



Reflections on Acts

Don Merritt

Introduction

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All blessings to you in Christ!

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Introduction to Acts

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 presented himself to them 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.

Acts 1:1-3

With this prologue, the action begins in this historical work that chronicles the early church for roughly its first 30 years of existence. This then is the story of how 11 young and dazed men became 12 Apostles who challenged the existing order both in Judea and throughout the known world of their time. When all was said and done, they had overthrown the whole order of things, based on the teachings of a relatively obscure Jewish carpenter/teacher, a work that still has a massive impact on the world of today. Oh yes, this is nothing if not an unlikely story, in fact in human terms it is essentially an impossible story, yet these young men had something within them that was the quintessential game-changer, for they quickly became the very embodiment of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The author of this account did not identify himself in his writings, but we know who he was because of another New Testament book that he wrote, one that bears his name. Actually the prologue to that book provides us an interesting parallel to the one found in Acts:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Luke 1:1-4

Tradition holds that Luke was a physician, and whether this title would have meant quite the same thing in his day as it does today is probably a matter of conjecture, but one thing is certain; whoever Luke was or whatever his profession may have been, he was certainly a well-educated man, as evidenced by the quality of his Greek. It is also clear that he was an associate of Paul, as we will see later on in the story, and an eyewitness to many of the things he describes here.

The theme and overall context of Acts rings clearly through the ages:

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. (1:8)

Acts has multiple phases and deals with many trials, tribulations... and triumphs, but this will remain the major theme, that they will receive power with the Holy Spirit, power to be the very witnesses of Jesus Christ throughout the world. Thus, we might accurately consider Acts to be

the book of Genesis for the Church itself, for what was begun way back in Luke's day, is an ongoing story from that time until this very day, a story in which both you and I have a part to play.

Our journey through this epic story begins today right here at The Life Project; I hope you'll decide to join us for the entire ride!

Chapter 1

The Story Begins

Acts 1:1-11

As I mentioned earlier, Luke begins his second book with a prelude, much like the one with which he began his gospel (1:1-3). Again, he addresses himself to a man named *Theophilus*. Sadly, there is no way for us to know for sure who this guy was; Theophilus was a rather common name at the time. It is important for us to note, however that it is a Greek name. This fact has resulted in the widely held belief that Luke wrote his account of Jesus' ministry for a Greek audience, and of course it would seem reasonable to suggest that Acts was written as a second volume for the same audience.

He begins Acts at about the point where Luke leaves off; the gospel ends with the ascension of Christ and Acts begins just before the ascension as though Luke wished to remind his readers of where they had wrapped up with a short transition into the second part of the saga.

If you notice in Luke 24, the last things Jesus spoke to the disciples about was that they should remain in Jerusalem until they had received the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:46-49) and then He ascends. Luke's Acts account begins:

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." (1:4-5)

With these words, the first and second volumes of Luke's message slide together nicely to form one larger saga that tells not only of "what you have heard from the beginning", but what the result of the message turned out to be. The next few verses share a piece of that same conversation that did not appear in the gospel:

Then they gathered around him and 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." (1:6-8)

As unbelievable as it may seem for those of us who have the 20/20 vision of hindsight, the disciples seem to have believed that Jesus' Messianic mission was to restore the glory of Israel... even after the resurrection. You'll recall that over and over in the gospels, Jesus tries to disabuse them of this notion, for His work was far greater in scope and magnitude than simply restoring Israel to the pantheon of nations, Once again, Jesus sets them straight, telling them that such things are not for them to know. In a sense, He sidesteps their question and answers the one they should have asked in verse 8, and it is here that Luke tells us of the theme of everything that will follow; He ascends into heaven in verse 9.

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." (1:10-11)

He was gone into heaven, just as He and the prophets before Him had foretold; the only thing left for them to do was to wait, for the Holy Spirit of God was waiting in the wings and would shortly burst upon the scene.

Acts 1:12-26

After the ascension of our Lord, the disciples walked the half mile or so back to the city where they entered their lodgings. There they joined the women who had followed Jesus from Galilee, His mother Mary and His brothers, spending their time in prayer; as well they should have under the circumstances. At some point, they were all together with the entire body of believers, some 120 or so in all, and Peter stepped to the fore.

He began to describe how the actions of Judas Iscariot had come about in fulfillment of prophecy, beginning with a rather grisly description of his fate:

(With the payment he received 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.) (1:18-19)

We know from Matthew's account (Matt. 27:1-5) that Judas threw the coins back at the priests and then went off and hanged himself, apparently at the property they had bought with the money he had returned. It would appear that his body decomposed quickly in the warm Mediterranean sun and fell apart... a reference to the consequence of sin that is reinforced in 1:25. Continuing with his message, Peter turns to the Psalms:

"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." (1:20)

Then Peter moves to his point; Judas by his treachery, has left a vacancy among the 12; another must be chosen to carry on their mission.

Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living 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 nominated 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. (1:21-26)

The man who will fill the vacancy must have been along for the entire ministry of Jesus, from His baptism by John up to and after the resurrection; an eyewitness to everything so that he may join with the other 11 to serve as a *witness* to what he himself had seen with his own eyes. Two men were found who fit this criterion, and they would let God decide which one of them was to become an apostle.

They prayed that God would show them the man He wanted to fill the post, and they cast lots. While this may seem a poor way to decide things to us today, in the Old Testament it was the correct method to discern the will of God in certain situations (Num. 26:55; 1 Sam. 10:21-21) and it showed their reliance upon the teaching of Proverbs 16:33:

*The lot is cast into the lap,
but its every decision is from the LORD.*

Thus, those 11 dazed and confused young men became the 12 Apostles who would spread their eyewitness account of Jesus Christ for now, the time was at hand for the Spirit to be poured out into this dark world.

Chapter 2

Too Much Wine!

Acts 2:1-13

The Apostles waited; I don't know how patiently they waited, but they waited nevertheless.

What they did not know that morning as they awoke was that this day would mark a paradigm shift of massive proportion. For those who had been through the ministry of Jesus, His death and resurrection, they had experienced many very highly significant events to say the least, but this day would be the culmination of all that had happened before— on this day of days, the Kingdom would come.

Oh yes, of course Jesus has already brought the Kingdom of heaven to earth with Him; He had been its very embodiment. In fact everything He had done in His ministry, and most particularly in His death and resurrection, had been done to make this day a reality. The paradigm shift takes place when the Holy Spirit comes into the Apostles and into all believers, for when this happens, the Kingdom itself is within us, and together as the Body of Christ, we are the embodiment of His Kingdom on earth.

This was the day of Pentecost, and in the Jewish calendar it is the second of three annual feasts, falling fifty days after the Sabbath of Passover week (Lev. 23:15-16). It has a few names in the Old Testament; the feast of weeks (Deut. 16:10), the feast of harvest (Ex. 23:16) and the day of firstfruits (Num. 28:26). I bring this up because we need to see God's timing in all of this: Jesus had instructed the Apostles to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit was poured out on them, and so they have waited. Then, the Holy Spirit comes upon them on the very day when the city was filled to overflowing with good God-fearing Jews from all over the known world who had come for the feast of weeks (Pentecost).

You see, the Holy Spirit came when there would be literally thousands of witnesses; this was not something that would happen in secret.

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. (2:2-4)

The Holy Spirit comes upon them without warning, but He does so in a dramatic way, with the sound of a "violent wind" and an appearance like "tongues of fire" that separate and "came to rest on each of them". We might want to keep in mind here that "like tongues of fire" isn't literally fire because of the word "like"; Luke is telling us that in this instance, the Holy Spirit took a form that they could see. He looked something like tongues of fire, but He was most assuredly the Holy Spirit. What we really have here in the coming of the Spirit, is the Apostles receiving the Spirit with such an impact that the people in the neighborhood couldn't miss it. The Apostles

began to speak in “other tongues”, and it is worthwhile for us to note the meaning of this statement: The Greek word rendered “tongues” is *glossa* which means “languages”, thus in this instance the Apostles were not speaking in private prayer languages, and they were speaking human languages that they didn’t know.

In 2:5-8, Luke documents for us that hearing all of the commotion, a crowd gathers, a crowd that is amazed to find a bunch of Galileans speaking languages that the people in crowd, who are in town for the Feast speak. In other words, they are wondering how it could be that mere lowly Galileans can speak their languages. Luke also documents the places the people in the crowd have come from in 2:9-11, and more to the point, he documents what the Apostles were talking about in languages they had never studied:

we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” (2:11b)

Needlessly to say, they were amazed and wondered what this all meant (2:12). Yet, as one might guess, not all were amazed...

Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.” (2:13)

Have you ever noticed that there are always the naysayers? As old Solomon wrote long before Pentecost, “there is nothing new under the sun”.

Peter will shortly step up once again and address the wine comment, and as he does so, he’s going to address quite a lot more. In the next section we’ll see what happens next on that most exciting of days; see you then!

Acts 2:14-21

Peter begins by speaking to the silly notion that they are all drunk, reminding the crowd that it was still only nine in the morning. By tradition, the ninth hour was the time for morning prayer after which the first meal of the day would be eaten; silly notion indeed. Then Peter gives an explanation of what was going on that morning, by telling the people that “*In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. (2:17a)*”. The prophet Joel, who is being quoted here (see Joel 2:28-32) spoke in a time of trial when the people were feeling the weight of their sin during a time of plague, when God had spoken of a future when Messiah would bring about the fulfillment of God’s purpose with His people, pouring out His Spirit upon all people. This was the longed for age of the Messiah for which they had been yearning such a long time now. In addition to Joel, Isaiah, Hosea and Micah had called this time “the last days”, as would New Testaments writers such as Peter himself, John and the author of Hebrews. Those in the crowd that day would have had no difficulty in understanding the reference, since it was a rich part of their heritage.

Joel made it quite clear that these wonders of God would be for all of the people. Notice that he said things like “all people”, “sons and daughters”, and “both men and women” that mark a great contrast with the restricted activity of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament. Now, the Holy Spirit

was to be “poured out” on all who believed; God was expecting universal acceptance. In 2:19-20 we see a number of apocalyptic elements that add to this the sense that God is doing a work of staggering proportion, and finally in verse 21 we see that what is coming about is a new age of salvation for all of those who will accept it:

*And everyone who calls
on the name of the Lord will be saved*

From our point of view, this passage is somewhat more difficult to grasp than it would have been to those who heard it first, for most of us are not well versed in the Messianic understanding of the first century; some today even suggest that Peter might have been mistaken in citing this passage from Joel as what was happening at that time, preferring instead to place its fulfillment at some point that is still in the future. Of course you are welcome to your view on the subject, but as for me, I must respectfully reject such thinking, and here’s why: In 2:1-12, we are told that the Apostles received the Holy Spirit. Their having been filled with the Spirit was so much in evidence that they began to speak in other languages (tongues), and while this was still going on, Peter applied the Joel text to that moment in time. Thus, we have in this very highly documented point in time, as we understand time, an Apostle who is under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit making an assertion that Joel’s prophecy was being fulfilled at that moment, nearly 2,000 years ago.

This event is being recorded by Luke, who although not an Apostle himself, is under the oversight of an Apostle while also being inspired by the Holy Spirit. Our whole understanding of inspired Scripture is that each author, either Old Testament prophet, New Testament Apostle, or a New Testament believer under the direction of an Apostle, is accurate and reliable precisely because of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, if either Peter or Luke got this wrong, then none of the 66 books of the Bible are reliable as the Word of God. As a consequence, any time I think the Scriptures might be mistaken, I recheck my work, for it is I who am mistaken.

At any rate, we can all be assured that Pentecost was the day the Church began as had been foretold long before. As we will see next time, Peter moves on from explaining to the people what they had witnessed, to telling them about the Messiah, and in doing so, he will pull no punches.

Acts 2:22-41

We left off earlier after Peter’s citation of the prophecy of Joel 2:28-32 (cf. Acts 2:17-21). Our text picks up in verse 22 as Peter moves forward to drive his point home. I would certainly recommend that you read the text at this point, if you haven’t already. He mentions the name Jesus of Nazareth in that verse, reminding them that He performed miracles and wonders in the midst of the people which were intended by God to confirm His identity and authority, and that his hearers knew all about these things. Then Peter goes right to the nitty-gritty:

*This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with
the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. (2:23)*

This is an amazing contrast to the Peter who not long before had denied Jesus three times and gone into hiding, and it might even be called a reckless thing to say to a large crowd of Jews in Jerusalem at that point in time, yet Peter boldly proclaimed the truth. He continued in his proclamation of the truth by boldly announcing that Jesus had been raised from the dead in 2:24-28, including another quotation, this time from Psalm 16. His explanation of the day's events is wrapped up in 2:29-33, and then Peter closes his remarks with this:

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 Messiah.” (2:34-36)

Let's pause a moment and take in the power of what we've been reading of the address by Peter at Pentecost...

Peter began to address this very large crowd of thousands when people in the crowd began to say that he and the other Apostles were drunk (2:13-14). This was not only silly, as Peter pointed out, but it was an attempt to marginalize the magnitude of the coming of Holy Spirit, which had been God's purpose all along. Yet the Holy Spirit, through Peter, took that slur and turned it completely around on the scoffers and used the occasion as an opportunity to proclaim the Gospel of Christ in a most convincing way; who could argue with it?

Apparently no one dared to do so. I would suggest to you that the coming of the Holy Spirit was the greatest miracle of that day, but the working of the Holy Spirit through Peter comes in a very close second. Look what happened next:

*When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles,
“Brothers, what shall we do?” (2:37)*

Where are the scoffers now?

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. (2:38-41)

Here's a question to ponder:

When did Peter become such a Bible scholar that he could cite and interpret Scripture so insightfully that people would see truths they had never before seen? Peter was a fisherman, not a theologian; he was a working man, not a Rabbi – where did this come from?

Another question might be, what had Peter really done?

The answer is simplicity itself: Not much. On that amazing day, the only thing Peter had done was show up, and get out of the Spirit's way; the Spirit did the rest, and about 3,000 people were saved from destruction. I'll end with one final point to think about: The same Holy Spirit that was in Peter is in all of us; brothers and sisters, what shall we do?

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who 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.

Acts 2:42-47

Luke abruptly shifts the scene from Pentecost to a summation of the period that followed in which he tells us what they did and how they lived during this early time. What is there for me to add to this picture?

Not much. There is one thing: For me at least, there are two references here that are easy to miss: First, notice that during this period they are said to have enjoyed "the favor of all the people" and finally, the Lord "added to their number daily". When the love of Christ shines through the Body of believers into the larger community, amazing and wonderful things happen.

That should give us something to ponder...

With that, I'll bid you farewell for now.

Chapter 3

Acts 3:1-10

On a certain day, Peter and John were headed into the temple area for afternoon prayer, which appears to have been the custom of the early church. There was a crippled man there; he was always there, begging for money because it was his only means of survival, having been unable to walk since birth. In a scene like so many that we find in the Gospel accounts of Jesus, they stopped and healed the man (3:6-7).

This story gives some substance to what we read in the previous passage (2:43) regarding the many wonders and signs being performed by the Apostles, of course this is the first one that Luke specifically relates to us.

As we read this, most of us will recall that when Jesus began His ministry, He, the embodiment of the Kingdom of heaven went from place to place proclaiming the Kingdom, teaching God's truth, healing the sick, making the lame walk, restoring sight to the blind and driving out demons. We saw that this is quite a natural progression, for wherever the Kingdom goes there are truth, salvation, healing, wholeness and redemption from evil. In this account of one of those incidents, we see the new embodiments of the Kingdom, here represented by Peter and John doing the very same things that Jesus had done before. As we see events unfold in the rest of this chapter, we will also see that like Jesus, the Apostles will use miraculous signs and wonders not simply to benefit people like this poor man, but to confirm their message of salvation as being genuine and truly from God.

It is also important for us to note that what the Kingdom brought was far more than physical healing and wholeness, that actually the physical miracles performed were but an illustration of the far greater spiritual healing that takes place within the kingdom, for the spiritual healing that takes place has eternal consequences... or maybe I should say eternal "benefits" or "rewards".

As the passage concludes, the two Apostles, along with the very familiar and now restored man enter the temple courts, to the great wonder of the crowd gathered there, setting the scene for the next part of the story...

Acts 3:11-16

After the man was healed (see Acts 3:1-10), he joined Peter and John and climbs the steps into the temple courts, and as they did this, many people were amazed at the sight of the familiar man walking along, for they all knew him as the cripple who begged near the entrance to the temple. As you might expect, a fairly large crowd of people began to gather there seeking understanding of what had happened.

Seeing the awesome opportunity, Peter began to speak to the crowd. It would seem that Peter's first thought was to interpret these events for his fellow Jews who were in a state of wonder, so he plainly told them that it was the God of Israel, not Peter, not John, who had done this

amazing thing to glorify His servant Jesus, for it is only in the name of Jesus that such a thing could take place (3:12-13a). Isn't this an interesting, not to mention telling, distinction between the Apostles and a fair number of modern day "healers"?

As a part of making this point, Peter once again pointed out that this Jesus to whom he was referring is the very same man that many in the crowd had participated in having crucified, and that they knew perfectly well who he was talking about (3:13b-15). In this statement, Peter also slipped in the fact that even though the people had participated in Jesus' demise, He also rose from the grave, and that both Peter and John were eyewitnesses of that fact.

Then, Peter closes this part of his remarks:

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 completely healed him, as you can all see.
(3:15)

With this verse, Peter does something we should take careful notice of, for he places this miracle squarely at the feet of faith in Christ. Again, the Apostles are taking no credit whatever for what has happened, and he is presenting this in a very persuasive way by making multiple references to the parts of the story that they all already knew, as though he is doing nothing more than filling in a few holes so they will understand not only what has just taken place, but what they all saw and heard several weeks earlier concerning Jesus. In the next part of his remarks, Peter will continue to elaborate on this theme.

For us today reading these verses, there is an attitude about the workings of God that we would do well to emulate, for while we may not have been part of anything quite as dramatic as this, we may well be involved in the working of the Holy Spirit both in our lives, and though us in the lives of other people. It is very easy, and I tell you this from personal experience, to see the Spirit working through us in some way, and then to get the feeling that we are pretty cool, that we have done some good and clever thing. Yet we must not succumb to such childish thinking, for it is the Spirit who changes lives, it is the Spirit who uplifts others, and not any of us. Yet such occurrences do give us the opportunity to let others come to recognize what has happened, so that they too may come to discern His glorious works.

"Now, fellow Israelites, 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 Messiah 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 Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. (3:17-20)

Here we are in the second part of Peter's address to the crowd that had gathered after the healing of the lame man just outside the temple (3:1-10). Peter began his remarks by making it very clear that the man had been healed by God to glorify His Son Jesus, and then had reminded the people that this was the very same Jesus that many of them had demanded to be crucified only a few weeks earlier.

Notice in these verses that Peter admits that their actions against Jesus were taken in ignorance; that they hadn't understood what they were doing, and then that he moves on to show them that in doing so, they themselves had helped to fulfill the word of the prophets, who had said that He would suffer. This is quite a different tact than many of us might have taken here, for wouldn't it be tempting to call these people all sorts of ugly names, to condemn them for their wicked actions?

But that is not the way of love. Instead, Peter tells them that they can repent of all of this now, and move into relationship with very One they had had a hand in putting to death; amazing!

Heaven must receive him 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 their people. (3:21-23)

In light of his call for repentance, he indicates why they aren't hearing directly from Jesus Himself; for He is with the Father in Heaven until such time as He returns to fulfill and restore everything, as the prophets have also spoken of. Then, Peter recalls the words Moses spoke and reminds the people that they are expected to *respond* to Jesus' call.

Finally, in verses 24-26, Peter moves into a discussion of the fact that Jesus fulfilled Abraham's covenant promise of all Nations being blessed through him, which was the crucial part of the covenant promises God made to him, however, the account of Peter's remarks ends rather abruptly, for circumstances intervened before he could finish.

Chapter 4

A Rude Interruption

Acts 4:1-22

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. (4:1)

Already the Jewish religious leaders were becoming uncomfortable with the message they were hearing about what was going around, that the old disciples of Jesus were spreading... and here they were again addressing a big crowd right out there in the temple courts; they must do something. It's interesting that the Sadducees are mentioned here, but there's no mention of Pharisees, but then Peter and the others were talking about Jesus, saying that He had risen from the tomb, and that was clearly an affront to the Sadducees who taught that there was no resurrection from the dead.

They had the Apostles arrested and thrown into jail for the night.

The next morning the Sanhedrin was convened and the men were brought forth for questioning. Clearly, they had reason to be concerned because even though they had broken up the address Peter was making to the crowd, a rather large group there had come to follow Jesus (4:4).

Their interview with Peter and John was an interesting one for the man who had been healed was also present, making the job of the Jewish leaders quite awkward for he stood there as a testament to the fact that the Apostles were telling the truth... and to make matters even worse, Peter decided that this was a good time to preach the Gospel (4:5-12).

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. (4:13-15)

Had the members of the Sanhedrin had any interest in getting to the truth, this could have been a groundbreaking moment, but just as when Jesus stood before them, they had no qualms about truth; they were in a real political pickle. There was no way they were going to admit that they had been wrong about Jesus, and they needed this Jesus talk to stop right now to avoid being exposed. After discussing the matter, they decided to order Peter and John to stop preaching about Him, and had them brought back into the room (4:16-18)

But Peter and John replied, "Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, 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. (4:19-22)

It had been a tough day for the Jewish leaders.

Much could be written about this incident, and much has been, yet the really telling scene is what the response of the community of believers was...

On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the 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 heavens 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 rise up
and the rulers band together
against the Lord
and against his anointed one.*

Act4:22-26

In the last section, Peter and John were arrested, thrown into jail overnight, and then questioned about their activities. They told the authorities that they had healed the lame beggar by the power of the name of Jesus, and were ordered to cease preaching in His name— they refused. After more warnings and threats they were released, and now we see what followed; they told the other believers exactly what had happened and then they had all begun to pray.

Interestingly enough, their prayer contains a quotation of Psalm 2:1-2 in which David seemed to describe the events of not only his day, but the times of the Apostles as well. Certainly, the words "anointed one" in the English could have just as accurately been rendered either "Messiah" or "Christ" in these verses since they all mean the same thing. If we never read any further, we might expect them to ask God to soften the resolve of the authorities so that the believers might not come under persecution, but is that what they asked God for?

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 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. (4:27-31)

After the Psalm 2 quote, they mention that the same kinds of things were going on then as had been going on in David's time, and then they did something quite remarkable, they asked for boldness in their preaching, not safety. To put it quite directly, they asked God for the courage to preach the Truth in spite of the danger, come what may.

In doing this, they were praying that God's will would be done, for they had been commissioned to spread the good news of the Gospel, not to live lives of safety and security, and God answered their prayer immediately.

I have sat in church assemblies for decades now hearing prayer for healing, good health, good jobs and safe travels, yet very few for the advancement of the Gospel; I have heard many prayers for relief from oppression or persecution, but almost none for boldness in the face of persecution. Please understand, I'm not saying there's anything wrong with the prayers I hear often, yet the absence of prayers concerning God's will and purpose trouble me.

What is God telling us in these verses, and what will we do about it?

As I survey the times in which we are living, I should think such questions and the answers we give them are every bit as relevant as they were in the first century.

Unity in the Body of Christ

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

Acts 4:32-35

After the things which we have seen in the last few sections, Luke gives us a glimpse into the lives of the believers in those early days. They lived in unity of purpose and of mind; they were generous, holding back nothing in their devotion to the Lord and each other. As we can see, those who had means often put their means at the feet of the apostles who used the resources to ensure that no one in the community of faith had unmet physical needs.

It should be observed by all that those donations from the sale of assets were entirely voluntary, for nowhere in our text are we told that anyone directed anyone else to dispose of an asset or give for the needs of others. Rather, we can rightly infer that those who made such gifts did so entirely of their own accord as the Lord led them to do so. Another thing we should note here is that there were believers of substantial economic resources and those with little or nothing in this world within the Body of Christ at that time, and since the text is clear that they lived in unity in "heart and mind" they were not divided along socioeconomic lines, a concept as radical in the first century as it would be today; perhaps even more so.

Luke adds a specific account of this generosity and in this case he mentions a name:

*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.
(4:36-37)*

Here we are briefly introduced to Barnabas, of whom we will see much more later in the book. There is an interesting note here that we might not want to miss, for Luke notes that Barnabas was a Levite. The Levites served in the temple, and were not permitted to own property and so we must infer either that this practice was not observed in the first century or that Barnabas might have owned the property he sold through marriage, or perhaps that the non-ownership of property was only applied to those living in Jerusalem; as usual, scholars debate these things. Whatever the case was, Barnabas demonstrated his devotion to the community of believers and the leadership of the apostles in his act of generosity.

Barnabas also stands in marked contrast to what happens next in Luke's narrative...

Chapter 5

The Curious Affair of Ananias and Sapphira

Acts 5:1-11

Two things are vital to the understanding of this most curious little affair: First, we must recognize that this is a part of the same narrative as 4:32-37. We must not be confused by the chapter break which is entirely arbitrary and added centuries later. Second, we must properly understand what is meant by “kept back” in verse 2.

Luke has just given his readers the example of Barnabas in 4:35-36, an example of sincere giving that recognized both the authority of the apostles and the legitimate needs of some of the community of believers. In this passage, Luke provides an example of something that was not so sincere. It would appear that Ananias and Sapphira were rich enough to own real property and that they have announced their intention to sell it and give the entire proceeds of the sale to the apostles to be used in their ministry of benevolence, but when the sale had been completed and Ananias had delivered the sale proceeds, he did not set all at the apostles’ feet, having “Kept back” some of the money.

To be very clear, this was money that belonged to Ananias and Sapphira, and they were under no legal obligation to give all of it to this ministry, yet it is clear from the text that at some point they had represented to the apostles that they would give the entire proceeds to God’s service. We can also infer from this that had conditions or circumstances changed in a way that necessitated their retaining a portion of those proceeds, they could have made those facts known, but they had made no such disclosures. I am taking this inference from Luke’s use of the Greek word *nosphizō* in 5:2 which is rendered “kept back” in the NIV. The word means “to deprive, rob; to misappropriate or to make secret reservation of something”. Peter confronted both of them; here is his conversation with Ananias:

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 just to human beings but to God.” (5:3-4)

Then a curious thing happened as the Holy Spirit took over:

When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him. (5:5-6)

In these verses, Peter is acting in the role of God’s prophet, able to perceive the thoughts and motivations of others and pronouncing God’s righteous indictment, a role so evident nowhere else in the New Testament. I can’t help but add that one of my preacher friends calls verse 6 “History’s first youth group project”.

I've always thought that it is quite interesting that Peter attributes this to Satan, but I doubt that he does so because Satan cares about keeping cash out of church coffers, for in spiritual matters money is about as noteworthy as horse dung. No! Money is entirely our hang up, not God's, and not even Satan's. In truth, this curious affair is entirely apocalyptic in nature, for Ananias and Sapphira have told of their intention to give their all to the work of the Holy Spirit in the midst of the church, and when the moment came, they held onto the world's greatest prize—money. A person may choose whether or not to follow Jesus Christ. If we choose to follow Him, we can do so wholeheartedly or we can do so halfheartedly, but we do not get to promise the former and do the latter and then willfully and deliberately lie about it to God, for falling short of the mark is one thing, and attempting to defraud God is quite another.

Needless to say, this little episode made quite an impression back in the day! The ministry of the apostles kept moving forward...

The apostles performed many 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 impure spirits, and all of them were healed.

Acts 5:12-16

For the third time, Luke interrupts his narrative to give a summarization of how things were going for the fledgling church. In his last summary statement (4:32-35) he spoke of their unity, here he speaks of the signs and wonders performed by the apostles.

It would seem that the word has spread about the healings of the sick and lame that have been going on, and people are shown bringing the sick to be healed; notice that people believe that even simply being in proximity of the apostles would bring healing, and here for the first time is specifically mentioned that people who are possessed by impure spirits are being delivered from oppression by the apostles' presence; Luke is careful to mention that "all of them were healed".

As a result of these wondrous events, the believers were highly regarded by the people, many of whom had come to believe.

Yet there is a problem in the background; notice that the believers were regularly gathering at Solomon's Colonnade in the temple courts, but no one else "dared join them" (5:13). Notice the apparent contradiction between this and verse 14: "*Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.*" One might well ask how it could be that on the one hand "no one dared join them" and on the other hand many "were added to their number". I would suggest that the answer to this seeming paradox is that while many came to believe, thus being added to "their number" not many of those new believers were committed enough to join the other believers right out in the open, at least not yet.

We face a similar phenomenon today, for there are many more who believe than who will be seen to believe, for to believe in Jesus Christ and to follow Him carries with it certain complications in this world. For instance rejection or ridicule of family and friends, and in some places even economic or political sanctions of various types; persecution in other words. Certainly in the first century this was the case as we will shortly see...

Acts 5:17-26

While the followers of Jesus were filled with the Holy Spirit, the priests and teachers of the law were full of something quite different: jealousy. Consequently, they ordered that the apostles be arrested and thrown into jail. At some point during the night, the angel of the Lord came to the apostles and released them from custody, and commanded that they resume their teaching in the temple courts the next morning.

When morning came, they were once again in the temple courts teaching about the "new life". As the Sanhedrin assembled, none of them had noticed what was going in the courts outside, and they sent for the apostles to be brought in, only to discover that the jail was locked up tight, the guards still posted at the door... and the cells were empty. Suddenly someone comes running in with the shocking news that their prisoners were out in the temple courts teaching another crowd of people!

It is hard to miss the fact that God has intervened in events to make complete fools of the Jewish leaders.

Upon hearing this, the captain, who was second in authority only to the high priest, took charge of his officers and went after the apostles, yet even now, enraged as he must have been at this humiliation, the captain dared not use force against the apostles, for fear of his own people. The apostles came along quietly.

Would anyone in the Sanhedrin, the wisest of all religious bodies, recognize what was going on; would anyone be able to see clearly enough through their jealousy and avarice to notice that the hand of God was against them? God was working His eternal purpose through these apostles, and no human agent, not even the devil they were serving, would stop these men until their mission was complete. Needless to say, there is a lesson for us in this story.

When Peter and John had first appeared before the Sanhedrin (4:1-22), they were not guilty of any particular offense against the Jewish leadership, but this time they were guilty of continuing to preach Christ after they had been ordered to cease and desist. In addition, there was the matter of their little escape from custody; surely the Twelve had cause for concern, and ample reason to be very careful about what they said.

The apostles were brought in and made to 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." (5:27-28)

So, here is the scene: They have been brought forward to be questioned by the high priest in front of the full leadership, only the high priest has no questions for them; look at what he said, there was no question asked at all. Any lawyer would tell the apostles to remain silent at this point.

The high priest, rather than ask a question, has made accusation without asking a question which I would suggest is a rather ominous sign that he has already made up his mind about what happens next. In fact, his accusation that the apostles have acted in disobedience to his previous command is accurate, for they have most assuredly disobeyed his order to cease and desist. Of course, there is a rather humorous note to all of this when he accuses the apostles of being "determined to make us guilty of this man's blood" which of course everyone in the room knows that they are guilty of.

If you were in the apostles' sandals, what would you do at this point?

Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than human beings! The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him." (5:29-32)

Well, "in for a penny, in for a pound" as the saying goes; Peter and the others fire a full broadside at their attackers, who by the way are also their judges. That they must obey God and not humans is about the equivalent of telling the court that it lacks competent jurisdiction to judge them, not usually a wise assertion for a defendant to make. Then, they make their assertion that the Jewish leaders were in fact guilty of Jesus' blood, which in this instance would be essentially a guilty plea considering what they've been accused of. Finally, they claim that Jesus sits at the right hand of Almighty God and is ready to forgive the Jewish leaders of their sins if they will only repent of their misdeeds.

At this point, we must remember who these leaders are; they consider themselves the most righteous and holy of all Creation, they keep the Law of God best of all, just ask them. Forgiveness – they don't need forgiveness; they keep the Law.

At this point, we must come to grips with the real facts of the matter, which are that the apostles have only just begun to carry out their Commission from our Lord, and that Commission is God's eternal purpose to build up a Body of believers on the earth. As long as the apostles still have work to do on the earth, no human authority is going to stop them.

Yet if we look upon this scene from an earthly perspective, the apostles are doomed:

When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. (5:33)

It was now time for God to make His next move...

God's Next Move

Acts 5:34-42

With the apostles standing before the Sanhedrin, having just infuriated everyone to the point of murder, something happens that is surprising to say the least. The greatest of the Pharisees in those days was a man named Gamaliel. He was highly respected by all, had descended from a line of Pharisaic superstars and was the greatest of the teachers of the law; most scholars believe that he was the mentor of a fellow called Saul of Tarsus, whom we will meet soon in Luke's narrative. Right at the moment of greatest fury, Gamaliel rises to speak...

He reminds the Sanhedrin that there have been false teachers before, and that they soon run out of steam and then are gone, for their teaching comes from men (5:35-37). After citing a couple of names, he comes to his point:

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." (5:38-39)

His argument carried the day; the high priest ordered the apostles flogged, gave them another warning and let them go. Luke mentions this almost as though it were nothing, but let's remember that they would at minimum be scarred for life after this, and over the years many who received 39 lashes died from infection of the resulting wounds; this was no small matter, and as a result, the apostles rejoiced!

Upon release, they continued their teaching, even going from house to house in flagrant disregard of the Sanhedrin's warning, for they were, at the leading of the Holy Spirit, moving forward with their purpose to do God's will (5:41-42).

Soon, the Good News would spread into the surrounding regions...

Chapter 6

Widows' Needs and Ministry Teams

Acts 6:1-7

As the early church grew rapidly, conditions required that steps be taken to meet the needs that arose in the congregation; in this text we see needs, responses to needs, and two all-time firsts. The main problem that came up was ministering to the needs of widows. In these times, to become a widow was very often a complete economic disaster, for without a husband or family to provide, a woman was unable to keep body and soul together, particularly an older woman. A young widow would find a man to marry, and he would provide for her, but an older widow would often be destitute. Jewish custom had made allowances for their needs, and the early church had also done so. Yet as the church was growing so rapidly, some widows began to be overlooked and something needed to be done about it.

At the same time, there were two groups within the church which had often been in conflict in the Jewish community, the Hellenistic Jews and the Hebraic Jews. The Hellenistic Jews had adopted Greek manners and customs over the years since the conquests of Alexander the Great, and many of them had moved to Judea from widely dispersed regions of the known world. The Hebraic Jews were largely descendants of those who returned to Jerusalem after the captivity and who had retained the traditional Jewish ways. You can easily see how friction would be the result of these cultural differences, and they can be compared to differences in today's church between traditionalist and non-traditionalist approaches to things like worship style and church organization.

The first recorded division within the church is described in 6:1 as these two groups became conflicted about the ministry to widows; apparently some Hellenistic widows had been overlooked. Notice that the apostles responded very quickly to this problem and came up with a solution: they would create the first ever ministry team comprised of seven men of high character who were to be selected by the congregation at large (6:2-4).

The apostles seem to have become stretched too thin as their preaching and ministry "of the Word" had grown, and since they were the ones who were eyewitnesses of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, they were the ones who needed to attend to it, and others were needed to handle the benevolent ministries, and the issue was promptly resolved to everyone's satisfaction (6:5-6).

As a result, the church continued to prosper and grow rapidly; even "a large number of priests" came to believe. Sadly, Luke doesn't give us any more specific number so that we might have an idea what "a large number" looked like...

For us today, there is a lesson here, for a problem surfaces and it was timely solved by the creation of a ministry team in which the apostles delegated some of their activities to others who had demonstrated the wisdom and maturity to handle it. We can certainly gain insight by noting

that the apostles did not wring their hands in despair at the idea of delegating, nor did they assume that they were the only ones who could possibly be trusted to get the job done, nor did they allow gossip or division to continue while they asked God to send them a professional. Instead they led the community decisively, responsively and wisely, and the Kingdom prospered as a result.

Yet, there were storm clouds on the horizon...

Acts 6:8-15

Having mentioned his name for the first time in the previous section as one of the seven to be placed over the widows' ministry, Luke now turns to the story of Stephen. It would appear that Stephen had been doing great work in his ministry, even including wondrous signs among the people, and a certain group of Jews became unhappy with his God-inspired work. Here, for the first time, Luke tells of opposition that had not come from the priests or the Sadducees, but this time from among the people.

The source of the opposition was certain members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen, which in those days was a center of Jewish social, educational and cultural life. The Freedmen were emancipated slaves, or their descendants from provinces in North Africa and Asia Minor, thus they were Hellenistic Jews. The synagogues were largely influenced by Pharisees rather than Sadducees, who were usually more interested in temple operations than synagogic operations.

From the text, it would seem that these people had interpreted Stephen's teaching about salvation coming from Christ alone as a repudiation of the temple and the Law... which in a certain sense it is. They debated with Stephen on these themes, and Stephen more than held his own, surprising them with the knowledge that the Spirit had given to him. So, in the end, these good folks did what any God-fearing and righteous person would do, they accused Stephen before the Sanhedrin, and gave false testimony against him.

As this criminal behavior on the part of the good and righteous men of the Synagogue of the Freedmen was taking place, everyone who looked at Stephen saw a man without a care in the world, so unconcerned was he about the proceedings, for he appeared to them to be in the very presence of God; in the realm of angels.

Chapter 7

Acts 7

The narrative of chapter six continues into chapter seven without interruption despite the chapter break: Stephen stands falsely accused before the Sanhedrin, and these false accusations have been made against him, probably at the prompting of his judges. The fateful question is asked in 7:1, “Are these charges true?”

Any lawyer would tell you that the only possible responses to such a question are: yes, no, I can't recall or I don't know, for this is not the time for a speech. Stephen, not being a cautious man, made a speech instead...

His speech is recorded in 7:2-33. In it, he recounts the long history of Israel, beginning with Abraham and the Patriarchs, and continuing through the Prophets and ending with charges of his own leveled directly at the very Sanhedrin before whom he stood: They, like their ancestors, had murdered the One whom their God had sent to them, for they did not care to hear God's message – and they went mad with rage.

Scholars, teachers and preachers have told this story in many ways, some focusing on the academic aspects of Stephen's words and theology, others centering on the presence and work of the Spirit in the story, and many others have taken various other tacts to suit the present needs of their students or congregations, and I would not presume to criticize any of these approaches. Yet it strikes me that there is something at work in this case that deserves mention and which is often overlooked, which is the fact that Stephen, in his speech, that was so unwise by human standards is actually playing a divinely inspired role as a prophet, as he leveled God's indictment upon the very men who were responsible for the murder of His Son.

As a reminder, the prophets of old were sent to the people to bring God's message; they were His messengers. Those minor and major prophets of the Old Testament were bringing a message of indictment, playing the role we might say, of a prosecuting attorney, letting the people know just exactly what God saw that was objectionable in their conduct of His Nation; they were not merely there to predict the future, as many today seem to think. Thus, if we look at Stephen's words in Acts 7, we cannot help but recognize a prophet at work, and just as with the prophets of old, the leaders of the people who were at fault for what was going on, went out of their minds with rage.

There is nothing new under the sun.

We might also note that nobody in this august group of great men even stopped to consider that their Roman overlords might object to their execution of Stephen without Roman approval, for they were so desperate to silence the truth he had spoken to them, and with this, the persecution of the Church began, and along with it, the rising of political tensions between the Jews and the Romans that would ultimately result in the complete destruction not only of the their beloved Temple, but of the ceremonial practices of the Old Covenant that Jesus had already made utterly obsolete. In the process, the preaching of the Gospel would also be forced outside of Jerusalem, and it would spread to the far corners of the earth, just as God had

planned it, with the eternal irony that the very Jewish leaders, who were acting to silence it, caused its spread.

Chapter 8

Persecution and Triumph

When Stephen was being murdered for speaking the truth to the Sanhedrin, a young man named Saul was on hand for the festivities; he seemed to be watching over the cloaks of those who wanted to free up their throwing arms to really let Stephen have it, and according to 8:1 he fully approved of what was going on that day:

And Saul approved of their killing him.

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in 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 both men and women and put them in prison.

Acts 8:1-3

It would seem that not only did Saul fully approve of Stephen's cold-blooded murder, but he also took the murder to the next step, dragging believers from their homes in an effort to thwart God's purpose. Of course, he had been blinded so thoroughly to the truth that he actually thought he was doing God a favor, as hard as that might be to fathom. As a result of this raging persecution of the fledgling church, believers began to flee from Jerusalem, moving out into both neighboring Judea and Samaria.

Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the signs he performed, they all paid close attention to what he said. For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was great joy in that city.

Acts 8:4-8

Notice that wherever those who fled the Jerusalem persecution went, they proclaimed the Gospel; this is an important contextual statement, for if "those who had been scattered" were proclaiming the Gospel, then the account of Phillip in Samaria actually serves as an example of what they were all (or at least most of them) were doing: Can we even begin to imagine the dramatic impact this would have had in the surrounding areas?

From the point of view of the Jewish leadership, this was a total disaster. Not only had they murdered a man in their "righteous" indignation, but the result was that they had caused his message to explode across the countryside around them; yet as a political leadership, because of their foolish treatment of Stephen and the believers of Jerusalem, they were now in so deep that there was now no going back. In essence, they had added an exclamation mark to their own ultimate doom.

From the point of view of the Jerusalem believers, the persecution was terrible, especially for the ones swept up by Saul, yet they were sustained in their ordeal by the Holy Spirit. For those

who escaped, they were participating as never before in God's eternal purpose as more and more people came to believe, to the glory of God.

From God's point of view, the Gospel was not intended to be a local phenomenon, but as a worldwide movement of the Holy Spirit for the redemption not just of one town, but of all Mankind; things were moving along according to plan.

From our point of view, what could possibly be more inspiring than these verses? Let's not forget that persecution is still in the world today, and all too often we see this from a purely human point of view, asking God to take it away and feeling sorry for our brothers and sisters who suffer. While there is nothing wrong with this reaction, we must also recognize that it is incomplete, because when persecution is taking place we need to see that it is happening because the Gospel of Jesus Christ is actually making headway; it's become a threat to an entrenched spiritual adversary, and that is a very good thing.

Acts 8:9-23

Luke tells us about a man named Simon who had gained quite a following because of his sorcery; it would seem that he was a master of the arts of magic. When Phillip and others came into the region, having been forced to flee the persecution in Jerusalem, and so many people accepted the Gospel, Simon came to believe in Jesus along with so many others. When the news reached the apostles, still in Jerusalem, Peter and John were dispatched to Samaria to investigate, and when they arrive, our story gets rolling in earnest.

Phillip had baptized those who came to accept the Gospel, but in spite of this, they hadn't received the Holy Spirit even though Peter taught that if we hear the Gospel, believe in Jesus, acknowledge that Jesus is Lord repent and are baptized, we will then receive the Spirit (Acts 2:38). Why hadn't this happened in Samaria; could it be that these unclean Samaritans can't have the Spirit? The two apostles began laying hands upon the people, and then they received the Spirit, and of course this brings us to another question: Did the Spirit actually come through the laying on of the apostles' hands? Did this only apply to Samaritans? Was there some other reason for this?

Then our friend Simon enters the narrative:

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." (8:18-19)

My, oh my, what an enterprising businessman this Simon was! Do you suppose he wanted to add the gift of the Spirit to his magical repertoire? I can't say what he was really thinking for sure, but it seems interesting that he wanted to pay for the ability to *dispense* the Spirit rather than asking *for* the Spirit. Ever the diplomat, Peter replied to this offer:

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 in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.” (8:20-23)

It’s a little hard for us to grasp this story since we live in an age when people, at least in the West, usually don’t believe there is such a thing as sorcery or magic, other than in a Las Vegas lounge act. Apparently, this Simon dude was the real deal as a sorcerer, and if that’s true, where did he get his magic? Clearly it wasn’t a gift from God, like the signs and wonders of Phillip and the apostles, so what was its source? I only know of one other place such things could have come from, and like Simon, Satan and the demons of hell *believe* in Jesus Christ, but they certainly do not *follow* Him, and it is fairly obvious from the text that Simon hadn’t even thought about repentance.

The text doesn’t say, in spite of the confidence of vast enlightenment on the part of some commentators, but I would have to suggest that the Holy Spirit had not come upon those people in Samaria yet because so many of them were actually followers of Simon, who, whether he knew it or not, was a follower of the Deceiver who directly or indirectly was the source of his power, and so naturally, they could not receive the Spirit until that situation had been rectified.

Of course, that’s only my theory; what’s yours?

Acts 8:26-40

In this scene, Phillip has gone from Samaria, and is travelling south on the “desert” road between Jerusalem and Gaza. While many scholars would use this as a time to float theories about *which* road he took toward Gaza, we might find it more interesting to look at *why* he went on this particular road trip: An angel of the Lord came to him and *told* him to go. There are plenty of instances recorded in the Scriptures that tell of an angel of the Lord coming to someone and telling them to do something, and we might even see this often enough not to question it, but if we step back and take another look, we will realize that this really doesn’t happen very often; in fact, it is rare enough that these incidents are recorded in Scripture. To put it another way, this was a big deal.

Phillip obeys the angel’s command and heads south.

While on the road, Phillip sees an Ethiopian royal official, a eunuch as it happens. In many ancient cultures, palace officials above a certain rank were made eunuchs so that they could not father a child, and thus were not able to be a challenger for the throne, so great was their authority over the kingdom. We can infer that this may well have been a royal procession with many servants, guards and chariots. Once again, the angel speaks to Phillip, and once again he obeys and approaches the chariot.

Walking alongside, Phillip discovers that the official is reading from Isaiah 53, the “suffering servant” passage (Is. 53:7-8). Let’s think about this for a moment; if you are on an evangelistic

expedition, and you come upon someone reading that particular passage of Scripture, earnestly trying to comprehend its meaning, wouldn't you see an almost unbelievable opportunity?

That angel was pretty smart, wouldn't you say?

The eunuch actually asks Phillip to tell him who Isaiah was talking about, and invites him to ride in the chariot with him, and Phillip is only too happy to help. In the course of their conversation, Phillip just happens to tell the man all about Jesus...

The text doesn't give us the details of this conversation, instead it skips to the thrill-packed conclusion: The man requests that Phillip baptize him when a body of water comes into view, and orders the procession halted. They step out of the chariot and into the water where the Ethiopian official is immersed in the waters of baptism. Then, Luke offers us a somewhat cryptic text:

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.
(8:39-40)

What just happened here?

What we know for certain is that Phillip baptized the man into Christ, and then left the scene. The eunuch went on his way rejoicing, that is clear, and Phillip was next seen in Azotus. Was Phillip transported there supernaturally? Many scholars think so. Did the Spirit lead him to be on his way immediately, and Phillip left under his own power? Many other scholars think so.

As for me, I don't know how Phillip got to Azotus, but I do know that all through this passage, Phillip was responsive to God's leading, and that as a result, others came to salvation in Jesus Christ, and God was glorified. The inference I take from this story is that we too, must be responsive to God's leading so that others will be saved and God will be glorified through us.

Chapter 9

Saul Meets Jesus

Acts 9:1-19

Luke has been telling us about the road trip adventures of Phillip, and now it would seem that Saul is about to hit the road as well. He has continued his persecution of the disciples in Jerusalem, and now he wants to make this outrage part of a road show, so he went to the chief priest for permission and gets it. As he was travelling towards Damascus with his goal more or less in sight, he has an encounter on the road that would change his life entirely, for he runs into none other than the risen Christ (9:1-1-3). Jesus, in a very bright light has a question for old Saul:

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. (9:4-5)

There is great significance in these verses, for Saul was out persecuting Christians, but Jesus, the risen Savior who sits at God's right hand, sees things quite differently for in His eyes, Saul is persecuting the very One by whose Word the entire universe is held together. Notice, that Jesus says so here in both verse four and verse five. It was a fact in Saul's day and it is a fact today, that anyone who persecutes the followers of Christ is persecuting Jesus Himself, and though I can take no real pleasure in saying so, they, will suffer for it.

You all know the story from here; Saul's companions must lead him by the hand the rest of the way into town, for Saul has lost his sight. There they are to wait at a certain house for further instructions. Those instructions are actually given to a man named Ananias, who receives his instructions with some trepidation:

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 holy people 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 proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." (9:11-16)

I think Ananias' concern was very reasonable, don't you? Yet Jesus has a plan for this Saul of Tarsus, and Ananias had a vital role in bringing His plan to fruition, and he obeys the Lord immediately, reminding us of the previous account of how Phillip did exactly what he was told to do. Saul's sight is restored, Ananias baptizes him, and he rests up for what might come next.

Acts 9:20-31

After Saul regained his strength, he began to move about Damascus; he started preaching the Gospel in the synagogues there, to the amazement of everyone. His preaching became more and more powerful, and he taught that Jesus was the Son of God fearlessly, yet people were confused because it was common knowledge that he was the number-one persecutor of Christ's followers.

His message was effective, Luke tells us that Saul proved "that Jesus is the Messiah"; the Jews in Damascus began to plot his murder.

Saul also seemed to have his problems with the believers, who feared him, yet he had gained enough confidence in the believing community for some of them to secrete him out of the city to escape the Jewish plots against him, and he traveled back to Jerusalem. Upon his arrival in that city, Saul attempted to join with the believers who remained, but they were having none of it, since they knew exactly who he was and what he had done to their brethren there; who can blame them?

Yet Barnabas stood up for Saul, telling the church what had happened on the Damascus road, how Saul had been converted by Jesus Himself, and how he had preached so boldly the name of Jesus in Damascus, and how he had come to be in Jerusalem. Apparently, the believers in Jerusalem more or less accepted Saul after that, but I can't help wondering if some of them might still have harbored their suspicions. In any case, Saul moved about town preaching about Jesus, debating with his colleagues, and getting into a bit of a tiff with the Hellenistic Jews, who hatched a murderous plot against him; again murder for righteousness sake!

When the disciples heard of the plot, they once again secreted Saul out of town, and sent him off to Tarsus, no doubt relieved to have him gone. It is at this point in his narrative that Luke says something wonderful:

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers. (9:31)

Saul, now a Christian, was gone from the region; the persecution had ended, at least for now, and peace reigned once again. The people no longer lived in fear of persecution, they no longer lived in fear of Saul; they lived in the "fear of the Lord" instead. Thus, rather than fleeing for their lives, they lived in humble submission to God and the church was strengthened and the numbers of the redeemed increased. As I read these verses, I can't help reflecting upon the fact that when Stephen addressed the Sanhedrin back in chapter seven, they went berserk, but it

was Saul who took up the persecution, and now that Saul is no longer leading it, it dies out and peace returns to the region. Stephen seems to have been the catalyst, and Saul the instrument for God to spread the Gospel out of Jerusalem and into the surrounding region, just as Jesus had said that they would preach the Gospel first in Jerusalem and then in “all Judea and Samaria”. In the next passage, Luke tells us about the kinds of things that went on during this period, about some of the amazing things Peter was up to, and about some of the amazing people he encounters...

Acts 9:32-43

In the beginning, the Gospel of Jesus Christ was preached in Jerusalem, and as it was preached thousands came to believe the Gospel and followed the Way. Yet, this was not to be a local thing, and God forced the message out of the city and into the surrounding region by means of persecution, and many more came to hear and believe the message of salvation in Christ. When the right time came, Jesus personally met the instigator of this persecution, Saul of Tarsus, on the road to Damascus, where Saul intended to continue his persecution. As a result of this meeting, Saul believed, and turned to Christ, ending the persecution. This section gives us two very vivid examples of what was going on in the region where the Gospel was preached, examples that remind us of what happened when Jesus Himself took His message of the Kingdom of heaven to the people.

The first of these examples falls within Acts 9:32-38 and involves a man named Aeneas who had been paralyzed and bedridden for eight years. Peter found him and healed him by the authority of Jesus Christ, with the result that many more came to believe his message.

The second involved a woman named Tabitha who lived in a nearby community (9:39-43). She was widely known as a good and godly woman who served the needs of others in a way that endeared her to her community; sadly, she had fallen sick and died. Having heard that Peter was in the vicinity, messengers were dispatched to ask him to come at once, which he did. Upon his arrival, Peter found Tabitha laid out in a room full of mourners who told him about all the generous and kind things she had done in their midst.

Peter asked that the room be cleared and began to pray over Tabitha; she awoke, and Peter led her, very much alive, out to greet the others. Needless to say, the news of this was electric throughout the town...

During the ministry of Jesus, He took the message of the Kingdom to the common people, and wherever He went, the Kingdom was preached, the sick made well, the lame were healed, sight was restored to the blind, and impure spirits were driven out. Jesus was the very embodiment of the Kingdom, and He prepared His disciples to take His place when their time came, and in our story, their time had indeed come; now, they were the embodiments of the Kingdom, and where they went, the results were the same as when Jesus had gone before them.

Yet as amazing as this was, God was only just in the beginning phases of executing His eternal plans, and as we will soon see, a whole new chapter was about to begin...

Chapter 10

Cornelius and Peter Have Visions

Acts 10:1-23

Cornelius was a Roman, a Gentile, and a man who believed in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; but he was not a Jew. He was a good man, who did many charitable works for the needy, and who prayed to God regularly. One day, he had a vision in which an angel of God told him to send for Peter and to have him come to Cornelius for a visit; Cornelius did as he was told (10:1-8).

The next day Peter, who was still in Joppa, had a vision also, but his vision was a little like a divinely sent video and a screen opened on which a large variety of unclean animals were displayed along with the message "Take, kill and eat". Naturally Peter objected, for as a good Jewish man, he would never even think about eating something forbidden by the old Law. But Peter was clearly told not to "call anything impure that God has made clean"; this was repeated three times.

A whole new age had dawned.

This was not merely a lesson on dietary laws and the culinary arts, for Peter was about to be approached by something else that was impure and unclean: Gentiles, specifically, the messengers sent to him by Cornelius. The vision ended with Peter being told to go downstairs to greet them. Apparently, Peter had taken this message to heart, for he invited them into the house to dine, something no good Jew was permitted to do.

What was really going on?

Just as the Gospel was not just for the city of Jerusalem, it was also not just for Jews, because Jesus did not die for Jews only; He died for all humanity's redemption. Everything about Israel and Judaism had been but a picture of the reality which came through Jesus Christ, because through Him, God had not redeemed just one Nation, but all Nations, peoples, tribes and tongues. Of course, it would take a little time for everyone to get used to this radical idea... I'm not quite certain that everyone has quite accepted it even now, but of course, that is a topic for another time.

Acts 10:23-48

"I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right."

Peter and some other believers left the morning after the vision, along with the messenger sent to him, for a visit to Cornelius. When they arrived, Cornelius had made arrangements for a big meal; all of his relatives had been invited, and Cornelius asked Peter to share everything with them that God had given to Peter to share.

Peter acknowledged that it was improper for a Jew to associate with Gentiles, and how God had sent him a vision to show him that He had declared them to be considered unclean no more, after which Peter began to tell them all about Jesus (10:36-43).

*While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.
(10:44)*

The significance of this sentence would be almost impossible to over-emphasize, for now, just as the Holy Spirit had come upon the apostles at Pentecost, He had come upon Gentiles for the very first time, for truly the Kingdom of heaven had come to Cornelius' house. The Jewish believers who had made the trip with Peter were "astonished" for they actually heard the Gentiles speaking in tongues, just as the apostles had done, and to the Jewish mindset, this was unthinkable. Peter spoke to his cohorts:

"Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." (10:47)

All of those Gentiles were baptized; oh yes dear reader, this was the dawn of a whole new age.

Yet when Peter returned to Jerusalem, he would have some explaining to do.

Chapter 11

“Peter, you did what?”

Acts 11:1-18

Having grown up in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood, I learned firsthand of the old Jewish attitudes about associating with Gentiles. Most of my friends were Jewish; they didn't see any problem with us, and for most part, their parents were fine with us, but the grandparents were a different story. From time-to-time, I would be invited into their homes for a meal, and when a grandparent was present, the experience could be a bit awkward. My friends used quite a few Yiddish expressions, as their parents did, and as time went by, I picked up quite a bit and by the time I was learning to drive a car, I spoke Yiddish as well as some of my friends did; I learned that this would get the attention of a grandparent who didn't think a *goy* should be at the dinner table.

I would simply speak to them in (imperfect) Yiddish, and they would invariably decide that I was OK for a Gentile, and I became an “honorary Jew” in several families.

When the believers back in Jerusalem heard about Peter's visit to Cornelius, they wanted an explanation: How could he even consider sitting down with *goyim* (not so nice term for Gentiles i.e. ‘*dogs*’)?

Peter gave his answer in 11:4-11, telling them about the vision God had given, about how they were not to call anything unclean that God has made clean. Then, he recounts his visit to Cornelius:

“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 he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?” (11:15-17)

What could they say to that?

When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.” (11:18)

Luke doesn't actually say so, and I could be wrong, but I think I detect a little bit of astonishment in their reaction, for it is clear enough that not even Peter had previously considered that Jesus had saved all Mankind on the cross, that He had intended the Good News to be for all people, if “all people” included Gentiles. Yet to his enduring credit, when the time came for God to make this clear, Peter didn't hesitate to accept God's plans.

And so, the Jewish believers of Jerusalem accepted the Gentiles... well, sort of. This issue would remain controversial throughout the first century, and even into future centuries, and would become manifest in a variety of rather unattractive ways on both sides of the divide.

Antioch

Acts 11:19-30

Once again in these verses, we see the result of the persecution that forced so many believers to flee Jerusalem; they were dispersed a long way, and they took the gospel with them. Naturally, those who fled Jerusalem only shared the gospel with other Jews, since they all knew how filthy Gentiles were, but here we begin to see an interesting thing happen, for when they shared Christ with Jews in faraway places, such as Cyprus, they brought men into the faith who did not share their cultural and social disgust for Gentiles, and these new believers shared Jesus with Gentiles and thought nothing about it (11:20-21). These new Christians had grown up in Gentile lands; they had been accustomed to mixing with Gentiles, unlike their brethren back in Judea...

That's how the city of Antioch comes into the story; these men took the gospel to Antioch. A modern day reader may not see why this is so important at first because Antioch which was in Syria in the first century is actually located in modern day Turkey. Tourists visit there today to see, among other things, the ruins of the ancient city. Yet in the first century it was one of the principle cities of the Roman Empire, the third largest, boasting a population of about 500,000. Because of its strategic location, it was the bridge between the Western and Eastern parts of the Empire; only Rome and Alexandria were bigger. It was a very cosmopolitan city, a crossroads, the key to all travel between Jerusalem and Rome. Thus, a strong church in Antioch was critical if the gospel was to spread to the West from Judea in that age, since the ships of the day could not cross the sea directly, because they had to stay much closer to shore or they couldn't navigate.

Yep, Antioch was the key point on the map; the most strategic location of all for God's eternal plan to move forward.

When I talk to people, they often express some frustration because they have a hard time discerning how God operates in the world today, in their lives today. This may sound odd to you, but most often I find that these good folks don't much care for history, and in fact, most people today haven't ever really studied history; it's too boring, too dusty and of course completely irrelevant. The problem with this kind of thinking is this: With an understanding of God's movements in Scriptural history, like our text here, His movements in the history of the past 2,000 years particularly as it relates to redemption and spiritual warfare, are fairly easy to see; they almost jump off of those dusty old pages and hit you in the face. Once you see enough of those, there is a pattern that develops, and that pattern begins to jump off the pages of the newspaper, and His workings today are discernible.

Notice I did not suggest that the newspaper or current events help us to discern the meaning of Scripture, but Scripture and history can help us understand the newspaper; this is very important to keep straight.

My point is simply this: If we look carefully at Acts, if we don't allow ourselves to get caught up in small details, if we resist the temptation to be looking for little proof texts to support our favorite doctrinal hobby horses, we will actually begin to see the great chessboard, where God makes His moves and where the Deceiver makes his counter-moves, as God's great eternal plans sweep across the known world and into our everyday lives.

Make no mistake; there really is nothing new under the sun.

So, the gospel moves into Antioch and many come to believe as Barnabas comes into the city from Jerusalem. The Gentiles there are quite receptive, and Barnabas has this brilliant idea...

"I wonder what old Saul is up to over in Tarsus." Tarsus isn't far from Antioch, and Barnabas decides to visit him, and persuades him to go to Antioch with him where they work together for a full year to build the church there, and with that, Saul, who had been called by Jesus Himself to be the Apostle to the Gentiles comes out of seclusion and into the forefront of building the church, largely made up of Gentiles, in the city that was the key to the spread of the gospel into the West.

What do you think, dear reader; had God planned it this way, or was it mere happenstance?

By the way – I might have forgotten to mention that secular historians often call Antioch "the cradle of Christianity".

A Word on the Discipline of Theology

I often read and hear Christians say that they don't like theology or that they don't want to hear about it or study it; they just want to hear about... (fill in the rest). I also hear others who say they love theology and doctrine, and they want to hear more about doctrine...

I'm reaching for my old professor of theology hat for a minute, because I'm afraid that neither of these points of view really reflects an understanding of what "theology" actually is. Most Christians seem to think theology is "teaching", but teaching, in this case Biblical teaching, is actually "doctrine" not theology; theology and doctrine (which simply means "teaching") are not the same thing.

Does that surprise you?

Strictly speaking, theology is the study of God, not the study of doctrine; doctrine is only the first phase of theology. Classically speaking, the pursuit of the academic discipline of theology meant the student identified and learned everything Scripture teaches about everything, arranging this information in a logical and systematic way (called a "systematic theology") and then, in light of systematic theology, studying all other academic disciplines to discover and understand how God works in every area of investigation, and to this end such institutions of higher learning as Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard and Princeton were established. As a result of this, theology was once considered the highest of all academic undertakings, not simply

because it involved the things of God, but because it involved learning all of the sciences, rather than just one of them.

In the last section I mentioned stepping back and rather than getting caught up in the small details, seeing the big picture of what God was doing in those days, and then studying the secular history of the next 2,000 years and finding the Acts patterns repeating over and over, and then looking at current events and being able to discern what is really going on... that was basic classical (or "applied") theology. It may be many things, but it is not boring, dusty or silly.

The problem today however, is that most of us never get beyond systematic theology, in fact most universities that teach theology only have systematic theology, as though systematics were the end game; but the end game isn't doctrine, it's understanding God's workings in the world around us... and in our lives.

Some might still be confused: "Isn't theology studying the Bible?"

The answer to that question is "Yes and no." It is yes because there is a great deal of Bible study involved in learning what He has revealed to us in Scripture. It is no in that learning what He has revealed to us in Scripture is the point at which we then study other subjects. In many Bible Colleges, "Bible" is its own course of study, apart from theology.

"Don, why should I care about any of this?"

Now that's the best question of all!

Because if all you want to do is learn doctrine, you'll make a great teacher of the law, if all you want is to learn about one particular subject, say... Jesus, or love, or church for example, then you will be a walking book of knowledge on one thing. But if you want a real and vibrant relationship with the Lord, a relationship that is at the core of your being, and that is in alignment with God's will and purpose for your life, it would behoove you to have a better understanding of theology so you can better discern what He is doing in and through your life.

That's this reporter's view, anyway.

Chapter 12

Herod, Peter and God's Will

Acts 12:1-19

Luke shifts scenes, this time we see Herod and his nefarious doings. He arrested some of the believers in Jerusalem to persecute them, and in the process James was murdered. With this act, Herod noticed his approval rating soaring amongst influential Jews, so he decided to kill Peter too; he was arrested and thrown into prison until Passover was over with, then he would face a show trial on trumped up charges and be killed, to the delight of the crowds.

It would seem that old Herod hadn't cleared his devilish little plan with God, who had other ideas...

Luke goes to great pains to establish that Peter was very well guarded in the prison, since Herod was taking no chances, but in spite of that, Peter would escape. While Peter was sleeping soundly, chained up between two guards, an angel woke him up, told him to get dressed, and then they walked right past the guards and out of prison, and all the while, Peter thought he was dreaming. After a block or so, the angel left him and Peter realized this was no dream; he had been sprung from the big house.

He went to the home of Mary and her son Mark, yes, *that* Mark. He knocks at the door and a servant girl answers, recognizes Peter, and is so overjoyed that she forgets to let him in! I don't know about you, but I think this is hilarious... Those inside the house who were praying fervently for Peter didn't believe the girl, and Peter is still outside banging on the door until someone finally lets him in: Amazing, not to mention comical, but then *how often do we expect the miracle we are praying for?*

When Peter finally gets into the house, the people are so excited he has to tell them to be quiet so he can tell them what happened, and when he finishes, he asks them to get word to the others, and departs for an undisclosed location.

The next morning, those poor guards must face the wrath of Herod who is pretty much looking like a fool; he has them all killed.

For me, this story brings into sharp focus something that we sometimes forget in the day-to-day of this life, and that is that God and the gospel, are on the offensive in the spiritual battle we live in; not the other way around. Thus, Satan and his minions are playing defense, and despite all appearances, their position is desperate and hopeless; they are trying to hang on. Does anybody really think that Satan can go toe-to-toe with God and have any chance of success?

Well... he can't.

His tactics are indirect, playing our weakness and frailty against us, but understanding this, we can take heart, for when we are weak, God is strong. From our point of view, and that of the

people in Mary's house that night, Peter's jail break was an astonishing and almost unbelievable miracle, but from God's point of view, it was just another day at the office— no biggie. After all, Peter still had work to do, so let's get on with it.

Isn't this a cool story?

Chapter 13

A Paradigm Shift

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.

Acts 1:8

Way back in the first chapter, the theme of this book is found in the words of Jesus. So far, we have seen that this is exactly what took place, for Acts 1-7 contains the story of the church in Jerusalem, chapters 8-12 tells the story of the Gospel's spread into the surrounding areas of Judea and Samaria, all the while giving us indications of how God's plan was unfolding. We have looked at each of the steps involved in this process as we have journeyed on our way to this point and thus I must point out to you now that just as the Gospel was not only intended for the city of Jerusalem, it was also not intended just for its environs; it was not only for the Jews but it was also intended for the Gentiles, representative of all peoples everywhere on the globe.

With chapter 13, there is a major shift in the book of Acts, for the rest of the story is the story of the Gospel moving out of the Jewish homeland and into the far corners of the earth. Yes, it is found in Acts 13 through 28, but let's be clear that it is a story that continues to this day, and you and I are living a part in that continuing tale.

The story begins as Saul and Barnabas are sent out from Antioch, along with our young friend John Mark. In this chapter we find a pattern that they will usually follow as they move from place to place in that they will almost always begin their preaching to the Jewish people in the synagogue, and then take the message to the general population, mirroring the theme Jesus set forth in 1:8.

We should also take notice that this, the first of three "missionary journeys" undertaken by Paul, wasn't quite like what we might think of on a "missionary" trip today. There was no fixed agenda, no timeline or schedule that we would recognize. Rather they set out and stopped in the towns and cities they came across, stopping to share their message. They had no idea which ones would be more or less receptive. They had no hotel reservations, no maps or gps devices, and for the most part, they were at the mercy of the hospitality of strangers for shelter and sustenance, which is to say they were completely dependent on God. There were places they remained only a short time, and as the story unfolds, there are other places in which they might remain for a very long time. One thing is sure: When they left Antioch, no one knew whether or not they would ever return.

The Road Trip Begins

Acts 13:4-12

Saul, Barnabas and Mark sailed to the island of Cyprus, and when they arrived, they began to proclaim the Word of God in the synagogues. There was a certain Roman proconsul named Sergius Paulus who sent for Saul and Barnabas because he wanted to hear the Word of God. Yet he had a sorcerer in his entourage named Bar-Jesus (Elymas) who was a Jewish false prophet; here the story begins...

Elymas was opposed to the Word, and did all that he could to turn his master against the message that Saul and Barnabas were teaching. Apparently, Saul, under the leading of Holy Spirit, turned on Elymas:

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 for a time, not even able 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. (13:9-11)

This is a very interesting few verses, for not only does the story take an unusual twist, but it contains three very interesting elements. First is that Saul was also being called Paul, and so was he known thereafter. Second, we have the third time that God, through the Holy Spirit takes decisive punitive action against someone in the book Acts, the other two being the story of Ananias and Sapphira, and most recently, Herod. In this, rather than striking the man dead, He made the man blind, and that is the second time someone who was attempting to stop the Word has been struck blind– Paul himself having been the other.

The third thing is this: In Scripture, blindness is an apocalyptic element. It symbolizes an inability to see the Truth of God's message, which was certainly true for both Saul in his early persecution of the church, and for Elymas the false prophet. When each was struck with blindness, it was a stark dramatization of their spiritual condition. On the other hand, when we see Jesus restoring sight to the blind, we see an illustration of the work of Spirit in restoring lost humanity to a spiritual condition in which they can see Jesus and the truth He spoke in their rightful light.

This little demonstration was not lost on Sergius Paulus:

When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord. (13:12)

Will it be lost on us?

Acts 13:13-52

When the time came, Paul, Barnabas and John Mark left Cyprus and sailed for Asia Minor. For whatever reason, Mark decided he had had enough and went home; Luke does not tell us why he did that, thus we can only speculate. The rest of the party set out for Pisidian Antioch which

was quite a distance inland, beyond the Tarsus Mountains. Upon arrival, they proceeded to the synagogue, where Paul stepped up as the leader and delivered a barn-burner of a message.

As had Peter before him, Paul went through the history of Israel, showing the chain of events that had led to the present day and the preeminence of Jesus, the Son of God. The Jews who were present, along with a number of Gentile converts were electrified by his message, and you might be too if you read it; it was certainly one for the ages. Afterwards, the leaders of the synagogue invited them back the following week to teach further about Jesus.

So far, so good.

The following Sabbath, not only the synagogue members, but the whole town came out to hear what Paul would say. Apparently, the Jewish leaders were upset by this; Luke says they were jealous of Paul. I don't know about you, but this makes me wonder... what had they expected; didn't they know that this young Paul was a real up-and-comer... a Pharisee among Pharisees? Surely they knew that he was one of those young men who would later be called the "best and the brightest" of their generations...

Whatever the case may have been, they turned on Paul and Barnabas, contradicting them and heaping abuse on them:

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."*

Acts 13:46-47

Two things jump out at me here: The first, and obvious one is that this is the pattern we have seen before; the gospel is proclaimed first to the Jews, and then to the Gentiles. Second is a point that many will have a problem with: When the Jewish leaders decide for whatever reason to reject the message of Christ, Paul and Barnabas were done with them. Neither Paul nor Barnabas got down on their knees begging them to reconsider, and no, they didn't share the love... the Jewish leaders turned on the message, and the messengers turned on the Jewish leaders. In doing this, they shared God's love with the ones who were still receptive to it; the Gentiles.

The result?

When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. (13:48)

The Jewish leaders weren't quite finished; they stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, who withdrew from the area, but the Word spread throughout the region

I must admit that this is a tough lesson, maybe that's why many commentators don't speak of it as plainly as I just did, but Paul had warned them the week before when he quoted the prophet:

*“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.” (Acts 13:41; c.f. Hab. 1:5)*

For Paul and Barnabas, it was on to Iconium...

Acts 14

An Incredible Adventure

Acts 14

Paul and Barnabas moved on to Iconium, where a great number of both Jews and Gentiles received their message; they performed signs and miracles to confirm the Word of Truth as they went along through the town, and they ministered boldly for quite some time. Of course, not everyone accepted the Truth, and opposition rose up to the message culminating in plot by leading Jews, together with leading Gentiles to cause bodily harm to the two men, and they were forced to move on to Lystra.

In Lystra there sat a man who was lame. He had been that way 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. (14:8-10)

That had quite an impact on the crowd, but not quite the kind of impact Paul had expected, for the Gentiles took this as a sign that they were embodiments of *pagan gods*. When Paul and Barnabas realized this, they reacted:

"Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the 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. (14:15-18)

Some Jews arrived in town from Antioch and Iconium who turned the people against them, and Paul was stoned in the streets, his body dragged out of town and left for dead, but he was not dead; they moved on to Derbe.

They were well-received in Derbe, where a large number were moved to follow The Way, after which Paul and Barnabas retraced their steps, strengthening and encouraging the fledgling churches along the way, appointing elders and telling them that, "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (14:22). Finally, they arrived back in Antioch, where they told the church everything that they had encountered on their incredible adventure.

Chapter 15

The Conference in Jerusalem

Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: "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 believers 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 keep the law of Moses."

Acts 15:1-5

This is where one of the great controversies of the first century began; certain Jewish believers started teaching that Gentiles must be circumcised before they could receive God's grace, for after all; God's grace was really intended just for the Jews... right?

A conference is held in Jerusalem to decide the question and the Antioch (predominantly Gentile) church sends Paul and Barnabas as its representatives.

As the text tells us, they were warmly welcomed when they arrived in Jerusalem, and they began to tell the apostles and elders, all about everything that God had done through them among the Gentiles. It was at this point that certain believers from "the party of the Pharisees" make their assertion that Gentiles must first be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses.

This assertion has some very serious problems: First, every man who reads this can tell you that an adult male will only submit to circumcision if one of three things is present:

1. Superhuman faith.
2. Extreme levels of an intoxicating substance.
3. Overwhelming force.

Unless one or more of these three factors is present, anyone who comes at that particular region of a male with a knife is not likely to live to tell the tale- we're funny like that. As a result, this could be seen as a rather thinly veiled way to keep Gentiles out of the church.

Secondly, what these men were trying to do is to mix covenants, which is a theological error of immense proportion that a great part of the New Testament is written to warn us against. Two excellent examples of this are the entire books of Galatians and Hebrews which both make the case that the Law is over and done with, that the Old Covenant is "obsolete" and will "soon disappear" (Heb. 8:13). As hard as the New Testament authors tried to prevent this, the

controversy continued throughout the first century, yet a controversy is one thing, the real disaster happened a few centuries later.

When the Roman Emperor Constantine decreed that Christianity was to be legal in the Empire, that was a pretty good thing, but then he went a step further and made it the official state religion, but in doing so, he gave the theologians of the day a real quandary, for the New Covenant does not create a theocracy, for it teaches that the Kingdom of God is *not of this world*, and theocratic government is very much *of this world*. Their solution was to introduce certain parts of the Old Covenant into their theology so that Christianity could be a state religion. The result of this mixture of theologies is that we have been fighting amongst ourselves ever since, and all too often the cause of our disputes can be traced back to this error.

In our time, we have in many places, a similar impulse as those Pharisaic brothers at the Jerusalem conference. We see this manifest when we tell a new believer that he or she must believe and do something or other to be a Christian. We might tell someone, for example, that they must take so many classes or sign a creed or doctrinal statement, or we might tell them that they must first stop smoking or sinning or get their lives in order before they can be a Christian, but that isn't the Gospel that Jesus and the Apostles taught, and it isn't what we read about in Acts 2:38. The Good News is that you don't have to get your act together to receive Jesus Christ, and that by receiving Him; the Holy Spirit will come and help you to get your act together.

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 did not discriminate 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 Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors 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."

Acts 15:6-11

As the Jerusalem council begins in earnest, there is much discussion of the proposition that Gentiles must be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses before they can be saved by grace. Peter rose to speak, and in a single paragraph spoke volumes to those assembled. First of all, he reminds the apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church that he requested their blessing to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles, and that they had assented to his request. Then he pointed out that God Himself had made the choice to give the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles. This was a sort of "kill shot" for the Pharisaic contingent that insisted Gentiles must become circumcised Jews before being Christians, since it was obvious that God had made no such requirement of them.

He cinches the argument in the next sentence:

He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith

With his point fairly won, Peter now points a rhetorical finger at his opponents:

Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear?

Game over.

After Paul and Barnabas tell their story, James stepped up to agree with Peter and actually offered a sort of compromise: They would not demand circumcision (which was basically a joke) but require that the Gentiles follow certain Mosaic principles

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 the Law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.
(15:20)

James' idea was agreed to, and the letter was drafted and delivered to Antioch by a delegation appointed for that purpose (15:22-35). The believers in Antioch received the delegation and the letter they bore with obvious relief, and the matter was settled... sort of. As I noted before, circumcision would keep coming up as time passed, and those Mosaic principles would only last for a time.

Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, working to build the church there and strengthening the body of believers, but as we will see next time, nothing stays the same for long.

Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the believers 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 believers to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Acts 15:36-41

In this brief passage we get some interesting insight into the humanity of these two New Testament giants. I think that in passages like this, it is best to take the text at face value, resisting the temptation to fill in the gaps with speculation and opinions that the text itself doesn't quite provide. In that spirit, here's what we actually know about the incident: Paul had an idea that he and Barnabas ought to retrace their first journey's steps and see how the churches were doing that they had established. Barnabas thought they should take Mark along on the trip and Paul did not because he hadn't completed the first one; they couldn't agree on this, so they didn't go on the trip Paul suggested. In the aftermath of this, Barnabas and Mark went to Cyprus, and Paul took Silas through Syria and beyond. At this point, Luke hasn't told us where Barnabas and Mark went after Cyprus or where Paul and Silas went after Cilicia.

Here's what Luke did not tell us: He did not tell us that there was a personal break between the two men, there is no mention of drama, just that they had a sharp disagreement, which doesn't necessarily mean they fell out. You also might have noticed that neither of the men got mad and left the church or spread division and gossip about the other; they just didn't decide to go on the trip Paul suggested. Unless Luke provides details later, or Paul does in one of his letters, that's the story.

Do you see, dear reader what I'm doing here?

I'm quite familiar with what many commentators like to do with this story at this point in a study of Acts, filling in details that aren't in the text. The problem with that is that if we allow ourselves to indulge in such speculation, we tend to miss something really cool: Instead of one missionary trip, there will be two, and thus these two guys, by having a disagreement, just doubled the Gospel's reach. Have you ever asked yourself why our disagreements result in division and discord, and their disagreement benefitted the Gospel? You see, these early "greats" were still human, and the early church wasn't perfect or without the humanity of its members, but at least in this instance, the parties involved responded by building the Kingdom twice as fast, instead of just being ticked off and sulking.

Personally, I think there's a great lesson for us here; don't you?

Chapter 16

Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek. The believers 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.

Acts 16:1-5

In this little tidbit, we can pick up a little more insight into Paul's second missionary adventure. Notice that he has arrived in Lystra, with no mention of Silas, and it would appear that he was looking for a young believer who had been brought to his attention as a potential member of Paul's traveling party. Luke gives us some interesting personal information about this young man named Timothy; his mother was Jewish, his father Gentile, and clearly, he was well respected in the church.

Since Paul wanted Timothy to travel with his party, he circumcised Timothy, because the Jews in the area knew his father was a Greek... and then Luke tells us that they went from town to town telling the believers about the results of the Jerusalem conference and how they need not be circumcised to be a Christian. At first blush, this seems beyond bizarre; didn't Paul just violate the Jerusalem decision?

Well... yes and no.

"Yes" in the sense that Timothy didn't need to be circumcised to be a Christian; but "no" because Timothy was not a Gentile, even though his father was, for his mother was a Jew, and that means that Timothy was also a Jew, a Jew who hadn't been circumcised. Since the other Jews in the area knew that Timothy had not been circumcised, Paul did not circumcise him so that he would be accepted as a Christian; he did it so that Timothy would be accepted as a Jew.

We don't really come across that situation very often...

So, they went around with the Conference news and strengthened the churches in the area, and their numbers continued to increase. After a time, the party moved on to Macedonia as we will shortly see.

Acts 16:6-15

Paul and his party began to move throughout Asia, but as they went along and passed through various towns with potential as mission fields, the Spirit held them back; we should take note that they obeyed the Spirit, even though they didn't understand why He was keeping them from

proclaiming the Gospel. Finally, Paul learns in a vision that their target was not Asia as he had expected, but Macedonia.

We should take careful notice that right after mentioning this vision, Luke suddenly begins writing in the first-person plural: “We”. Up to this time, it has always been “they”. Most commentators and I’ll include myself in their number, believe that Luke joined Paul’s missionary team at this point. So, it was on to Macedonia...

Upon arrival they headed for Philippi, the leading city in the area and as Luke put it, “a Roman colony”. We might expect the group to head for the synagogue on the Sabbath day, but this was a “Roman colony” and it would be reasonable for us to infer that there wasn’t a synagogue there for them to go to. Whatever the case may be, they headed outside the city to the river seeking a place of prayer. When they arrived, they found, of all things, a group of women, one of whom was a woman named Lydia. Macedonia was unusual in the first century in that within this province, women actually had legal rights. They could initiate divorce, enter into binding legal contracts, engage in trade and own property, among other things, and as Luke tells us, Lydia was a merchant from Thyatira who dealt in the fine purple cloth for which that city in Asia Minor was so famous. It would also seem from the text that Lydia was not only a businesswoman, but a successful one, having a house in Philippi large enough to house the missionary party.

She also believed in God.

Lydia accepted Paul’s message of salvation through Jesus Christ and was baptized on the spot. Following this, she insisted that Paul and the rest of his party stay in her home, which would have been quite a relief for them, not to mention a testimony to her faith.

The Macedonian adventure had gotten off to a good start, but as we will see, this was not going to be a cake walk...

Acts 16:16-40

As the story continues, Paul, Silas and the rest of their group were teaching in Philippi when one day they were accosted by a slave girl who had a demon. The spirit had been irritating Paul for days, always shouting, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved”. On this particular day, Paul had had just about all of this he could stand, so he drove the spirit out of the girl.

The slave girl and her demon were a real money maker for her owner, because the spirit enabled her to tell the fortunes of paying customers, and when her owner discovered that his slave girl could no longer do this, he realized that he had just lost a key part of his business, and was understandably upset; he brought Paul and Silas before the local magistrate looking for justice, after all, he had suffered actual and verifiable financial damages because of what Paul had done. Certainly in our day, there would ample cause for a legal action, and this was no mere nuisance case. As plaintiffs tend to do, the man exaggerated his claim just a tad, claiming that they had not only damaged him financially, but that they were advocating illegal customs

and practices (which was arguably true) and that they had created an uproar in the city (which from the evidence we have to work with, appears to be not quite accurate).

For any good Roman magistrate, the mere hint of a possible public unrest would result in harsh action, so Paul and Silas were ordered to be beaten with rods, a form of torture that killed a man about as often as not, and then had them thrown in prison to bleed to death or die from infection or shock.

During the night there was a severe earthquake and the chains on all of the prisoners came loose; they could all have walked out of the place, but for some reason, they didn't.

The jailer, assuming that his charges had taken their opportunity to escape was about to kill himself, for a horrible death would surely be his fate when daylight came anyway... but Paul stopped him. When he realized that no one had escaped, he realized that something very amazing had just happened and he asked Paul and Silas how he could be saved; they told him about Jesus.

The jailer and his entire household believed and were saved and Paul and Silas were attended to.

The next morning, the magistrate ordered them to be released, but Paul wasn't quite finished with the magistrate... In speaking with the messengers who had come to release them, Paul dropped a little bombshell: He and Silas were Roman citizens, and the action of the magistrate was a gross violation of their rights as citizens; the magistrates would have to "make it up to them" and personally escort them out as an acknowledgement of their illegal actions of the day before. Of course, there was the obvious implication that if they didn't, there would be charges filed against them.

The magistrate complied with this demand, and escorted them, and after visiting Lydia's house, the party moved out of the city.

I'm quite certain that the effect of these events left a powerful testimony for both salvation and God's glory in that town...

Chapter 17

Moving Forward

Acts 17:1-15

The great adventure was not nearly over when Paul and the others left Philippi; it was just getting started. Luke mentions a number of towns they visited, and then tells us of some of the details of the visits to Thessalonica and Berea, and in doing so; we find an interesting contrast between the two communities.

In Thessalonica, Paul begins by teaching in the synagogue for three Sabbath days. He showed them, using the Scriptures, that Jesus was indeed the long-awaited Messiah, and a fair number of the people came to believe. Yet others were “jealous” and these decided to recruit a bunch of unsavory characters to instigate a riot, with the result that Paul and Silas left town, and Jason had a very close call before the magistrate; but a church was established in spite of all of this phony riot business.

When Paul and Silas reached Berea, they found a quite different group of Jews. These people eagerly examined the Scriptures as Paul taught, wanting to see if his message was true, and upon finding that he was indeed telling the truth, they gladly received his message about Jesus. From Luke’s narrative it would appear that no one in Berea was “jealous” of the message Paul and Silas taught, but word of their activities would soon reach Thessalonica, and the unsavory characters were soon dispatched to Berea, and Paul was soon secreted to Athens where the rest of his party would join him.

The contrast between the two communities is obvious enough; one had a large number who were jealous, and the other had a large number who were willing to verify what was true, and act according to their truth findings. As for the manufactured riots using unsavory characters... that is a political tactic that is still used to this day.

Acts 17:16-34

As was the usual custom, Paul first taught in the Jewish synagogues upon his arrival in Athens. From there, he also taught in the marketplace where he came across some interesting people. Luke tells us that Paul had become “distressed” about the number and magnitude of “idols” in the city, for in the first century, Athens had become a center of art and philosophy; it was no longer a political center as it had been in centuries past, thus aspiring artists and philosophers traveled there to seek their destinies from all over the region.

While in the marketplace, he came to discuss his new ideas with Epicureans and Stoics who disputed both Paul and each other, as was their custom. Yet we should note that their disputations were collegial rather than hostile, which is the key to understanding this text. At some point in this process, Paul’s new debating buddies invite him to speak before the Areopagus so that all of the philosophers might better understand this new teaching of his.

For the modern-day reader, Luke's use of the term "Areopagus" is slightly ambiguous, since it can either refer to a place or a council. As a place, it refers to a location known in English as "Mars Hill" which was the place where criminal and civil cases were heard and adjudged. As a council, it refers to a group of scholars who ruled on philosophical and religious questions, the same council before which Socrates had appeared 500 years earlier. Over the centuries following Paul's appearance, scholars have debated which of these Luke was referring to, in fact, in literature, Paul's speech in this passage is known as "The Mars Hill Discourse", demonstrating the geographical interpretation. Of course, in verse 33, Luke actually tells us that Paul was before a council... For whatever it's worth, I believe that Paul addressed the council, and the council met on Mars Hill.

Paul's actual speech is recorded in 17:22-31; you really should read it, if you haven't already for it is truly marvelous and well worth the effort. In fact, the King James version of this address is considered to be one of the true literary classics of all time and is required reading for students of both literature and philosophy in universities worldwide.

For our purposes, there are a few things I hope you will take note of:

First, I hope that you will notice that in spite of Paul's distress with all of the idols he came across in Athens, he did not bother telling the group that they were wicked evil sinners who were destined for hell, even though he may have thought that to be true. He also didn't tell them that all of their philosophizing was a shocking waste of time, and recommend to them that they seek actual gainful employment, which is a thought that comes to my mind. Instead, his approach was more along the lines of, "here's a new idea you might want to consider; I have news about your 'unknown god', he is revealing himself to you after centuries of mystery".

By taking such an approach, Paul actually had their attention and gained a hearing, rather than just being laughed off the stage.

The second thing I hope we will all notice is that when Paul spoke to the Areopagus, God met the people where they lived through Paul. The moral of the story dear reader, is that if we will resist the temptation to behave as arrogant jerks, God can do a mighty work through us; notice that even though many of those who heard Paul did not receive his message, others did receive it, including at least two notables, to the glory of God.

"Hellfire and brimstone" usually doesn't work.

Chapter 18

God Has Paul's Back

Acts 18:1-17

After leaving Athens, Paul moved onto Corinth, where Silas and Timothy would eventually meet him. While there, he once again began teaching in the synagogue. He quickly became acquainted with a man named Aquila and his wife, Priscilla who had been forced to leave Italy because of the decree of Emperor Claudius, banning all Jews from the region. Since all three of them were tentmakers, Paul worked with Aquila and Priscilla, remaining in Corinth for a year and a half.

After some time, the synagogue had heard enough of Paul's teaching, and rejected it; Paul also had had enough of the synagogue as it turns out. Yet even so, some there had received his message, including the synagogue leader, and a fledgling church began in the city. Paul now turned his full attention to proclaiming the good news to Gentiles.

At some point in this process, Paul had an interesting vision from the Lord:

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 in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God. (18:9-11)

Some time later, probably many months later, after Paul had obeyed the Lord's instructions, an incident arose:

While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews of Corinth made a united attack on Paul and brought him to the place of judgment. "This man," they charged, "is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law." (18:12-13)

In the verses that follow, we see something unusual take place, for the proconsul Gallio has no interest in the matter, since it concerned Jewish law, and essentially told the Jewish leaders to take a hike; Paul was free to go. The crowd that had been ginned up by the synagogue leadership then turned on the synagogue leader, beating him right in front of the proconsul, who did nothing whatsoever to stop them.

God had important work for Paul and the others to do in Corinth, which was a vitally important city in those days. Paul had been faithful to the Lord's command, and the Lord had seen to it that Paul's work would continue, and had dealt with those who had attempted to interfere. Once again, there is an important lesson for us with regard to who it is that is actually in control of events.

God is most notable in Scripture for His restraint; He doesn't throw His weight around as a rule, preferring for reasons entirely of His own to allow a certain leeway for men and spiritual opponents to exercise freewill. However, when His eternal purpose is being threatened, He steps in. Although it is difficult for many of us today to wrap our brains around it, sometimes He

steps in and exercises His judgment, as in this case. We might say that this cannot be, for God is love and He would never act in a way that isn't "nice", but this is a rather naive view in my opinion, for love isn't the same thing as "nice". God's love is unlimited, and His purpose is loving indeed, since it is all about forgiveness and the gift of eternal life in fellowship with God in His everlasting love. However, there is a line that must not be crossed in this model, for if a man rejects God's grace and seeks to prevent salvation and grace coming to others, he will discover that he is dealing with a God of justice, who will not permit him to deprive others of God's loving grace. Thus, the new synagogue leader learned a valuable lesson that day about messing around with God's purpose... I wonder if he lived to tell the tale; Luke does not say.

A Lesson in Transition

Acts 18:18-28

Paul eventually left Corinth taking Aquila and Priscilla with him to Ephesus. Paul remained there only a short time, and then left the two in Ephesus, probably to set up a base for more operations in the future, and traveled to Jerusalem and then to Antioch, ending his second missionary journey. He remained in Antioch for an indeterminate period of time, and then left on his third missionary journey.

Meanwhile, back in Ephesus, Aquila and Priscilla seem to have been making some progress when a man named Apollos came upon the scene. He was an educated man who hailed from Alexandria, and an excellent teacher and debater, yet he still lacked a few fundamentals of the faith. Aquila and Priscilla quickly got him up to speed, and he became a powerful force for the Gospel. Soon he was off to Achaia where he was known to have debated leading Jews about Jesus, proving from the Scriptures that He is the Messiah.

Clearly this is a transitional text, covering the time from the winding up of Paul's second journey and setting the stage for the drama of the third. Yet even with that said, it has an interesting and very relevant message for us today, for in these few verses, we can see a dramatic example of the way that discipleship is supposed to work.

Paul discipled Aquila and Priscilla, and when they were ready, he didn't simply leave them to repeat the same things they had always done, rather he took them to Ephesus so that they could play a central role in the establishment of a whole new church in that city. Then Apollos comes along, a man who had a gift for preaching the Word, yet even though he was a very talented and gifted man, he still needed some guidance in his teaching, and Aquila and Priscilla provided that guidance, and soon sent him on his way to establish new congregations in another area. In this we see discipleship on the part of Paul paying dividends for the Kingdom, and then his disciples in turn passing the torch to newly trained disciples who go out and repeat the process with the result that the Gospel spreads throughout the region at a much faster rate than it would have otherwise been able to spread... and God being glorified through all of it.

Most of us don't do that today.

At one point in my life, I taught a Sunday school class for 10 consecutive years, and never missed a Sunday. For the entire time, I had essentially the same people in the class; no one ever graduated. The reason that I didn't miss a single Sunday as teacher was that there was no one else who would fill in for me. It wasn't because the people hadn't learned enough, and it wasn't because they couldn't have done a terrific job of it. It was because they had no concept of ever doing anything other than filling a seat on Sunday, instead they thought that that's all anyone ever really needs to do, and no matter how often I told them otherwise, they simply could not comprehend that there was anything else for them to do, for they had sold out to the idea that they were going to be "lifelong Bible *students*".

Teaching along with ministry was supposed to be someone else's problem; leave that to the professionals.

Obviously that wasn't the attitude in Paul's day, and just as obviously it shouldn't be ours today.

Chapter 19

Paul Arrives in Ephesus

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 in 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.

Acts 19:1-7

Paul arrived in Ephesus on a route from the north, and upon arriving he met a small group of "disciples" who had been taught by Apollos, apparently before he had been instructed by Aquila and Priscilla. It would seem that Apollos' initial misconceptions had been passed to these men, who had not been properly instructed. Paul seems to have noticed that something was missing, and asked them if they received the Holy Spirit only to discover that they had not even heard of the Holy Spirit, even though they had believed.

What follows is quite interesting theologically, for Paul sets for us a clear linkage between baptism and receiving the Spirit (19:3-5), followed by events that parallel those we saw take place in Samaria in chapter 8. Notice that Paul explained to them that John's baptism, which they had received, was a baptism of repentance, and that John had taught those who received to believe in the One who would come after him, Jesus, and that upon hearing this, the men were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus (cf. Acts 2:38). Then, as Peter had done in Samaria, Paul lays his hands on the men and they received the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts that made the Spirit's presence obvious. Notice they had to first be baptized into Jesus Christ, and then they would receive the Holy Spirit.

At this point, it might be useful for us to consider that we are looking at an event that took place roughly 20 years after Pentecost, and for that length of time, the Gospel had spread orally from Jerusalem throughout the known world. As we might expect, as the great story was retold over those years, there was some confusion about some of the details that was beginning to be problematic. Of course, this shouldn't be any great surprise, for even now after having the New Testament Scriptures for so many centuries, there is a great deal of confusion about these

same matters. For example, what baptism should a Christian receive? As you know, asking a question such as that one will spark endless debates today, and having been in my share of those debates myself, I can assure you that not many of those debaters will mention this particular text, even though it is one of the clearest teachings on the subject.

At any rate, the men obviously received the Spirit, and the stage was set for the next part of the story, an amazing series of events that demonstrate the spiritual power of what was going on in that region...

Acts 19:8-20

In this passage Luke tells us of the wonders and marvels that came about in Ephesus and the surrounding area when Paul arrived there. The narrative begins in 19:8-10 in which Luke tells us that Paul spoke persuasively in the synagogue for a period of three months. In this period, many, possibly most of his hearers came to follow Jesus Christ. I say this because in verse 9 Luke uses the words, "but some of them" which strongly implies a minority, became "obstinate" and refused to believe. After this, Paul, as was his custom, took the message to the Gentile population, with the result that everyone in the region heard the message of the Lord.

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. (19:11-12)

Once again, we are reminded of all that had happened in Samaria after Peter was called upon to make a dramatic demonstration of the Holy Spirit coming upon the population in chapter 8, in this community where Paul did the same thing in the previous passage.

In vv. 13-16 we have a curious account of some Jews attempting to drive out demons in the name, "of the Jesus whom Paul preaches" (19:13). It doesn't appear from Luke's wording that these men were followers of Christ who were working with the power of the Spirit, for the demons in question caused them to be badly beaten, and when the people heard this they came to recognize that the name of Jesus was not a name to be tossed around lightly, and it was held in the highest respect thereafter; God was not messing around in Ephesus.

Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed what they had done. 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. (19:18-20)

Jewish sorcerers were not uncommon in Gentile lands, and they, according to historians, had a reputation for effective incantations. Here we see that after the incident mentioned above, many people including a number of sorcerers came to sincere repentance and were willing to divorce themselves entirely from their past lives. In our text these sorcerers actually burned their scrolls with a combined worth of 50,000 days' wages, an astronomical sum. In the Roman world.

Scrolls were very expensive, and scrolls with magical incantations and formulas were very highly prized, and these guys were so moved to repentance that they destroyed a fortune.

Indeed, God was not messing around in Ephesus.

Paul's work in Ephesus was about complete; he made arrangements to move on, but with so many amazing things taking place there, the Evil One was about to make his move...

Acts 19:23-41

Taking a look at the heavenly chess board, we have seen in the last few posts that God has launched a major offensive in the province of Asia, with Ephesus as the strategic central point of His operations. Up to this point, the Enemy was completely on the defensive, and in this text he attempts to slow God's progress in Ephesus.

The instigator of the counter assault is a silversmith named Demetrius who riles up his fellow silversmiths by pointing out that the silver idols that are the basis of their very lucrative trade are in danger of becoming economically obsolete, as Paul's message finds more and more acceptance among their potential customers.

The silversmiths and whoever else heard Demetrius responded with logic and high mental prowess, just as agitators always do: They shouted slogans. Their slogan, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians" struck a chord of tradition and civic pride among the people, and chaos resulted; before long the crowd became a mob of shouting people, few of whom had any real idea of why all of this was even happening, and they grabbed two of Paul's travelling companions and dragged them into the theater.

Paul felt compelled to go there and address the crowd, but everyone urged him not to. In verse 31 we discover that Paul now had friends in high places, and they too sent him word to stay away.

Finally, before anything too drastic had taken place the city clerk managed to quiet the mob; he spoke to them in a reasonable way, pointing out that their business was safe, and then pointing out that the reputation of the city was hanging in the balance (civic pride again) and that if they had any actual charges to file against the two men they had taken, there were courts for that purpose. This appears to have broken the spell of insanity, and the mob, now once again a crowd, began to go home.

Like I mentioned last time, God was not messing around in Ephesus; the counter assault failed completely.

Chapter 20

A Long-Winded Sermon

Acts 20:1-12

Today, most of us consider a long sermon to be somewhere from 35 to 40 minutes, but the Apostle Paul gives comfort to any modern-day preacher who is hearing about long sermons from critics, for Paul in this passage went on past midnight, and then until dawn in Troas.

The first six verses of this passage give details about places visited and who was in Paul's party, but beginning with verse seven we see the events surrounding this epic sermon. The most interesting thing here is that Luke never even tells us what Paul was talking about!

Paul went on so long that a young man named Eutychus, who was seated in the window, fell asleep and then fell three stories to his death sometime after midnight... and we complain after only a few minutes. Luke tells us that Paul ran outside and raised the young man back to life, and then returned to his sermon and went on several more hours. We know that Paul went a little long because he was leaving the next day, but my oh my I wonder if anyone was awake when he was finished.

I take three lessons from this text:

First, preachers should probably keep an eye on the clock.

Second, young men shouldn't sit in third floor windows.

Third, the power of God can overcome any calamity.

Next time, Paul bids farewell to the elders of Ephesus, and Luke tells us what he told them; see you then!

Paul Reflects on His Ministry

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 and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents. 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.

Acts 20:17-21

Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders is remarkable for several reasons, one of which is the relevance of his remarks for those of us who are leaders in the church of our own day. For some of you who read these remarks and follow along with me here, you know that you are a leader in some way or fashion; some of you are paid ministers, other teachers or ministry leaders in your home congregations— some are Christian bloggers whose writings of instruction or encouragement are available to a worldwide audience. So you too might want to reflect upon Paul's message to these elders.

As Paul began his farewell remarks to the elders of Ephesus, he does so by reminding them of his approach to ministry and of the style of ministry that he exhibited in their midst for an extended period of time. He reminds them that his ministry was a ministry of humility, of service and not of haughtiness, pride or exalted position or high status, which of course is quite a contrast to that of the Pharisees, or even to some leaders in today's church. He also mentions something that might strike us as strange here, for he mentions the "severe testing" brought about by his "Jewish opponents". I say this is odd because while in Ephesus, Luke really didn't mention much about opposition from Jewish sources, other than the fact that after three months of teaching in the synagogue, some spoke openly against him; his last recorded close call from Jewish opposition was in Corinth.

Of course, it is possible that there was behind the scenes opposition that Luke did not describe in his narrative.

Paul goes on to remind them of how he was always available, either in public or private to teach, instruct and encourage anyone who needed his help, with the implication that he didn't consider his own needs when called upon: He demonstrated selflessness in his ministry. His ministry and teaching were always available to all peoples, and in everything he did, he brought his listeners face-to-face with the Lord Jesus Christ, whose servant he always was.

There is a great deal here to reflect upon, so we'll pick up next time with the next "chunk" of his remarks; I am sure that all us might want to consider how our own efforts reflect Paul's approach, for surely Paul's approach to service mirrored that of Jesus Himself.

Paul's Mindset

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; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace.

Acts 20:22-24

Paul's mindset now comes into the discussion as he tells the elders about his intention to go to Jerusalem. He says that he doesn't know what may happen to him there, and that everywhere

he goes the Holy Spirit warns him of hardship and prison, and then he makes the statement that is the key in understanding his way of thinking: his life means nothing to him.

In several of his letters, Paul speaks of putting self to death, of life by the Spirit as opposed to life by the flesh, of the “old man” as opposed to the “new man”. As you know, each of those passages is about mindset, about setting aside selfish motivations and interests in favor of serving the Lord and serving other people. To Paul, this meant that we set everything aside and are all in for the Gospel... but what does it mean to us?

In my experience, when Paul talks about death to self, we talk about other selfish people. In passages where Paul uses the expression “Spirit” and “flesh”, it seems that we talk a lot about the sins of others. When he talks about the new man and the old man, we like to talk about the shortcomings of others. When Paul talks about how he is all in for the Gospel no matter what the cost, we like to talk about the plans we have for next week that make it impossible for us to serve.

OK, maybe you’re right; maybe I’m painting with a broad brush. Yes, fine, maybe I’m being a little too direct... but you aren’t going to tell me that you have no idea what I’m talking about are you? You did notice that I used the word “we” didn’t you?

Yep, you’re absolutely right: Paul was an apostle, and they are kind of special. None of us are apostles, so maybe we don’t have any reason to have that kind of mindset...

But we are leaders, aren’t we?

Here’s a scary thought: This short paragraph is the set up for what he is about to say to the leaders from Ephesus... I’ll bet you can’t wait to see what he said next!

Bad Moon Rising

“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 any of you. 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.”

Acts 20:25-31

Paul begins this part of his farewell by telling the Ephesian elders that they will never see him again, and as we see in Acts 21:11, he has in mind a prophecy about coming troubles in Jerusalem, to which he is about to travel. He continues by warning them that they will be dealing with “savage wolves” that will come upon the church after he leaves. Clearly, these “wolves” are

false teachers, many of whom will arise from among the believers themselves, who will seek to lead the entire flock astray.

Looking at these verses, we can see that Paul has been warning the leaders about this for quite some time, and while his presence has kept false teaching at bay for three years, it will soon be up to them to protect their flock as a shepherd protects his. In all of this, Paul makes a curious point: He is not to blame for what is coming, precisely because of his continual warnings, and the fact that he has ensured that they all understand God's entire will. Interestingly, this carries with it the implication that God's will for them and the church is that they be tested by false teaching, which is not the way we usually understand such threats today.

In any case, as we know from Paul's letters later on, that trial did sweep through the churches of Asia.

"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.'"

Acts 20:32-35

With these words, Paul concludes his farewell to the elders of Ephesus. By committing them to God and "the word of his grace", Paul is reminding them that it is only through their relationship with God and the truth of His Gospel that they will grow and prosper spiritually and thus be sustained through the challenges they will face, and so it is with us today...

Then he turns to an area of temptation that cannot be avoided for those who find themselves in a position of leadership; he reminds them of the fact that at no time over the past three years has Paul or his companions ever asked for any enrichment financially. Rather, he reminds them that it was by the work of his own hands that all of his party was sustained. Notice that he says that it is by "hard work" that they help the weak. In this, Paul is not referring to those who are poor or disadvantaged in monetary terms, but rather it was the elders themselves who were the "weak" ones, for this is not a monetary admonition as much as it is a spiritual one. In fact, the really interesting, and frankly significant aspect of this admonition is that it was by his hard work to pay his way that he supplied the spiritual needs of his (spiritually) weak brothers, for he took the earthly element of money completely out of the picture by hard work.

I mention this because it is entirely counter-intuitive for most of us today, for so great is our attention to money and material things. Once again, notice that throughout the entire farewell, Paul's emphasis has been entirely on spiritual concerns, and not those of this world.

Luke ends the section in vv. 36-38 with their last tearful moments together, and then Paul heads for his ship, never again to see these dear ones. Luke picks up in chapter 21 with Paul's journey to Jerusalem, where a whole new set of adventures await his arrival.

Chapter 21

Paul Sails to Jerusalem

Acts 21:1-16

After the long farewell to the elders in Ephesus, Paul and his party returned to the ship and set sail. Much of this passage tells of the ports of call along the way, and in some instances of ports where Paul and his party were able to meet with other believers while the ship was loading or unloading cargo. It would seem that everywhere they went; Paul was warned not to go to Jerusalem.

Luke has not told us why Paul was so intent upon visiting Jerusalem as opposed to returning to Antioch and reporting to the elders there in the church that had actually commissioned his journey; we can only speculate about his thinking. Yet whatever his reasons were, he was determined in spite of the warnings that the Holy Spirit was giving him.

They arrived in the port city of Caesarea where a prophet by the name of Agabus gave Paul yet another warning with a dramatic illustration of what would happen to him in Jerusalem and everyone begged him once again, not to go:

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." (21:12-14)

Looking at this moment in purely human terms, it would be easy to conclude that Paul was acting rashly, that he was just being stubborn; we might even wonder if he had some kind of martyr complex. Oh, I know that we really won't confine ourselves to this moment, since we have all read further in the story of Acts, not to mention through Paul's letters, and we know that the ultimate result was that the Gospel would go to places it might not otherwise have been, and that letters were written that are now part of the Scriptures, that might not have otherwise been written. Try to step back from all of that and ask yourself a question: If the Holy Spirit was leading Paul to Jerusalem, then why was the Holy Spirit warning him not to go there?

At this point in the story, in spite of all the nice little "Sunday school" answers we have heard over the years, there really is no way for us to know; perhaps Luke will give us some clues in the chapters that follow... or perhaps Paul was making a big mistake, and God used him to spread the Gospel anyway...

One thing however is certain, Paul's companions finally gave up trying to talk him out of the trip, and left everything to God's will, for they were willing, when all was said and done, to place their faith in God.

I would suggest that this is a pretty good lesson for us to learn as well.

Acts 21:17-26

When Paul arrived in Jerusalem he was warmly greeted, and the next day he reported to James and the elders of the church about his adventures among the Gentiles. They received his report with joy, and no doubt were also happy to learn that he was not guilty of the things that were being said about him in Jerusalem, for it would seem that many Jewish Christians had been told that Paul was telling Jews in faraway places that they should not observe the Law of Moses.

We know from Paul's letters that he often spoke highly about the law, we also know that he often spoke harshly about Jews who insisted that Gentile believers be circumcised, and that Paul himself claimed that he was not under the law as a Christian, but that he observed the law when dealing with Jews, and not when dealing only with Gentiles. At no point in his letters or recorded remarks does he advise Jewish Christians not to live according to the Law.

As you see, there are some fairly fine lines here, and one might understand how a Jewish Christian might misunderstand Paul's position... especially when his position was deliberately misrepresented by those who sought to discredit him.

James proposed a solution to this problem: Paul could join in a purification rite which would be a very public demonstration that Paul had not rejected Jewish law or custom; surely this would convince anyone who harbored a genuine misunderstanding about Paul's teaching that he had not done the things he had been accused of. Paul quickly agreed to this and participated, in accordance with Jewish practice.

What follows demonstrates to us very clearly that there was something much more sinister afoot than a simple misunderstanding...

Acts 21:27-22:21

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, "Fellow Israelites, help us! This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple 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.)

Acts 21:27-29

With these words, the riot begins. In reading them, we cannot but notice that what served as the catalyst to all that would follow was no misunderstanding, for what we have here is a bald-faced lie, followed by a substantial misrepresentation. In fact, if you look closely, it isn't an appeal based upon a religious difference, it is an appeal based upon national pride and cultural identity; no sir, this is no mere doctrinal dispute.

The crowd goes berserk, and Paul is beaten with intent to commit murder in cold blood.

The Roman commander on duty responds quickly and leads his soldiers into the fray. As one might expect of Romans, they quickly place Paul under arrest, and with great difficulty, they manage to get him out of the crowd's grip. As they proceed away from the mob, Paul asks to be allowed to address the crowd, and remarkably, the commander agrees...

Luke records his words in 22:3-21; he tells the people of his birth and heritage as a Jew among Jews, of his training, and of his bloodthirsty pursuit of Christians. He tells of his mission to Damascus to persecute in that city, and of how the Lord Jesus Christ appeared to him on the Damascus road, telling them all about that experience and of his call to bring the good news to faraway places; the crowd remained silent up to this point, but Paul would never finish telling his story...

It would seem that there was a spirit in play on that fateful day, a spirit that was not at all a holy one. What happened next?

Chapter 22

Paul, Romans and Legal Rights

Acts 22:22-29

As Paul addressed the mob, things went along for a short time in calm, and then he mentioned taking the Gospel to the Gentiles, and the mob went wild, demanding Paul's murder. The Roman commander ordered Paul taken into the barracks where he ordered Paul to be interrogated.

At this point in the story, it is interesting to note that in the Roman worldview, the victim of a violent attack by a mob is arrested and interrogated, while the perpetrators of the violence are not; obviously this Paul guy did *something*, let's make him tell us what he did.

Paul was to be encouraged to be forthcoming by flogging. This was the same kind of thing done to Jesus before His crucifixion; Paul was stripped naked, and his hands were tied to the top of a high post. If the post was high enough, his feet would actually have been off the ground, and then he would be struck repeatedly with a leather whip that was weighted down on the ends with bits of bone and rock that would rip his flesh apart... while being asked questions. This would have been by far the most severe torture he had ever endured up to this point, and it would likely result in lifelong injury or death if it went on long enough.

I have often been accused of having a rather odd sense of humor, and with that in mind I tell you that what happens next strikes me as one of the funniest scenes in all of Scripture; there is naked Paul tied to this post, his feet probably off the ground, and he asks a question...

"Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn't even been found guilty?" (22:25b)

The centurion who was tasked with getting a confession from Paul got a bit of a shock with that innocent little question and went straight to his commander, who received a shock of his own, and went directly to Paul:

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 lot of money for my citizenship."

"But I was born a citizen," Paul replied. (22:27-28)

The commander's comment in 22:28 can be taken more than one way, but for me it looks like kind of an insult, as though he were saying that he had to pay a lot to become a citizen and now *anybody* can be a citizen. Whatever was going through his mind, Paul had the higher status, having been born a citizen. Notice that the men who were about to commit a serious crime got

out of that room “immediately” and Luke tells us the commander himself was “alarmed”— this had been a close call for all concerned.

Now the Roman commander had a call to make: What was he going to do with Paul?

Acts 22:30-23:11

After the scene in the torture chamber, the Roman commander must have gone to the Roman tribune, for he then summons the Sanhedrin into session and takes Paul before them in an effort to discover what Paul was being accused of. In spite of their brutality, it is difficult to accuse the Romans of being anything other than cunning in this scene, for their tactics have shifted in a fascinating way; they are now defending their citizen in a sense, and shifting the responsibility for the mob violence from the victim of the mob to the leaders of the people who had committed the violence. Remember that Luke has not mentioned that the Sanhedrin was behind the mob’s actions; it was some “Jews from Asia” who incited the crowd... Now, the Sanhedrin needs to give an account...

Paul begins his defense in 23:1. Isn’t that interesting; he hasn’t been accused of anything, in fact, the purpose of the meeting is to discover what the accusations are. Essentially, Paul makes a statement that in everything he has done; he has been a faithful servant of God.

Ananias became the high priest in 47 AD, and he was known to be extremely corrupt, according to the Jewish historian Josephus. When Ananias heard Paul’s statement, he ordered him struck in the mouth, in violation of the Law (Lev. 19:15):

“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!” (23:3)

Everyone was shocked that Paul would speak to the high priest in such a manner:

Those who were standing near Paul said, “How dare you 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.’” (23:4-5)

Interesting response from Paul; did he really not know he was addressing the high priest, dressed as he was in his judge’s costume, seated in the high priest’s special chair? We know Paul’s eyesight was poor, but did he really not know?

Three years ago I was a witness in a court case. I am legally blind, and I could not see the judge from where I was giving testimony, but when the judge asked me a question, I could hear where the voice had come from and I could tell that it wasn’t the attorney who was asking; I couldn’t see the attorney either, but I could tell. I don’t believe for a second that Paul didn’t know whom he was addressing... but no one would have known he was the high priest by his actions, since he was violating the law he was there to enforce, and thus I would have to suggest that Paul spoke with irony in this instance. Paul got one pop in the mouth, the high priest got two.

OK, the first part of the story is funny; the next part is hilarious...

In 23:6-10 we read that all Paul needed to do at this point is to say he had been attacked because he taught about the resurrection, and the Pharisees and Sadducees were at each-others' throats. Nobody accused Paul of anything, and the Romans had to take Paul out of the now chaotic room by force... The scene ends with 23:11:

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."

A little ways back we saw that Paul had been led by the Holy Spirit to go to Jerusalem, and that the same Holy Spirit had been warning others that he would have a rough time of it when he got there, that he would be bound by the Jews and handed over to the Gentiles, giving us a riddle: What was going on here, isn't that a contradiction? This is the answer to the riddle; Paul would take the Gospel to the very heart of the Roman Empire as a result of this chain of events.

Chapter 23

Conspiracies, Plots and Politics

Acts 23:12-35

When Paul returned to Jerusalem after his third missionary journey, there was a spirit abroad in the city; it was the spirit of evil. After the ridiculous behavior of the Sanhedrin in the last scene, a new plot comes to light when “some Jews” form a conspiracy some 40 strong, to murder Paul. They need an accomplice in order for their plans to come to fruition, for Paul was being held in the Roman barracks, a stronghold they dared not attack. Who could they get to help them set an ambush?

Obviously, if you are plotting murder, the ones who will help you are the chief priests and elders, those great paragons of righteousness and virtue, those men who are responsible for maintaining the law of God: They quickly agreed.

In 23:17-22 we learn something interesting for it appears that Paul had a nephew in town who was privy to this information. We might rightly wonder if he was connected to the chief priests and elders in some way, after all, Paul had been a Pharisee, perhaps the nephew was in the same line of work; sadly, Luke doesn't quite say. In any case, the nephew pays Paul a visit in the barracks to warn him, and Paul sends him off to the commander to share the information. The commander listens, and takes the warning to heart, making a plan of his own; he will send Paul to Caesarea under heavy military escort in the dark of night.

I'm not sure how Luke came into this bit of knowledge, but it seems that the commander wrote a note to Governor Felix in Caesarea:

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. (23:25-30)

I suppose we can forgive our commander for his rather loose treatment of the facts here for he was a military man with a political hot potato on hands that was beyond his pay grade, and it would appear that this note accomplished its purpose; Felix accepted the case which was no doubt quite a relief for our commander.

Paul and Felix would have to wait for the accusers to come to Caesarea before they could proceed. Would the accusers be arrested upon arrival there for their roles as co-conspirators in the plot to murder a Roman citizen, as Roman law would require?

Don't hold your breath...

Chapter 24

A Series of Curious Events

Acts 24:1-25:12

When the Jewish officials arrived in Caesarea, they presented a vague and flimsy case to Felix; there really isn't any other way to describe it (24:1-9). If the Jews had known about the letter Felix had already received from the Jerusalem commander, I doubt they would have taken to approach they did, for as the case was presented to Felix, it was all about a Roman citizen who had been assaulted by a mob of provincials. Paul then made a very simple and clear defense (24:10-21) which was more or less in accord with the note Felix had received from the Jerusalem garrison. We have arrived at the place where Felix should probably have dismissed the charges, but Felix knew he was in a tough political spot and adjourned for the day, saying he would render his decision when the commander of the garrison arrived on the scene. Apparently, he wanted to examine the differences between the Jewish and Pauline accounts of events. The funny thing is... Luke makes no mention of there ever having been such a meeting.

The political problem for Felix is simple: Paul hasn't broken any laws and is popular with one set of people in the city. The Jewish leaders are obviously not being truthful, but they are the leaders of the majority of the people in the region, and people who are famous for being fiercely independent and almost impossible to deal with honestly. If Felix does the right thing, he will likely have an insurrection on his hands. If he condemns Paul, he will possibly have violence and discord in the streets, and his career would be in danger either way. Thus, as any up and coming politician would do, he stalls for time.

He stalled by having a series of meetings with Paul over a two year period; Luke makes his thinking clear:

At the same time he was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him. (24:26)

There's nothing like a little cash to break a political stalemate.

Paul did not offer any bribes, and eventually, Felix was replaced by Porcius Festus; no doubt his new posting would be less difficult.

When Festus took office, he seems to have gone to Jerusalem and discussed matters with the Jewish leaders, including the thorny question of what to do about the Paul case. Naturally, the Jews wanted a change of venue for the trial (which had already taken place) so they could set an ambush, but Festus wasn't quite that gullible, and they would need to go to Caesarea.

In yet another hearing, the Jews brought their charges which were firmly denied by Paul. Hoping to gain favor with the Jews, Festus asked Paul if he would agree to a change of venue, and Paul opted to change the venue not to Jerusalem, but to Rome. Festus, having little choice in the matter at that point, granted the motion. Of course, Festus had no way of knowing that he

was really nothing more than a pawn on God's chess board, for it was His expressed will that Paul take the Gospel to Rome (23:11); Paul would travel there at Rome's expense.

Yet, there was another interesting scene still to be played out in Caesarea...

Chapters 25-26

God's Plan Unfolds

Acts 25:13-26:32

Apparently Festus was troubled by Paul's case; here was this guy Paul who had done nothing against Roman law, being held in his jail. He had been accused of terrible crimes by the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem, the only problem was they never quite mentioned what those crimes were, and it seemed to Festus that it came down to a doctrinal dispute of some kind that they couldn't or wouldn't quite make clear to him. Although he wanted to free Paul, he also wanted to keep the Jewish authorities on his side; he wasn't sure what to do, except that Paul had exercised his right as a Roman citizen to appeal the matter to Caesar. Ah yes, there was an exit for Festus, just ship Paul off to Rome and let the bigwigs deal with him; yet this seemed to bother Festus.

When King Agrippa was in town for several days, Festus discussed this troubling case with him, found that Agrippa was quite interested and desired to hear from Paul himself. It would seem that Agrippa was much more familiar with Jewish custom and practice; he may have known about Paul before coming to visit Caesarea.

Their audience with Paul takes up the entirety of chapter 26. Paul takes them through his testimony from childhood to the present day, as we have seen him do previously, yet most any lawyer would tell you that Paul made a mistake in doing so:

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 a prisoner on to Rome without specifying the charges against him." (25:24-27)

Following this, Paul fills the whole chapter (26) with his narrative. All Paul needed to do was say that he had no idea what the Jews were accusing him of for he had done no wrong, and Festus is trapped by his own words; Paul should have withdrawn his appeal to Caesar and gone free. By talking more than that, there is always the chance that they find something to charge him with, so just shut up!

But Paul wasn't trying to be set free, for he knew that God had another mission for him, this time in Rome (23:11).

In giving his testimony, Paul proclaimed the Gospel to all of the people in the room as Festus noted: *"Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" (26:28b).*

At the end of the day, Festus and Agrippa agreed that Paul could be set free, except for his appeal to Caesar (26:30-32). Paul will be sent to Rome as soon as it can be arranged.

Chapter 27

Perils of the Sea

Acts 27:1-26

We know from the text that Luke was with Paul on the trip to Rome; no one else who might have been with Paul on the voyage is named in the text. In the first 12 verses, Luke tells us where they stopped, and of unfavorable winds that caused delay upon delay in their progress. As you read this, you might wonder why the weather was so uncooperative when they were on a mission from God to get Paul to Rome, for surely God could calm things down if He wanted to. Of course, another possibility would be that there was another force in play, a force that did not want Paul in Rome to accomplish God's will for him there, a force that might try to use the weather as a hindrance to his progress.

As for me, I think there was quite a struggle going on behind the scenes.

In 27:13 ff. Luke tells us of a great storm that came up, giving us details that make it clear that this was no ordinary storm, as it raged day after day for 2 weeks. The sailors did all they could do to keep the ship afloat, but they began to lose heart; everyone feared that they would die.

But they would not die.

After they 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 to whom I belong 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." (27:21-26)

God's will for Paul to appear before Caesar would not be deterred by a storm, for God's will is going to be done on this earth. Yes, His will might be opposed by men or by the spiritual forces of darkness, but they will never keep it from being done. In fact, the opposition of the Evil One may well provide an additional opportunity for God's will to be done; just imagine the impact this statement of Paul's would have when all of the men on the ship survived this mammoth storm in spite of the shipwreck that we will read about next.

Acts 27:27-44

The storm had been going on 14 days, and the crew and passengers, 276 in all had not eaten. The crew discovered that they were most likely approaching land, but since it was night, they could see nothing, and fearing running onto the rocks and being killed, they set anchor until daylight.

The crew also lowered the lifeboat, apparently hoping to get away safely from the ship once they could see land, but Paul noticed what they had done and informed the centurion, who set the boat adrift. I'm guessing the sailors weren't overly thrilled by this, so Paul stepped up and urged everyone to have something to eat, changing the subject. He took some bread and gave thanks to God for it, and that seemed to encourage the others to join him, and they all ate their fill. After that, final preparations were made to make landfall as soon as the sun came up.

When daylight finally came, they couldn't identify where they were, but they did see a bay with nice sandy beaches in the distance, and the crew made for it... until they ran aground on a sandbar some distance from the beach. The stern of the ship was quickly dashed to pieces by the rough surf; they would have to swim for it. This of course gave the soldiers a quandary for they couldn't risk any of the prisoners escaping, so they resolved to kill them all. God of course was not going to have it, for the whole point of all of this was to get Paul to Rome; their commander intervened on Paul's behalf and they were spared. Then he directed that those who could swim should head for shore, and those who couldn't were given planks and other floating objects to ride into the beach; everyone made it, and thus Paul arrived in Malta.

We must know that after all this, Paul's visit there would be a noteworthy one, as we will shortly see.

Chapter 28

Paul's Adventures in Malta

Acts 28:1-16

It was a cold and rainy day when the 276 souls arrived on the island of Malta after the shipwreck, and the people on the island were very kind to them, seeing to their needs. Since it was a cold day, they built a bonfire to help them get warm and dry. Paul, as was his custom, chipped in to help and brought in some brush for the fire. As he moved up to the heat, a viper launched itself from the brush and attached to Paul's arm. Everyone who saw this knew Paul was a dead man walking.

The Maltese assumed that Paul must have been a very bad man, since he was saved from the shipwreck only to die from snakebite, but something very unusual happened: Nothing. As strange as it may sound to say that, it's true; Paul's hand should have swelled up, but it didn't. Paul should have become quite sick, but he didn't. Paul should have keeled over dead, but there he was as if nothing had happened. The Maltese eventually decided that rather than being a bad man, he must be a god!

Afterwards, they were taken in by the chief official of the island, a man named Publius. He showed great hospitality to his guests but soon his father became seriously ill.

When news reached the rest of the Maltese people that Paul had healed the man's father, they brought their sick from all over the island to Paul so that they too might be healed, and Paul was quite accommodating; one can only imagine the impact this had for the Gospel that Paul had brought with him to their island. Publius would provide everything they needed when the time came for them to set sail, some three month later.

When they finally arrived in Rome, they were warmly greeted by the brothers and sisters there. The guards were lenient with Paul at first, and allowed him to live by himself, with only one guard to keep watch. As we will see next time, nothing was done to keep him quiet...

Acts 28:17-31

For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!

Acts 28:30-31

Luke ends his narrative with these words, which wrap up the theme of the book that was stated by Jesus Himself back in 1:8:

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.

If you think about it, it really is an amazing story of God overcoming everything this world could throw in His way. There is Paul, having been taken to Rome as a prisoner of the State, kept in chains under house arrest for two years, during which he taught, preached and wrote, right in the very heart of the Roman world.

In this text, Luke also records some of the conversation Paul had with the Jews of Rome, a conversation that changed some minds, and yet left others entrenched against the Way. Yet even in that, the Gospel had gone forth, and Paul had shown them exactly what was going on from the Scriptures, as Luke's mention of Isaiah 6 shows so well (28:26-27). Thus, when you come right down to it, we can see that while the world of the first century was different in so many ways; its essence is very much like our own. We, like the disciples of old, are charged with proclaiming the Gospel. Many will listen and receive it, more will not. There will be obstacles to be overcome, there will be persecution and opposition, hardships and struggles, yet the Gospel will be proclaimed, and God will build His kingdom.

In the final analysis, it will be up to each person to decide for him or her self whether or not to receive God's offer of grace. Yet in this, it is not for us to judge or attempt to force anyone in making their decision, for that is not the way of love. However, it is for us to share, to encourage, to serve and to boldly proclaim the salvation that Jesus shed His blood to make possible.

The rest is up to God.