor.

Paul's Message

So what does the man have to say? What is the message that Paul gives to the rulers of this world? Perhaps we should be delivering the same message today:

Righteousness

The word can also be translated "justice." Is it not curious that our rulers acknowledge the value of justice, and the world at large values it - but only in receipt. I always want justice; I never want to deliver it. We have it backwards.

Worse yet, this virtue is particularly fitting for the ruler. For if the ruler will not reign in righteousness, what does that say to the people? Does it not say that every man can do whatever he can get away with? Do you hear echoes of "If it's legal, it's moral?"

The truth is simple: Rulers, like the rest of us, are either slaves to righteousness or slaves to sin. Choose well and wisely.

Self Control

Isn't it interesting how we admire the athlete who disciplines himself physically - and even more the athlete who can discipline his character? Ty Cobb was one of the greatest baseball players that ever lived - and yet his friends were few. Not until late in life did he accept Christ, and then publicly regretted the waste. Babe Ruth was no Christian - but because he loved the least, the world loved him. Both had their failings; but it is self control in character we admire, really. It's just that we don't value it in our own lives.

There is a great message in here for our rulers. Presidents want to be popular, respected and loved. This respect and love vanishes for the ruler without self control. Bill Clinton is highly approved - as President. But for the man, who respects him? Gerald Ford's drinking caused him to be an object of ridicule. Franklin Roosevelt was greatly admired for overcoming his handicap. Is there a pattern here?

Judgment to come

The word for judgment used here is an interesting one: it is the root word of the English word "crime." It carries with it the idea of being judicially convicted. If there is no other aspect which becomes a ruler, it is a sense of justice. Can any leader be taken seriously if he will not give good justice?

If that is so for a king or president, how much more so for God? God is just; therefore there must be justice. But the court of God is still in session; sentence is yet to come. While there is yet time, we need to come to Christ.

From the world's view, Paul is in deep trouble. From God's view, it's the world that's in deep trouble. The character of his servant highlights this. The justice of God will bring it about.

God's Ways, Our Ways - Acts 25-26

One of the great surprises to intelligent Christians is the way God treats our prayers. We often ask for something we know is in his will, and we get it - but not in the way we asked for it. Perhaps Paul is seeing something like that here:

Three days after arriving in the province, Festus went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem, where the chief priests and Jewish leaders appeared before him and presented the charges against Paul. They urgently requested Festus, as a favor to them, to have Paul transferred to Jerusalem, for they were preparing an ambush to kill him along the way. Festus answered, "Paul is being held at Caesarea, and I myself am going there soon. Let some of your leaders come with me and press charges against the man there, if he has done anything wrong." After spending eight or ten days with them, he went down to Caesarea, and the next day he convened the court and ordered that Paul be brought before him. When Paul appeared, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many serious charges against him, which they could not prove. Then Paul made his defense: "I have done nothing wrong against the law of the Jews or against the temple or against Caesar." Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there on these charges?" Paul answered: "I am now standing before Caesar's court, where I ought to be tried. I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well. If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!" After Festus had conferred with his council, he declared: "You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!" (Act 25:1-12 NIV)

How God Works

Do you suppose that Paul had this all figured out before it happened? I think not. God often works in "mysterious ways." Here are some of them:

The Unexpected Way

Paul has determined to go to Rome, to preach the Gospel at the center of the civilized world. His travel agent, as it turns out, is the Roman government. Did Paul have this in mind, or something a bit more comfortable? Whichever way it is, Paul is going to Rome, as we shall see. But this is no accident:

- It is conditioned on Paul's obedience. God works his wonders for those who obey him - and He works them *to* those who do not. Paul's obedience to God's will has given him God's protection in that work.
- It is conditioned on Paul's patience. We have seen that this trial has taken two years of imprisonment to come about. At any time Paul could have offered Felix a bribe. Paul preferred to wait upon God's timing.
- This is a way of showing us that the foolishness of God is greater than the wisdom of man.[149] Paul's enemies think they are destroying him. Actually, they are spreading the Gospel by their actions.

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[149] 1 Corinthians 1:22-25

Moral Judo

The temptation to the Christian in this situation is to fight fire with fire. Get the slickest lawyer you can hire; grease palms all the way around; find some political allies[150]. That's not God's way:

- As Paul shows us here, we must overcome evil with good.[151] Do not pick up the weapons of Satan, for if you do, you join his forces.
- Our weapons, therefore, are not of this world.[152] Bribery, slick talk, political alliances are not for the Christian. Rather we must choose the weapons God has provided for us - because the weapons of the world cannot defeat them.
- What are those weapons? Paul outlines them for us in the "whole armor of God" passage, Ephesians 6:13-18.

The key is this: if you will use God's weapons, and those alone, the weapons of this world are powerless against God's cause.

God working "in all things."

We often forget just who is in charge of this universe. This leads us to believe that God does not hear us. But remember:

- Christ is the creator *and sustainer* of the entire universe.[153]
- As such, the Bible explicitly declares to us that He works all things together for the good of those who love him.[154]

We often mistake this. Satan's argument is this:

- If God denies your request, this is proof that he does not answer prayer.
- If He grants your request, you can usually see how the request was granted. Therefore, "it was going to happen anyway." So even when you got what you wanted, God didn't answer.

This logic depends upon two fallacies. First, that God is not wiser than we are. We equate getting what we want with answered prayer. But we wouldn't do that with our children! Second, that the universe is somehow independent of him. Both are indeed fallacies. If God grants your request, you should see how it was done - for it was done in his creation.

So there it is. His enemies wanted him killed. Instead, they arranged an all expenses paid, security guard provided, free trip to Rome with a speaking engagement in front of the Emperor thrown in. Not bad! Just not quite the way Paul had envisioned it.

The World's Way

The world sees it a bit differently. We can get an idea of this in the reaction of Festus and Agrippa:

A few days later King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea to pay their respects to Festus. Since they were spending many days there, Festus discussed Paul's case with the king. He said:

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[150] It is interesting to see the love affair between the Republican Party and the church in this light.
[151] Romans 12:21
[152] 2 Corinthians 10:3-5
[153] Hebrews 1:1-3
[154] Romans 8:28

"There is a man here whom Felix left as a prisoner. When I went to Jerusalem, the chief priests and elders of the Jews brought charges against him and asked that he be condemned. "I told them that it is not the Roman custom to hand over any man before he has faced his accusers and has had an opportunity to defend himself against their charges. When they came here with me, I did not delay the case, but convened the court the next day and ordered the man to be brought in. When his accusers got up to speak, they did not charge him with any of the crimes I had expected. Instead, they had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive. I was at a loss how to investigate such matters; so I asked if he would be willing to go to Jerusalem and stand trial there on these charges. When Paul made his appeal to be held over for the Emperor's decision, I ordered him held until I could send him to Caesar." Then Agrippa said to Festus, "I would like to hear this man myself." He replied, "Tomorrow you will hear him." The next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp and entered the audience room with the high ranking officers and the leading men of the city. At the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. Festus said: "King Agrippa, and all who are present with us, you see this man! The whole Jewish community has petitioned me about him in Jerusalem and here in Caesarea, shouting that he ought not to live any longer. I found he had done nothing deserving of death, but because he made his appeal to the Emperor I decided to send him to Rome. But I have nothing definite to write to His Majesty about him. Therefore I have brought him before all of you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that as a result of this investigation I may have something to write. For I think it is unreasonable to send on a prisoner without specifying the charges against him."
(Act 25:13-27 NIV)

The use of law

Man somehow must attain to the dignity of God. One most common device is to proclaim, "the law says…" Almost all of us acknowledge the existence of right and wrong; the law attempts in some ways to codify that. But if the world wishes to claim what really belongs to God, using this method, it will soon find the flaws - as Festus does here:

- The law must be *complete* - it must deal with every situation. Roman law, a code imposed from above, was supposed to do that. But what code can deal with the One who came to fulfill the true Law? How does the code deal with one who is risen from the grave?
- The law must be *errorless* - its provisions must always give justice. Just to state this provision is to see the problem: the law is an imitation of the true righteousness. The only way for the world to make the law errorless is to declare it to be so - the Fuhrer is always right.

And when the law is neither complete nor errorless, its practitioners must do something. Here, they fall back upon bureaucratic dodge: the local expert is coming in; we'll ask him. Surely there is a legal loophole somewhere.

The pretence of the absolute state

In our time we have seen the re-emergence of the absolute state. This is the government which proclaims itself to be righteousness in and of itself. We saw it in Hitler's Germany, where every soldier took an oath of loyalty to Adolf Hitler, personally. We see it yet in communist countries. But it is a pretence.

- "Power," said Mao Tse-Tung, "grows out of the barrel of a cannon." Force is potent, but not sovereign. If force accompanies sovereignty (the true right to rule) then it is good. If it sweeps aside sovereignty, it is not. Time and again the dictator has proclaimed himself supreme. Give it time; the dustbin of history has many such men.

- The nature of power itself makes this claim absurd. For if power is absolute, it cannot be resisted - and therefore does not need to be declared absolute. Who can resist gravity? But does God thunder from heaven, threatening us if we do not obey the law of gravity?

In our own land, in our own time, we see the humanists proclaiming the supremacy of man's righteousness. Abortion is good, they tell us, because we say so. Patience, Christian, and endurance: the dustbin of history is not quite overflowing - yet.

Is the king above the law?

One of the great monuments in the march of justice is Magna Carta. It contains no great proclamations of human rights. Indeed, the document itself deals mostly with mediaeval obscurities. But buried within is a basic principle: the king is not above the law. In a society which held the king was appointed by God, even the king was not superior to the law. It is a point which bears repeating in every age.

Bernice, the "wife" of Agrippa, is also his sister. Like most of Herod's family, she schemes relentlessly. She has been married, widowed, divorced - and indeed was quite a charmer. Two Roman emperors slept with her (Titus and Vespasian) and one wanted to make her empress (Vespasian). He was prevented from doing so only by public outcry. She is highly positioned - but God is not deceived.[155] Paul gives her no flattery. He treats her and her husband as the sinners they are - and offers them the forgiveness of God.

Our Response

Given all this, what should be our response? How is the Christian to act when involved in this conflict between God and the world? How is the Christian to deal with earthly things when heavenly things are on his mind? Let's look:

Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself." So Paul motioned with his hand and began his defense: "King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense against all the accusations of the Jews, and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently. "The Jews all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem. They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that according to the strictest sect of our religion, I lived as a Pharisee. And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our fathers that I am on trial today. This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. O king, it is because of this hope that the Jews are accusing me. Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead? "I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them. "On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. About noon, O king, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing

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[155] Galatians 6:7

around me and my companions. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' "Then I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' ""I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' the Lord replied. "Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.' "So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds. That is why the Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. But I have had God's help to this very day, and so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles." At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defense. "You are out of your mind, Paul!" he shouted. "Your great learning is driving you insane." "I am not insane, most excellent Festus," Paul replied. "What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do." Then Agrippa said to Paul, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" Paul replied, "Short time or long—I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains." The king rose, and with him the governor and Bernice and those sitting with them. They left the room, and while talking with one another, they said, "This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment." Agrippa said to Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."
(Act 26:1-32 NIV)

Boldness

You would think that after two years in prison Paul would have learned his lesson, and greased some palms. Not Paul. He speaks out with boldness and courage. This courage has roots:

- *A clear conscience.* Have you ever been pulled over for a traffic violation? It makes a lot of difference in your attitude if you recall that you really were speeding. A sense of guilt destroys courage; a sense of righteousness increases it.
- *Preparation.* Did you think that Paul was idle those two years - or was he preparing his defense, especially after he heard that a new governor was coming?
- *The Holy Spirit.* Many of us forget that we can rely on God is such situations. It is true; the Scripture promises us[156] that He will give us the words to say.

Note that in all this there is one thing which is certain: such boldness will provoke persecution. We are the servants of Christ; they persecuted him. When we proclaim him boldly, they will persecute us too.

Personal Testimony

Paul does not reason from philosophy or first principles. Rather, he begins with his own personal testimony. Note three things:

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[156] Luke 12:11-12

- He begins with something that each of us can use: a comparison of ourselves before and after our encounter with Jesus Christ. If Christ made no difference in your life, you have nothing to say. But if he did …
- He is not afraid to confess his sins. Indeed, as often repeated, there is only one qualification for becoming a Christian: you have to be a sinner first. Paul admits this, and in so doing clears the way for any other sinner. If I, the sinner, can be saved, then so can you.
- He proclaims the great mercy of God triumphing over the justice of God. It is mercy we need, not justice.

Those who persecute

As we are certain to be persecuted, we need to decide beforehand what our attitude towards our persecutors should be. It is no sense trying to decide as the issue comes up. It is much better to be prepared that to "wing it."

- First, understand that it is generally God's will that we flee from persecution![157] Jesus understands that we are not heroes. By fleeing the Gospel is spread to new locations. This is God's use of the unexpected.
- But if we cannot, we need to remember that God's grace is sufficient for our every need. It may not appear that we can withstand our trials. Do not fear; he will provide.[158]
- More than that, as Paul appealed to Agrippa to become a Christian, we must exhibit Christ's love for our persecutors. Here is how Jesus put it:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.
(Mat 5:38-48 NIV)

Trust your Father to work in unexpected ways, working all things together for your good. Do not succumb to the world's ways, but rather live as God's children. Then see how your light will shine in the darkness.

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[157] Matthew 10:23
[158] 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Lesson in the Storm - Acts 27

It's no great revelation to the average Christian that God sends adversity to those who sin. But what about those who are walking in God's will? Let's look at an example here. Paul, knowing that the Spirit has commanded and foretold that he will go to Rome, meets a lot of "natural difficulties" along the way:

When it was decided that we would sail for Italy, Paul and some other prisoners were handed over to a centurion named Julius, who belonged to the Imperial Regiment. We boarded a ship from Adramyttium about to sail for ports along the coast of the province of Asia, and we put out to sea. Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica, was with us. The next day we landed at Sidon; and Julius, in kindness to Paul, allowed him to go to his friends so they might provide for his needs. From there we put out to sea again and passed to the lee of Cyprus because the winds were against us. When we had sailed across the open sea off the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we landed at Myra in Lycia. There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy and put us on board. We made slow headway for many days and had difficulty arriving off Cnidus. When the wind did not allow us to hold our course, we sailed to the lee of Crete, opposite Salmone. We moved along the coast with difficulty and came to a place called Fair Havens, near the town of Lasea. Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Fast. So Paul warned them, "Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also." But the centurion, instead of listening to what Paul said, followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship. Since the harbor was unsuitable to winter in, the majority decided that we should sail on, hoping to reach Phoenix and winter there. This was a harbor in Crete, facing both southwest and northwest. When a gentle south wind began to blow, they thought they had obtained what they wanted; so they weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete. Before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the "northeaster," swept down from the island. The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and were driven along. As we passed to the lee of a small island called Cauda, we were hardly able to make the lifeboat secure. When the men had hoisted it aboard, they passed ropes under the ship itself to hold it together. Fearing that they would run aground on the sandbars of Syrtis, they lowered the sea anchor and let the ship be driven along. We took such a violent battering from the storm that the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard. On the third day, they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved. After the men had gone a long time without food, Paul stood up before them and said: "Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss. But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me and said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.' So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me. Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island." On the fourteenth night we were still being driven across the Adriatic Sea, when about midnight the sailors sensed they were approaching land. They took soundings and found that the water was a hundred and twenty feet deep. A short time later they took soundings again and found it was ninety feet deep. Fearing that we would be dashed against the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight. In an attempt to escape from the ship, the sailors let the lifeboat down into the sea, pretending they were going to lower some anchors from the bow. Then Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved." So the soldiers cut the ropes that held the lifeboat and let it fall away. Just before dawn Paul urged them all to eat. "For the last fourteen days," he said, "you have been in

constant suspense and have gone without food—you haven't eaten anything. Now I urge you to take some food. You need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head." After he said this, he took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat. They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves. Altogether there were 276 of us on board. When they had eaten as much as they wanted, they lightened the ship by throwing the grain into the sea. When daylight came, they did not recognize the land, but they saw a bay with a sandy beach, where they decided to run the ship aground if they could. Cutting loose the anchors, they left them in the sea and at the same time untied the ropes that held the rudders. Then they hoisted the foresail to the wind and made for the beach. But the ship struck a sandbar and ran aground. The bow stuck fast and would not move, and the stern was broken to pieces by the pounding of the surf. The soldiers planned to kill the prisoners to prevent any of them from swimming away and escaping. But the centurion wanted to spare Paul's life and kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and get to land. The rest were to get there on planks or on pieces of the ship. In this way everyone reached land in safety.
(Act 27:1-44 NIV)

Natural Difficulties

Hidden in this passage - a wonderful seafaring story in itself, with the obvious eyewitness account of Dr. Luke - is a great difficulty. It is clear from the text that Paul is doing precisely what God wants him to do: going to Rome. Now, the Almighty being in charge of these things, one might ask just why he has so much difficulty in getting there.

Indeed, many Christians have the same dilemma. "How is it," they ask, "that the righteous man, the one doing God's will, seems to meet with such troubles in this life? I can understand God's chastisement; I can see the hand of Satan - but this is clearly God's doing. Why?" Perhaps we can see some reasons here.

That others might see God through you

Notice, if you please, what respect Paul gets from the Centurion. The sailors want to slip away on the life boat; Paul says no, the Centurion acts. The Centurion wishes to spare Paul's life, and thus does not slaughter the prisoners (one must remember that a soldier who loses a prisoner replaces him in prison). Sometimes God sends adversity so that the Christian might prove to be the example of God.

That we might be strengthened

Do you exercise? Is it in vain? No, you believe that by exercise you are strengthened. Spiritual exercise is often found in adversity. What better adversity than natural disaster? There is no one to hate; there is no evil to fight, just the problem at hand. The temptation is less and the opportunity just as great as any other.

That we might learn deliverance

Many of us are very confident of our own abilities. It is not a sin to know that you are talented. But once in a while we might just need a reminder of just who is our deliverance.[159] It is hard for the

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[159] Psalm 34:19

able to learn that they must trust in God, and sometimes natural calamity is the best teacher for this. Sometimes we need to learn deliverance from the receiving end.

That we might trust only in God

Many of us are greatly pleased with the arrangements we have made for our future. We have retirement funds, stocks and bonds, all kinds of things. Some have survival shelters, six months of food, a spare generator. Others of us have one flashlight. But whoever we are, we must learn to trust only in God. All these preparations may be wise, and there is good reason to make them. But sometimes God surprises us with something for which we are not prepared - just to remind us that he is God and we need to trust only in Him.

There are two examples of this here:

- First, when do you throw the grain overboard? When do you decide that the things you have provided for financial security are now harmful and need to be disposed of? Does the money you have really do you any good, or should it be given away - to keep you from temptation and to benefit someone else?
- Next, no matter how it appears, there is no security in this world. You can appear close to safe harbor - and then run aground on a sand bar. Thomas à Kempis puts it this way:

IT IS good for us to have trials and troubles at times, for they often remind us that we are on probation and ought not to hope in any worldly thing. It is good for us sometimes to suffer contradiction, to be misjudged by men even though we do well and mean well. These things help us to be humble and shield us from vainglory. When to all outward appearances men give us no credit, when they do not think well of us, then we are more inclined to seek God Who sees our hearts. Therefore, a man ought to root himself so firmly in God that he will not need the consolations of men.

When a man of good will is afflicted, tempted, and tormented by evil thoughts, he realizes clearly that his greatest need is God, without Whom he can do no good. Saddened by his miseries and sufferings, he laments and prays. He wearies of living longer and wishes for death that he might be dissolved and be with Christ. Then he understands fully that perfect security and complete peace cannot be found on earth.

(The Imitation of Christ, I-12)

That God might comfort us - so that we will know him

Matters must have been pretty desperate for God to send an angel to Paul. Sometimes this is the whole purpose of calamity - that God might comfort us, and in so doing we might draw closer to Him.

All Things Work Together[160]

There is another difficulty for some Christians here. God has told Paul that he is going to Rome. The temptation is to kick back and enjoy the cruise. Paul does not do that. Why? Is God unable to deliver him without his help?

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[160] Romans 8:28

Breaking bread

Paul sets an example here. The men, crazed with fear, have not eaten in two weeks. This is not good. So he calmly sits down and eats, setting an example for them which encourages them. It is a practical thing. But remember: our Lord fed the five thousand. We are to be his imitators. He worked in this practical way, and we should too. We may not be able to solve world hunger - but we can feed the hungry man in front of us.

Some of us don't see that. We're so heavenly minded that we're no earthly good.[161]

The goodness of God

We see here the goodness of God - not only does he spare Paul and all his companions, but indeed grants him - as a favor - all the lives on board. Surely this is in answer to Paul's prayers! So we see that prayer changes things. But - there is that small voice in the back of the room - why did Paul tell the Centurion to cut the ropes to the lifeboat? Surely God could deliver without the sailors on board; why does Paul require them?

The answer is simple: God has pronounced his intention; Paul will work in that direction. All things are to work together - including us.

But - why "swiftly?"

Swift to cut the ropes

If there is anything which impresses me about the early Christians, it is their sense of urgency. We tend to think we have all the time in the world to do what God wills - when we get around to it is soon enough. But consider:

- The ancient Hebrew, in taking the Passover (the predecessor of the Lord's Supper) was to eat it in haste, dressed for a journey. We often linger over communion; they were taught that action was to follow immediately. Moments with God are to provoke swift action.
- We have only so much time on this earth - and that not known to us. We are, as the King James put it , to "redeem the time."[162] Get to work - for the night is coming.

Throughout this passage, we see that God encourages Paul during his difficulties - but does not prevent those difficulties. Paul reacts to this with one of the three great virtues: hope.

Hope

It is rare today to think of hope as a virtue - but the church has always held it to be one, from the earliest days. We need to consider it carefully.

The character of hope

First and foremost, hope must be unconditional - otherwise it's merely wishful thinking. No matter what happens, we must hope on:

Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him; I will surely defend my ways to his face.

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[161] Barclay
[162] Ephesians 5:15-16

(Job 13:15 NIV)

Is this hard for you? Perhaps this might help. Often we lose hope because we can't see how God is going to work things out. Because we cannot see, we do not hope. But is it necessary to see? Or is it merely necessary to know? Suppose you knew how God was going to work it out - suppose he told you. Would it make any difference to what you are supposed to do? Of course not; your duty is clear. Then do it, and hope in God for the deliverance to come.

The virtues of hope

There are two great virtues to a living hope:

- First, it is a source of patience. As long as we hope, we persevere, and in perseverance we learn patience. Have you ever felt that your children would never grow up?
- Next, it is a source of strength. Isaiah puts it this way:

Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.
(Isa 40:30-31 NIV)

The actions of hope

So then, what shall we do? It is all well and good to talk about hope - but how do I put it into practice daily? I am indebted to Bishop Jeremy Taylor (17th century) for this answer - five acts of hope:

- Rely on God's promises. If He promises it, act like it is certain - depend upon it in your daily life. Don't look for it - assume it.
- Whenever you encounter adversity, always think that it must be either God's chastisement for your correction, or an opportunity for you to grow closer to Him. Either way, He is your Father - correcting you or drawing you closer.
- Rejoice in hope - no matter what the misfortune.
- Desire, pray and long for the true hope of the Christian - the return of Jesus Christ. Do not let the day go by without "Even so, Lord Jesus, come!"
- And while you are waiting for the Resurrection, persevere in this life in the imitation of your Hope.

A Happy Habit - Acts 28:1-15

It is surprising how often Christians bring up the mistaken attitude that what they do in ordinary, daily life is not particularly important - only that which comes out in the crisis. It is not so; character is not made by crisis, it is shown by crisis. We see in here today one of the habits of character which ennobles a Christian - hospitality.

Once safely on shore, we found out that the island was called Malta. The islanders showed us unusual kindness. They built a fire and welcomed us all because it was raining and cold. Paul gathered a pile of brushwood and, as he put it on the fire, a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. When the islanders saw the snake hanging from his hand, they said to each other, "This man must be a murderer; for though he escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live." But Paul shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects. The people expected him to swell up or suddenly fall dead, but after waiting a long time and seeing nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and said he was a god. There was an estate nearby that belonged to Publius, the chief official of the island. He welcomed us to his home and for three days entertained us hospitably. His father was sick in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him and, after prayer, placed his hands on him and healed him. When this had happened, the rest of the sick on the island came and were cured. They honored us in many ways and when we were ready to sail, they furnished us with the supplies we needed. After three months we put out to sea in a ship that had wintered in the island. It was an Alexandrian ship with the figurehead of the twin gods Castor and Pollux. We put in at Syracuse and stayed there three days. From there we set sail and arrived at Rhegium. The next day the south wind came up, and on the following day we reached Puteoli. There we found some brothers who invited us to spend a week with them. And so we came to Rome. The brothers there had heard that we were coming, and they traveled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. At the sight of these men Paul thanked God and was encouraged.
(Act 28:1-15 NIV)

The Virtues of the Barbarians

The word for "islanders" here is actually "barbarians." The Greeks (like Luke, the author of this history, who was obviously present on this occasion) considered anyone who did not speak Greek to be one who babbled on and on ("bar-bar"). It is instructive to consider, then, that these people are neither Christian nor Jew, not given the instruction of God - and yet exhibit virtues worth emulating and exceeding. Indeed, God goes beyond that: sometimes the virtues of the pagans are the route by which the Gospel is displayed in power, as we shall see.

Justice

The pagans have a definite sense of justice. They agree with Job's friends: the reason that snake bit you is that you deserved it. There is justice in the world, and what goes around comes around (or ought to). It's obvious to them, in their superstitious way, that Paul must be a murderer. But note the reaction when the snake does no harm! Suffering in innocence proclaims the man of God, and here prepares the hearts of these people to hear the Word.

We often use this incident as a instance of the credentials of an Apostle.[163] But these islanders had not read that passage; they just understood justice. And justice here proclaims the man of God, suffering, but innocent.

Hospitality

One writer has suggested that the "unusual kindness" of the islanders is the work of the Spirit, preparing their hearts for these unusual guests. After all, when you have welcomed someone into your home, it's hard not hear what they have to say.

There is more. We see two other things in this example:

- Those rich in the things of this world - in this instance Publius, the chief official of the island - have a particular duty to practice hospitality.
- Hospitality is not just in the coming, but in the going. The islanders supplied their needs as they left.

Response of the Christian

Of course, hospitality is much easier if the guest is of a welcome character. We see some of that here in Paul; note that he is gathering sticks for the fire. Some of us get so "executive" in our thinking that after the shipwreck we want to organize and manage the rescue - but the Christian pitches in with the team.

Indeed, the Christian repays hospitality with the grace of God. It's not easy to spot in the English, but the words "heal" and "cure" in verses 7-8 are actually two different words. The first means an instantaneous healing; the second a gradual cure. It would seem that Paul applies the first and we may guess that Luke the second, as he was a doctor. The Christian guest should never neglect his host.

We do also see Christian hospitality in this passage, at the end. Paul is met by Christians when he lands - Christians he has never met. Interestingly, they come from Appius, which is 40 miles away, and Three Taverns, which is 30 miles away, on foot! (And we grumble at a trip to the airport). Hospitality is an effort.

The Nature of Hospitality

Hospitality gets little press in Christian writing, largely because it has declined only recently. With the rise of hotels we have lost much of the art - which is a pity. There is much to be learned from it.

Hospitality is a sacrifice

Did you ever have the thought that you'd like to make a sacrifice to God - but the occasion just never arises? Hospitality is just such an occasion:

- *You sacrifice the pleasant.* I arrange my home to my liking. The furniture, the other items and indeed the normal schedule of my home is arranged for the benefit of me and my family. But when

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[163] Mark 16:17-18

we entertain guests, we alter that. The furniture is rearranged and the meals changed; the schedule is different. I sacrifice the pleasant things for the pleasure of my guests.

- *You sacrifice the present.* If I am at home, I tend to presume that my time is my own (or at least my wife's). But when I have a guest, I must give up some of that control of my time in favor of my guest's wishes. My schedule must now accommodate their doings.
- *You sacrifice the private.* When you come into my home, you see my library - the books that influence my thought. You hear the comments that I'm too polite to make in public. You see me interacting with my children - and see how I've raised them. This might be embarrassing!

Hospitality is a habit

The phrase in the English language - taken from the King James - is that we "practice" hospitality. The word[164] in the Greek literally means "to pursue." We are to perform our hospitality diligently, not haphazardly. There are two specific implications of this:

- First, we are to practice hospitality "without grumbling."[165] Have you ever been the guest in a home that did not want you there? Consider that you are a child of God, and this is how others will see God - just like others see me reflected in my children, in my home.
- It is the particular duty of those who are rich in this world to give hospitality - like Publius in this story. To this day, many churches have members who set aside "Elisha's room"[166] for visiting missionaries and workers.

Not just for the "known," but also the unknown

One of the most difficult aspects of Christian hospitality is that it must be given to the unknown guest - the stranger - as well as to those known. We are often uncomfortable with this. But consider:

- It is by this method that God often blesses us. Publius did not know Paul, but his father was healed by Paul. Elisha is welcomed by the Shunemite[167] who rewards her with a long desired son - and raises him from the dead. Indeed, the Scripture enjoins us to hospitality by telling us that in so doing we may entertain "angels unaware."[168] God rewards those who are faithful.
- It is by this method that the Gospel is spread. First, we can see that giving hospitality to the poor (in Jesus name) is a powerful witness for the Gospel. We also see that it is specially commended that we give hospitality to traveling evangelists, even those we don't know. John the Apostle commends one Gaius for this[169] - the same Gaius commended by Paul for his hospitality.[170] Imagine the privilege of having both Paul and John in your house! Imagine the spread of the Gospel in your community!

Hospitality to the Spirit

There is one guest to whom all Christians, by the grace of God, give hospitality: the Holy Spirit.

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?

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[164] from Romans 12:13
[165] 1 Peter 4:9
[166] 2 Kings 4:8-10
[167] 2 Kings r
[168] Hebrews 13:2
[169] 3 John 1:1-8
[170] Romans 16:23

(1Co 3:16 NIV)

We need to consider, then, how well we do at giving hospitality to the most important guest anyone could have.

Sacrifice

- *Do you sacrifice the pleasant?* This can be done in many ways. We often think of giving up a pleasure so that our brother might not stumble, in the spirit of Romans 14. But there are deeper meanings than that. For example, are you willing to give up the pleasure of anger - particularly anger which is chewed like a cow's cud - so that the Spirit will not be grieved? Will you give up drunkenness so that you might listen to the Spirit's voice?
- *Do you sacrifice the present?* We often say, "my time is my own!" But is it really? C. S. Lewis gives us a great example of this. Suppose that Jesus came to you, in the flesh, and asked you for the next 24 hours of your time. You would not have the courage to plead your schedule with Him! How disappointed you would be if He had you spend the first half hour listening to a lonely old woman chatter, and then told you to go and enjoy yourself. But if you name Him as Lord, does not your time belong to Him now?
- *Do you sacrifice the private?* It is foolish to think you cannot - he knows your every thought. But how many of us put our lives into little compartments, marking this one "God" and another one "Me." Are there pleasures in your life which are "off limits" to the Holy Spirit? How would a guest feel if you told him to stay out of the kitchen?

Habit

Habit, too, plays its part in hospitality. We need to examine ourselves in this area as well:

- Do we practice hospitality to the Spirit? Or is He only welcome in times of crisis?
- Is our hospitality without grumbling? Or do we wish that God would please leave us alone, and stop bringing to mind the evils we do? We must remember that the Spirit is there to prompt us to holiness and perfection in Christ.
- Indeed, this is the special "duty" of the rich. But note how the rich in Spirit love it! Those whose devotional life - the life in the Spirit - is rich are much more inclined to accept the Spirit in all aspects of their lives.

Not just the known, but also the unknown

Here indeed are some fruitful questions:

- Will I be so filled with the Spirit that God's grace flows out of me, not just to those I know, but also to those I do not?
- Will I be so open to the leading of the Spirit that I will hear and heed the call of the unknown? Whether that is the call of unknown place, unknown person, or indeed the sin in my life which the Spirit is trying to make known, will I listen?
- And when our Lord returns in glory, will He find the Holy Spirit at home? I do not know the time of His return. Will I rejoice at His return, or will I be scurrying around trying to clean house before he arrives? The Shunemite woman was prepared for Elisha's return; will we be prepared for our Lord's return? Repentance is then too late.

Redemption - Acts 28:16-31

There is an enduring theme, as an artist would understand it, through the Bible. It is this: God redeems his people from their sin and suffering. The point is at least an artistic one; as J. R. R. Tolkien put it: "Now it is a strange thing, but things that are good to have and days that are good to spend are soon told about, and not much to listen to; while things that are uncomfortable, palpitating and even gruesome, may make a good tale, and a deal of telling anyway."[171] We come to the end of such a tale, and it is good to reflect upon it.

When we got to Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him. Three days later he called together the leaders of the Jews. When they had assembled, Paul said to them: "My brothers, although I have done nothing against our people or against the customs of our ancestors, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans. They examined me and wanted to release me, because I was not guilty of any crime deserving death. But when the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar—not that I had any charge to bring against my own people. For this reason I have asked to see you and talk with you. It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain." They replied, "We have not received any letters from Judea concerning you, and none of the brothers who have come from there has reported or said anything bad about you. But we want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect." They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe. They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement: "The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your forefathers when he said through Isaiah the prophet: "'Go to this people and say, "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving." For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.' "Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!" [*After he said this, the Jews left, arguing vigorously among themselves.*] For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.
(Act 28:16-31 NIV)

Attitude and Altitude

"Your attitude," says a popular slogan, "determines your altitude." In a sense that is true for the Christian facing times of trouble. Just what kind of attitude should we have?

Persecution is inevitable

We seem to think we can avoid it, but the Bible makes it quite clear that where the light of God shines forth the vermin will react with persecution. You cannot change that; you can change your attitude towards it. Perhaps we should revise our attitude in light of the ***blessings*** of persecution:

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[171] The Hobbit, Ch 3.

- First, persecution usually achieves the opposite of its desired effect. One result of persecution is that the Gospel spreads - because Christians, obedient to their Lord, flee persecution.[172]
- Next, that we might find God's blessing, even in the midst of persecution. Or if not then, when He returns.[173] For it is a badge of honor that Satan thinks you worth persecuting, and God will reward such.
- Another reason is this: by their fruits you will know them. Persecution is a wonderful instrument for separating out the true Christians from the Sunday attenders.[174]
- Finally, persecution teaches you to give this life away, so that you might gain in return eternal life.[175]

Examples

You want to see an example of the right attitude in persecution? Just look at Paul in this passage. Here's a man who has been railroaded through the justice system of the time - by the Jews. He's been the victim of beatings, floggings and assassination plots - by the Jews. There are people who consider him unfit to live - the Jews. And what does he say about them? "Not that I had any charge to bring against my own people." Note two things here:

- He brings no charge - despite all they have done. Why? Because he hopes for their salvation, and does not wish to drive them further away.
- He calls them "my own people." No closer can you get to heartache than this.

The ultimate example, of course, is Jesus Himself. As Isaiah said it many years before the event,

> He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.
> (Isa 53:7 NIV)

Jars of Clay

We must remember that we hold the treasure of God in jars of clay.[176] It is God who gives victory in this, not us. So what then should be our attitude towards those who persecute us?

- We must give up all thought of revenge. Vengeance belongs to God,[177] and to take vengeance is to take what belongs to God.
- We must be diligent in his work. Note (verse 23) that Paul teaches "morning till evening." Being diligent about his work also has the advantage that it give us less time to brood on revenge!
- Ultimately, however, we must realize that there will be rejection by some. Christ told us that He came to bring a sword, not peace.[178]

Rejection

Persecution can be painful to the body; rejection can be painful to the soul. We must remember that when we present Christ and are rejected that it is Christ who is being rejected - however

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[172] Matthew 10:22-23
[173] Matthew 5:11-12
[174] John 15:18-19
[175] Luke 17:33
[176] 2 Corinthians 4:4-7
[177] Romans 12:19-21
[178] Matthew 10:34-42

we present Him. This is especially painful to parents who live a Christian life only to watch their children reject that life. We come back again and again to "why?"

- One reason is for our sins. It is instructive to read the story of Samuel's sons. He appointed them judges; they were unjust - so the people rejected God's prophet and demanded a king.[179]
- Sometimes, as Christ told us in the parable of the Sower and the Seeds, it is the care of this world which drives out that which we have planted.
- Ultimately, however, rejection of God is rooted in pride. It is by pride that Satan fell

Rejection is punished by God

It is one of the constants of the Old Testament. God warns his people, over and over, of the perils of rejecting Him and following after other gods and other ways. The blessings of keeping his ways are made apparent; the curse of departing is likewise plain. Despite this, the Old Testament is filled with examples of the Jews rejecting God. Not until they return from captivity do we see that idol worship is abolished.

This is also a picture of what is to come. The Old Testament also clearly prophesies that the Christ, the Messiah, would also be rejected.[180] But it is also clear that the Christ would rise to greatness by God's power.[181] Despite this clear vision of what was to happen, God did not vary from his fixed purpose. You will note that in his ministry Christ *never* left the area of Israel as defined by Moses. Indeed, we have a fine example of his single-mindedness on the subject:

A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession." Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said. He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs." "Yes, Lord," she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.
(Mat 15:22-28 NIV)

It may seem foolish that Jesus would do this; did he not know the Jews would reject Him? Should he not have taken this rejection as a sign to carry the message elsewhere? To understand why not, we need to understand another of God's themes: the remnant.

The remnant

Another of God's themes is this: after a time of punishment for rejection, or a time of persecution (often the same) God will keep for himself a remnant of his people who are faithful. This is what Paul sees happening to the Jews:

I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew. Don't you know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah—how he appealed to God against

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[179] 1 Samuel 8:1-9
[180] See Isaiah 53
[181] Isaiah 53:12

Israel: "Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me"? And what was God's answer to him? "I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal." So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace. What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened, as it is written: "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day." And David says: "May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them. May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever." Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring! I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?
(Rom 11:1-15 NIV)

(A similar thought may be found prophesied in Isaiah 6). We see this idea throughout the Old Testament.

- Joseph tells his brothers that they are to be saved "as a remnant" out of the famine of the time.[182] This is typical of God.
- We need to understand that this is not "natural selection." This is the work of God. For as the prophet wrote,

Once more a remnant of the house of Judah will take root below and bear fruit above. For out of Jerusalem will come a remnant, and out of Mount Zion a band of survivors. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.
(2Ki 19:30-31 NIV)

It is the work of "the zeal of the Lord of Hosts."

- It is also an act of grace, the unmerited favor of God. Ezra, returning with the exiles, clearly saw this:

"But now, O our God, what can we say after this? For we have disregarded the commands you gave through your servants the prophets when you said: 'The land you are entering to possess is a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples. By their detestable practices they have filled it with their impurity from one end to the other. Therefore, do not give your daughters in marriage to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. Do not seek a treaty of friendship with them at any time, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it to your children as an everlasting inheritance.' "What has happened to us is a result of our evil deeds and our great guilt, and yet, our God, you have punished us less than our sins have deserved and have given us a remnant like this.
(Ezr 9:10-13 NIV)

Triumph Through Tragedy

How then, does this come about? We must remember that God's instruction is that we are not to overcome evil with evil, but overcome evil with good.[183]

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[182] Genesis 45:7
[183] Romans 12:21

- We are the imitators of Christ. "What Would Jesus Do?" is a popular slogan and motto for our youth. This is a great principle of the faith.
- If then God gives us a command, then is it not likely that the command is to do something in imitation of Him?
- And does not our Father send his rain on the just and the unjust?

God not the author of evil

Do not be misled. God did not create evil so that he might bring good out of it. He did not create evil at all. Evil exists because righteousness exists, like darkness exists only because light exists. Righteousness may exist without evil; evil cannot exist without righteousness. God is the author of righteousness. And as such he is the creator of happy endings.

- The Jews were enslaved in Egypt; Pharaoh's heart was hard. But God turned this into good, and created the nation of Israel from it.
- David committed adultery and murder to get Bathsheba - but from this union came Solomon.
- The supreme example, of course, is our Lord's death on the Cross - from which we have salvation.

God is not finished yet

Many would ask now, "so how come we're still suffering?" Because God is not finished yet. We need to see his mercy and goodness as they really are.

First, we need to see his providence in the world in which we live. As Jesus taught us,

(Mat 6:26-34 NIV) Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? {27} Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life ? {28} "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. {29} Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. {30} If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? {31} So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' {32} For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. {33} But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. {34} Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Is it not the case that much of what we consider our troubles come through our worries? Should we not have confidence in the one who created all things?

Next, God has a change planned for this world:

(Rev 21:1-7 NIV) Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. {2} I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. {3} And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. {4} He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." {5} He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." {6} He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. {7} He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son.

So then, this being the way things will be then, what should we do in the meanwhile? Peter gives us the simple answer:

(2 Pet 3:13-14 NIV) But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. {14} So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.

Is this life, or is this preparation for true life? Decide well; eternity hangs in the balance.