

The 800-Pound Gorilla in the Room

Acts 15:1-11

¹ But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” ² And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. ³ So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. ⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. ⁵ But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.”

⁶ The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. ⁷ And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. ⁸ And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, ⁹ and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” – Acts 15:1-11 ESV

Paul and Barnabas eventually arrived back in Antioch in Syria, reuniting with those in the church who had commissioned them and sent them on their first missionary journey. While they were there, “they reported all the things God had done with them, and that he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27 NLT). But their good news concerning the Gentiles was soon met with strong opposition, fueled by a contingent of Jewish Christians who had come from Judea with the expressed purpose of clearing up what they believed to be false and misguided teaching regarding these so-called Gentile converts. These individuals, while believers in Jesus, still held fast to their Hebrew heritage and viewed Christianity as an extension of Judaism. After all, Jesus had been a Jew and a rabbi. He had lived His life according to the Mosaic law, having kept it to perfection. He had attended synagogue and had been a student of the Hebrew Scriptures. And all of His disciples had been Jews, as well as the rest of those who had received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. So, in their minds, it was essential that any Gentile who wished to be saved, must first become a Jewish proselyte. In other words, they must be circumcised and keep the Mosaic law in order for their salvation to be complete and acceptable. So, all of those Gentiles who had come to faith on the island of Cyprus, and in Iconium, Lystra, Derby and Pisidian Antioch, as a result of the ministry of Paul and Barnabas, were not really saved at all. The men from Judea had made their case known, loud and clear. “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1 ESV). And Luke, who can at times come across as the king of understatement, simply says, “Paul

and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them” (Acts 15:2 ESV). We can only imagine how incensed these two men were at the suggestion that their work had been in vain. It’s not that the opposition was denying that Gentiles *could* be saved, but they were clearly stating what they believed to be the mandatory requirements concerning their salvation. And this so-called “debate” was going to become a major dividing point within the early church, as these believing Jews, sometimes referred to with the collective term of Judaizers, continued to propagate their particular salvation mandate.

It was determined that this matter must be taken to the church leadership in Jerusalem, so, Paul and Barnabas were sent along with others to present their opinions on the matter before Peter and the rest of the apostles. After having arrived in Jerusalem, they provided the apostles with a detailed accounting of all that had happened on their trip. They told of all those who had come to faith in Christ and how God had clearly been validating their efforts among the Gentiles. But the opposition was also present, and they stated their case in all-too-clear terms: “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses” (Acts 15:5 ESV). They weren’t questioning the veracity of these Gentiles’ salvation experiences, but they were denying their validity. They were only partially saved. There was something missing. They had to become Jews, with all the males submitting to the rite of circumcision, and every man, woman and child agreeing to keep the Mosaic law. According to these men, the salvation of each and every Gentile was is a sort of spiritual limbo until these conditions were met.

Luke indicates that this matter produced a great deal of debate. And one can only imagine how vehemently Paul and Barnabas argued their side of the case. Their whole ministry was in question and the salvation of every Gentile convert they had witnessed was in jeopardy. And at the heart of the debate was the argument over what was required for someone to be saved. Had Jesus taught that circumcision and adherence to the law was required? Was that what He had commissioned the disciples to take to the nations? Had Jesus intended for all who come to faith in Him to first become card-carrying, law-abiding Jews?

It was Peter, the recognized leader among the apostles, who eventually stood up and addressed those gathered. And the first thing he did was remind all those in the audience how God had sent Him to the Gentiles.

⁷ “Brothers, you know that some time ago God chose me to preach to the Gentiles so they would hear the message of the gospel and believe. ⁸ And God, who knows the heart, has testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, ⁹ and he made no distinction between them and us, cleansing their hearts by faith.” – Acts 15:7-9 NLT

Notice what Peter says: “he [God] made **no distinction** between them and us.” The Greek word, *diakrinō*, means “to separate, make a distinction, discriminate, to prefer.” God had not treated the Gentiles any differently than He had treated the Jews who had been gathered in that upper room on the day of Pentecost. The Gentiles received the outpouring of the Spirit of God just as the Jews had. In other words, the Gentiles were not denied this experience because they were uncircumcised and violators of the Mosaic law. They had been full-fledged non-Jews, but that

had not made an ounce of difference to God. So, Peter asks an obvious and highly compelling question: “So now why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?” (Acts 15:10 ESV). He accuses the Judaizers of putting God to the test. He asserts that they are demanding of these Gentile converts something God never required of them. And the truly unfathomable thing about this to Peter was that these Jews were placing a “yoke” or burden on the neck of the Gentiles that no Jew had ever been able to bear. They were demanding the impossible of these Gentile converts. There wasn’t a Jew alive who had been able to keep the law. In fact, Paul would later address this issue to the church in Rome.

The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. So God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin’s control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins. – Romans 8:3 NLT

The law was unable to save man. So, then why had God given it? Paul would answer that very question in his letter to the church in Galatia.

Why, then, was the law given? It was given alongside the promise to show people their sins. But the law was designed to last only until the coming of the child who was promised. God gave his law through angels to Moses, who was the mediator between God and the people. – Galatians 3:19 NLT

And in that very same letter, Paul would juxtapose the law with the grace of God, exposing the law’s incapacity to save anyone.

I do not treat the grace of God as meaningless. For if keeping the law could make us right with God, then there was no need for Christ to die. – Galatians 2:21 NLT

And Peter brought up this important issue of grace to those gathered in Jerusalem. He wanted them to know that there was nothing to be done by men that would add to or complete the salvation that God had graciously made available to them through Christ.

“...we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they are.” – Acts 15:11 NLT

Salvation is the work of God, not men. There is nothing men can bring to the table that makes their salvation more acceptable to God than their simple faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ. The offer of salvation is a gracious gift from God. No one deserves it – neither Jew or Gentile. No one can earn it. And there is no yoke or burden we are required to bear in order to receive the salvation offered to us by God through faith in Christ. Salvation is not based on anything we do, but is based solely on what Christ has done. And again, Paul would make that point over and over again in his letters to the churches.

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹not a result of works, so that no one may boast. – Ephesians 2:8-9 ESV

The 800-pound gorilla of works-salvation is still present within the church today. It hasn't gone away and it continues to divide the church and deceive those who think there is more required for salvation than simple faith. The spirit of the Judaizers is alive and well. Their mantra of faith-plus-something still permeates and pollutes the gospel message. We struggle with the idea of getting something for nothing. There must be more that we have to do. The gift of eternal life can't come without strings attached. But Peter was making it perfectly clear, from the very beginning, that "we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus" – nothing more, nothing less.

What God Had Done

Acts 15:12-21

¹² And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. ¹³ After they finished speaking, James replied, “Brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴ Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. ¹⁵ And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written,

¹⁶ “After this I will return,
and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen;
I will rebuild its ruins,
and I will restore it,
¹⁷ that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord,
and all the Gentiles who are called by my name,
says the Lord, who makes these things ¹⁸ known from of old.’

¹⁹ Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God,
²⁰ but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. ²¹ For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.” – Acts 15:12-21 ESV

After Peter had addressed the council in Jerusalem, Barnabas and Paul were given an opportunity to describe all that God had done among the Gentiles during their most recent road trip. The crowd sat in rapt silence as these two men share what “God had done through them.” This is important. Barnabas and Paul were not bragging about their own personal exploits or trying to pad their resumes by highlighting the irreplaceable role they had played in the evangelism of the Gentiles. No, they told of what God had done *through* them. They had merely been the conduits through whom His grace and mercy flowed. Their contribution had been to share the gospel. Everything else that had taken place had been God’s doing. And they qualify that what God had done had been done *among the Gentiles*. This had all been His doing and, obviously, His decision. The receptivity of the Gentiles among whom Barnabas and Saul had ministered, had been the result of God’s Spirit moving among them. He had prepared their hearts to hear what Barnabas and Paul had to share. There were three essential ingredients that had made the journey of Barnabas and Paul a success. First, they had been willing to go. They had submitted to the will of the leadership of the church in Antioch and left the safe and secure confines of their local congregation, all so they could take the message of the gospel to those who had not yet heard. And that brings up the second non-negotiable ingredient that made their trip spiritually successful: They took the gospel. Everywhere they had gone, they preached the good news regarding Jesus Christ. And God’s Spirit provided the third essential ingredient: Power. The most willing of witnesses, eagerly sharing the message of good news, will accomplish nothing apart from the power of the Holy Spirit. Salvation is a work of God. And

no one believed that more than Paul. But he also believed that there was an essential role that he and others had to play. He would later write in his letter to the church in Rome:

¹³ *For “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”*

¹⁴ *But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them? ¹⁵ And how will anyone go and tell them without being sent? That is why the Scriptures say, “How beautiful are the feet of messengers who bring good news!”*

¹⁶ *But not everyone welcomes the Good News... – Romans 10:13-16 NLT*

You see, Paul knew that, as beautiful as the message of the good news of Jesus Christ was, it was useless without messengers. It was a message that could bring life to those who heard it, but they couldn't believe in a message they had never heard. And for those whose job it was to take the message, it was necessary that they had a strong sense of calling and commission. Otherwise, they would be tempted to quit when the going got tough or the message seemed to be falling on deaf ears. Paul seemed to understand that not everyone who would hear would believe. Not all who heard the good news would welcome or accept it. That's where the Spirit comes in. He is the trump card in the conversion process. Without His regenerating role, no one can or will come to faith. In a conversation He had with a Pharisee named Nicodemus, Jesus said:

⁵ *“I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Humans can reproduce only human life, **but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life.** – John 3:5-6 NLT*

What Paul and Barnabas had seen happen in Iconium, Lystra, Derby and Pisidian Antioch was the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, opening spiritually blind eyes and softening hearts hardened by sin. They had witnessed the Spirit bring life to those who had been dead in their trespasses and sins. Paul would describe this wonderful, Spirit-empowered process in his letter to Titus.

³ *For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. ⁴ But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ **he saved us**, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, **by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit,** ⁶ whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. – Titus 3:3-7 ESV*

The pattern of salvation is always the same. Those who were foolish, disobedient, led astray and slaves to various passions and pleasures are, somehow, suddenly transformed and made right with God. At one point, they were completely separated from and enemies of God, because of their sin. They suddenly find themselves friends of God, fully righteous in His sight. Why? Because someone was sent with the message of the gospel, they shared it, and the Spirit prepared the hearts of those who heard it. The end result: They believed. You see, the Bible makes it clear that the things of God are spiritually discerned.

*¹⁰ these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹ For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also **no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.** – 1 Corinthians 2:10-11 ESV*

*The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and **he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.** – 1 Corinthians 2:14 ESV*

What Paul and Barnabas had witnessed had been the unquestionable work of the Spirit of God. And James, the half-brother of Jesus and a recognized leader in the Jerusalem church, came to their defense, fully agreeing with and confirming their assessment. He reminds those in his audience that Peter (Simeon) had already given ample proof that God was at work among the Gentiles, after he had returned from Caesarea and shared of the conversions of Cornelius and his household.

“Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name.” – Acts 15:14 ESV

Notice his emphasis: It was God who had first visited the Gentiles. He doesn't give Peter the credit. It was God who had chosen to take from among the Gentiles a people for His name. And it had taken a vision from God to get Peter on board and fully convinced that this mission had God's full blessing. God had sent Peter. Peter had gone. The gospel had been declared and the Spirit had moved. Bottom line? Gentiles were saved.

And James further confirms that divine nature of the mission of Paul and Barnabas by citing a passage from the Old Testament book of Amos.

*¹⁶ “After this I will return,
and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen;
I will rebuild its ruins,
and I will restore it,
¹⁷ that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord,
and all the Gentiles who are called by my name,
says the Lord, who makes these things ¹⁸ known from of old.” – Acts 15:16-18 ESV*

According to James, the prophets had predicted the very thing Paul and Barnabas had described. Amos spoke of the “remnant of mankind”, not the remnant of Israel. He specifically mentioned “all the Gentiles who are called by my name.” And nowhere does he include a requirement that this remnant of Gentiles must first become full-fledged, card-carrying Jews, having submitted to the rite of circumcision and agreed to keep the Mosaic law in its entirety. And that was the real crux of the matter. The whole reason this council had been convened was to deal with the demands of the Judaizers that all Gentile converts to Christianity become Jewish proselytes first. By citing the passage from Amos, James was turning the focus away from a matter regarding Jewish ethnicity and a kingdom that mirrored that of David and Solomon. This was about a future Messianic Kingdom that would be ruled over by Christ Himself and made up of people from every tribe, nation and tongue. It is not to say that God does not have a place for the people of Israel in His eschatological plans. He does. But for those Jews in the audience that day in Jerusalem, they were thinking in a purely ethnic and Jewish-centric manner. For them, the Messiah was a Jew, and His Kingdom would be a Jewish Kingdom. Therefore, any Gentiles who wished to be a part of that Kingdom, must first become Jews themselves.

But Paul, Barnabas, Peter and, now, James, would strongly and vehemently disagree. So much so, that James would flatly state, “Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God” (Acts 15:19 ESV). By “trouble” he meant require them to submit to circumcision and adhere to the Mosaic law. In other words, demand that they become Jewish proselytes. The decision was made. The die had been cast. The only thing James suggested was that a letter be written and sent to all the Christians in the places where Paul and Barnabas had ministered, encouraging these Gentile believers to “abstain from things defiled by idols and from sexual immorality and from what has been strangled and from blood” (Acts 15:20 NLT). And James qualifies his words by saying that these very things were commonly taught in every synagogue and had been since the times of Moses. For Gentiles to remain ignorant of these typical Jewish prohibitions and to then violate them in ignorance, would have made the gospel onerous and repulsive to the unbelieving Jewish community. And the apostle Paul would later describe that he lived his own life with the very same attitude that James was prescribing in mind.

²⁰ When I was with the Jews, I lived like a Jew to bring the Jews to Christ. When I was with those who follow the Jewish law, I too lived under that law. Even though I am not subject to the law, I did this so I could bring to Christ those who are under the law.

²¹ When I am with the Gentiles who do not follow the Jewish law, I too live apart from that law so I can bring them to Christ. But I do not ignore the law of God; I obey the law of Christ. – 1 Corinthians 9:20-21 NLT

The objective? That as many as possible might come to Christ. James was not willing to allow circumcision or the Mosaic law to become a stumbling block to belief. Paul was not willing to let his freedom from the law to act as a deterrent to his fellow Jews receiving the gospel. He was also not willing to let his own personal love for the law of God to turn Gentiles away from the love of God found in the gospel.

Learning to Live in Unity

Acts 15:22-41

²² Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, ²³ with the following letter: “The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. ²⁴ Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, ²⁵ it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. ²⁸ For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: ²⁹ that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.”

³⁰ So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. ³¹ And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. ³² And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. ³³ And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. ³⁵ But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

³⁶ And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.” ³⁷ Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. ³⁸ But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. ³⁹ And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, ⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹ And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. – Acts 15:22-41 ESV

On the night He was betrayed, Jesus spent time in the Garden of Gethsemane, praying to His Father. And one of the topics He covered had to do with was unity:

²⁰ “I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. ²¹ I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me.” – John 17:20-21 NLT

Jesus knew that one of the greatest challenges to the church, which would form after He left and the Holy Spirit came, was maintaining unity. Jesus was fully aware that His church would eventually be comprised of people from every tribe, nation and tongue. There would be Jews, like His 11 disciples, but there would also be Gentiles, who would bring their pagan mindsets and non-Jewish instincts along with them. The church would become a melting pot made up of people from all walks of life, every conceivable ethnic group, and a wide and disparate array of backgrounds. And while Paul could say, from a theological perspective, that “there is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Acts 3:28 NLT), the everyday reality would be quite different. This early in Luke’s chronicle of the life of the church, we have already seen division taking place. With the gospel beginning to make its way outside the walls of Jerusalem and beyond the cultural context of Judaism, we have seen the inclusion of Gentiles into the family of God. This exciting, yet somewhat unexpected aspect of God’s redemptive plan, was creating a bit of tension within the church. What had begun as a predominantly Jewish-focused and influenced ministry, had quickly morphed into a much more eclectic and egalitarian movement. And this shift had not taken place without incidence or difficulty. Some of the Jewish Christians in Antioch had been Pharisees, just like Paul had been. That means they had a high regard for the Mosaic law. These men had spent their entire adult lives studying, revering, and attempting to keep the law. They were the religious rule-keepers of Judaism. And they would have brought that legalistic mindset with them to their newfound faith in Christ. They didn’t suddenly stop being Pharisees or forget all that they had been taught. So, when they heard the news that Gentiles were coming to faith in Christ, they were shocked that these people were not first being required to convert to Judaism. Their strong pride and belief in the Hebrew nation as the people of God, made it difficult for them to imagine anyone being able to have a relationship with the God of Israel outside the context of the religion of Israel. Therefore, they campaigned aggressively for these Gentile converts to become Jewish proselytes so that their salvation would be complete. This was the whole reason the council had been called together in Jerusalem.

With all the wonderful things taking place in those early days of the church, there were problems and issues that came along with its rapid spread and growing ethnic diversity. It was going to be impossible to bring together all of those people from such diverse backgrounds and not have conflict and disunity be a natural byproduct. Which is exactly why Jesus had asked His Father to bring about unity. It was going to take divine intervention. Men, when left to their own devices, will almost always find reasons to disagree and divide. Even as redeemed individuals, Christians will find that their sin natures lead them to respond to one another in less-than-Christlike ways. James, the half-brother of Jesus addressed this in his letter.

¹ What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Don’t they come from the evil desires at war within you? ² You want what you don’t have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can’t get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them. Yet you don’t have what you want because you don’t ask God for it. ³ And even when you ask, you don’t get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure. – James 4:3 NLT

Paul would have to write a letter to the church in Corinth, dealing with a divisive matter taking place within their local congregation. It all had to do with disagreements over food sacrificed to idols. There were some in the church who knew that there was nothing inherently wrong with eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols, because idols don't really exist. Now, the whole reason this issue had come up was because, within the pagan religions, there was a practice of taking the animals that had been sacrificed to an idol and selling it in the marketplace. It was high-quality meat. And there were some of the believers in the church in Corinth who, having been saved out of that pagan context, knew that the meat was good, and the idols were false, so they saw no reason not to take advantage of this ready supply of high-quality food. But there were others in the church, referred to by Paul as their weaker brothers and sisters, who were new to the faith and who didn't understand that their former gods were false. They saw the eating of this meat as a way of validating or honoring these gods, so they were appalled at the idea of anyone in the church doing such a thing. And a conflict arose. But Paul addressed the issue in fairly simple terms: "Now regarding your question about food that has been offered to idols. Yes, we know that 'we all have knowledge' about this issue. But while knowledge makes us feel important, it is love that strengthens the church" (1 Corinthians 8:1 NLT). There were those who knew that the meat was perfectly fine to eat. They were free to eat and enjoy, because while idols are real, the gods they represent are not. But Paul was going to trump their knowledge of the truth with an appeal to love. It is love that strengthen the church, not our knowledge of right or wrong. Paul went on to elaborate on his thoughts regarding this matter.

⁴ So, what about eating meat that has been offered to idols? Well, we all know that an idol is not really a god and that there is only one God...⁷ However, not all believers know this. Some are accustomed to thinking of idols as being real, so when they eat food that has been offered to idols, they think of it as the worship of real gods, and their weak consciences are violated. ⁸ It's true that we can't win God's approval by what we eat. We don't lose anything if we don't eat it, and we don't gain anything if we do. ⁹ But you must be careful so that your freedom does not cause others with a weaker conscience to stumble. – 1 Corinthians 8:4, 7-9 NLT

Again, love trumps all. Just because you can, doesn't mean you should. Paul was a huge believer in the rights of the Christian and would fight for the freedoms we have in Christ. But He was also demand that we be willing to die to our rights in order to protect the spiritual well-being of another brother or sister in Christ. Paul's attitude was fairly simple and straightforward: "So if what I eat causes another believer to sin, I will never eat meat again as long as I live—for I don't want to cause another believer to stumble" (1 Corinthians 8:13 NLT).

Unity was going to be an ongoing struggle within the rapidly growing and diversifying church. There were going to be conflicts and disagreements. We even see Barnabas and Paul disagreeing over whether or not to include John Mark on their next missionary journey. If you recall, John Mark had originally traveled with them on their trip to Cyprus. But when Paul and Barnabas had determined to go to Pisidian Antioch, John Mark had left them and returned to Jerusalem. Paul never forgave him for bailing on them. And when Barnabas suggested that they take John Mark with them again, Paul balked at the idea. This disagreement would end up with

Paul and Barnabas parting ways and headed two separate directions. But rather than viewing this as a sad and unnecessary outcome, it seems that this was yet another God-ordained and orchestrated event that would result in an expansion of the gospel ministry. Now there were two teams. Paul chose Silas and made his way to Antioch and Cilicia. Barnabas chose John Mark and returned to Cyprus. God would take what appeared to be a case of disunity and use it to further His Kingdom. Paul and Barnabas couldn't agree on what to do with John Mark, but they were in complete unity over the need to continue the spread of the gospel. We may not always agree with everyone in the church, but we must never let our disagreements harm the cause of Christ or do damage to the name of Christ.

It was King David who wrote, "how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!" (Psalm 133:1 ESV). But the members of the early church were going to learn just how difficult it was to pull off that kind of unity. It seems that everything was stacked against them. They were all so different. Their backgrounds were so diverse and life paths, so divergent. But God was choosing them and placing them within His family, making them members of the body of Christ. Their unity was not going to be a byproduct of their shared ethnic identities or inherent similarities. They had none. It was going to be the work of God. He was going to have to unify what was inherently different. And the words of Jesus regarding the unity of a man and a woman in marriage, apply just as well to the God-ordained union of believers within the body of Christ. "Since they are no longer two but one, let no one split apart what God has joined together" (Mark 10:8-9 NLT).

Led by the Spirit

Acts 16:1-10

¹ Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. ² He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. ³ Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. ⁴ As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. ⁵ So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.

⁶ And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. ⁷ And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. ⁸ So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. ⁹ And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰ And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. – Acts 16:1-10 ESV

At the end of chapter 15, we saw Paul and Barnabas parting ways over a disagreement concerning John Mark. Luke does not elaborate on the nature of their conflict, but it was enough to lead Paul to select Silas as his new traveling partner, leaving Barnabas free to take John Mark with him. And while it would be easy to conclude that this whole affair has a negative shadow cast over it, we're going to see that God was working behind the scenes, orchestrating matters in such a way, that Paul and Barnabas became even more effective in terms of ministry and more men were given the opportunity to participate in the work being done. This disagreement had actually resulted in two ministry teams being formed, effectively doubling the evangelistic capacity of Paul and Barnabas.

Paul, with his new partner Silas in tow, ended up returning to some of the cities he and Barnabas had visited before, including Derby and Lystra. It was in Lystra that Paul came into contact with a young man named Timothy. While you most likely recognize this name and know that Timothy would later be mentored by Paul and become one of his most trusted companions, Theophilus, the man to whom the Book of Acts was written, would not have known anything about him. So, Luke's description of Paul's first encounter with this young man would have come across as nothing more than a fortunate coincidence. Paul just happened to meet Timothy in Lystra and Timothy had just happened to be a Greek who had become a follower of Christ. We are not told how Timothy came to faith, but it might have been the result of Paul and Barnabas' first visit to the city. Paul would later write a letter to Timothy, inferring that this young man had been taught the Hebrew Scriptures since he was child. It is most likely that he had been raised in a Gentile home that feared God. In other words, they were worshipers of Yahweh, the God of the Jews, and had become proselytes to the Jewish faith.

¹⁴ But you must remain faithful to the things you have been taught. You know they are true, for you know you can trust those who taught you. ¹⁵ You have been taught the holy Scriptures from childhood, and they have given you the wisdom to receive the salvation that comes by trusting in Christ Jesus. – 2 Timothy 3:14-15 NLT

Paul indicates that it was Timothy's indoctrination into the Hebrew Scriptures, at a very early age, that had informed him about the Messiah, and better prepared him to accept the message of Jesus as the Messiah when he heard it. Evidently, Timothy's mother and grandmother had come to faith first. Paul refers to this in the first of two letters he eventually wrote to Timothy.

⁵ I remember your genuine faith, for you share the faith that first filled your grandmother Lois and your mother, Eunice. And I know that same faith continues strong in you. – 2 Timothy 1:5 NLT

Luke's description of Paul running into this young man may sound serendipitous, but it was not. In fact, there is little that takes place in the Book of Acts that can be explained away as fate, chance, or luck. The Holy Spirit had come and, as a result, you can sense a divinely inspired influence over each and every event that takes place. Paul's encounter with Timothy was not a chance occurrence that just happened to work out well. It had been preordained by God. We know that Timothy's salvation was the work of God. He had been chosen and saved by God. Paul reminded Timothy of that very fact when he wrote to him, referring to the God "who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began" (2 Timothy 1:9 ESV). Timothy had been set apart by God, not only for salvation, but for the work of spreading the gospel. And God had intended all along that Timothy would accompany Paul on His missionary journeys and play a significant role in the ongoing edification and strengthening of the churches that were being formed.

Timothy already had a good reputation among the believers in Lystra and Iconium. So, Paul, recognizing the potential in this young man and, most likely, influenced by the Spirit of God, decides to take Timothy with him. But before he could do that, Paul had to deal with what could end up being a potential problem. Timothy was a Greek or non-Jew, and while he was a God-fearing Gentile, he had never been circumcised. Paul had already had enough interactions with the Judaizers to know that their stance on uncircumcised Gentiles was going to be an issue. While the council in Jerusalem had determined that Gentile Christians should not be required to become Jewish proselytes, undergoing circumcision and adhering to the Mosaic law, Timothy's case presented a different scenario. This was not about some isolated Gentile becoming a believer. This was about Paul, a Jew, taking Timothy, a Gentile, and placing him in a position of leadership within the church. This would have been a first. And Paul knew that if Timothy were to remain uncircumcised, it would invalidate his ministry credibility among those Jewish believers who were already sensitive about Gentile converts in the first place. So, in an attempt to circumvent potential conflict, Paul had Timothy circumcised. Paul did not want anything to interfere with Timothy's ministry effectiveness. Circumcision, while painful, was a small price to pay to ensure that Timothy would be accepted by Gentiles and Jews alike.

We must assume that it was after Timothy's recovery that they they made their way back through the cities Paul and Barnabas had visited in their earlier missionary journey. And Luke makes it clear that one of the things Paul, Silas and Timothy did was to deliver the content of the letter written by the church in Jerusalem suggesting that the Gentile believers "abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood" (Acts 15:20 ESV). And Luke tells us that "the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily" (Acts 16:5 ESV). The church continued to grow and prosper. More and more Gentiles were coming to faith in Christ. Paul and Barnabas had planted the seeds on their first visits to these cities, not they were reaping the harvest of new converts to Christianity.

And Paul provides us with a somewhat subtle insight into how the Spirit was leading and guiding these first missionaries. He simply states that the Holy Spirit had forbidden them to speak the Word in Asia. He doesn't tell us how. He provides no details as to what the Holy Spirit said or how He communicated it. He only tells us that Paul, Silas and Barnabas were forbidden by the Spirit from going to Asia and were not allowed to go to Bithynia. The very next verses seem to provide a clue as to how the Spirit may have been communicating to them at this time. "And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16:9 ESV). Like Peter and his vision of the sheet descending from heaven, Paul had his very own vision from God. And it became clear to him that they were to proceed to Macedonia. It would appear that Macedonia had not originally been on their agenda. They had obviously planned to go to Asia and Bithynia, but God had somehow made those non-options. Perhaps the only way Paul knew they weren't supposed to go there is because God had so clearly provided an alternative destination: Macedonia. Whatever the case, Paul obeyed. And this would not be the last time Paul found himself changing course and adjusting his plans according to the leadership of the Spirit of God. He later wrote to the church in Rome:

I want you to know, dear brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to visit you, but I was prevented until now. – Romans 1:13 ESV

Paul would elaborate further, indicating that part of the reason for his delay in coming to see them was that he felt an unmistakable call by God to take the gospel to those places where it had never been heard before.

²⁰ My ambition has always been to preach the Good News where the name of Christ has never been heard, rather than where a church has already been started by someone else.

²¹ I have been following the plan spoken of in the Scriptures, where it says,

*"Those who have never been told about him will see,
and those who have never heard of him will understand."*

²² In fact, my visit to you has been delayed so long because I have been preaching in these places. – Romans 15:20-22 NLT

Paul was being led by the Spirit of God. This leading was, at times, obvious and irrefutable. Other times, it was subtle and even invisible. But he knew that his life was in the hands of God and under the divine direction of the Spirit of God. Paul was learning to live his life with a sensitivity to the Spirit's leading, looking for Him and listening to Him. When he had the vision, he took it as having come from God, "concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them" (Acts 16:10 ESV). He was living his life with a desire to focus all his efforts on the Kingdom of God, the cause of Christ, the ministry of sharing the gospel and the joy of seeing Gentiles come to faith in Christ. So, it was easy for him to see each and every event in his life as somehow tied to his calling and commission. Oh, that we would live with that same attitude of urgency and sensitivity to the Spirit's movement in and around our lives.

The Deity is in the Details

Acts 16:11-24

¹¹ So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, ¹² and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days. ¹³ And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. ¹⁴ One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. ¹⁵ And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us.

¹⁶ As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. ¹⁷ She followed Paul and us, crying out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." ¹⁸ And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.

¹⁹ But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. ²⁰ And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, "These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. ²¹ They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice." ²² The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. ²³ And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. ²⁴ Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. – Acts 16:11-24 ESV

Having revisited the cities in which Paul and Barnabas had ministered in their first missionary journey, Paul takes Silas and Timothy and heads across the Aegean Sea for Neapolis, the port of Philippi in Macedonia, a journey of 125 miles. Luke makes note of the fact that Philippi was a Roman colony. In an attempt to bring the strongly nationalistic and somewhat unruly Macedonians under control, the Romans had divided Macedonia into four distinct districts, with Philippi becoming an important operations hub of military and commercial importance. There was a large Roman population in the city, because Rome had a policy of filling its colonies with Roman citizens who would be faithful to the state, many of them former Roman soldiers and their families. So, not only was Paul going to encounter a Gentile population made up of pagan Macedonians with a strong sense of nationalistic pride, he was going to encounter a larger-than-usual contingent of Roman citizens, faithful to Rome and its pantheon of gods.

Luke records that, on the Sabbath, their party ended up searching for a place where any Jews might have gathered for the prescribed hour of prayer. The fact that they did not head for the

local synagogue indicates that there must not have been one. For any city to have a synagogue, there had to be a required number of Jewish males living there. Before a synagogue could be built, the local community was required to have at least ten adult Jewish men of bar mitzvah age. So, it seems likely that Philippi had a very small contingent of Jews, far too small to justify the construction of a synagogue. In the absence of a synagogue, Jews were known to gather by the seashore or a river for prayer. Luke reports, “we went outside the city gate to the side of the river, where we thought there would be a place of prayer” (Acts 16:13 NLT). There, they found a group of women who had gathered to pray. Notice that only women were mentioned. This corroborates the assumption that there were not enough Jewish males to justify a synagogue. There were no men present at the river at the time of prayer. But one of the women, who was named Lydia, struck up a conversation with Paul, Silas and Timothy. Luke would have been in Paul’s entourage as well. Lydia is described as a worshiper of God, which means she was a Gentile proselyte to Judaism. She was also a businesswoman, a seller of purple goods, and it is likely that she was in Philippi on business, because Luke indicates that she was from nearby Thyatira. What we have here is yet another example of one of those seemingly chance encounters that the apostles had. They end up in Philippi and, on the Sabbath, they find themselves down by the river where they run into a woman who just happens to be in town on business and, because she is a Gentile God-fearer, she was at the river at the prescribed hour for prayer. There, her path crossed that of Paul, Silas and Timothy, and her life would be changed forever as a result. Lydia, upon hearing the gospel as declared by Paul, became a Christ-follower and was baptized. And Luke indicates that her salvation ended up impacting her entire household. Because she implored the apostles to come to her home, and her family members and household servants ended up placing their faith in Christ as well and were baptized.

Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke had yet another “chance” encounter that day. They ran into a young slave girl “who had a spirit that enabled her to foretell the future by supernatural means” (Acts 16:16 NLT). As we will see, the source of her supernatural ability was demonic in nature. But that didn’t matter to her owners, because their only concern was that she made them a lot of money telling people their fortunes. This young woman began following Paul and his companions around, shouting, “These men are servants of the Most-High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation” (Acts 16:17 NLT). And Luke indicates that she was very persistent in her efforts, carrying on for a number of days. Now, at first blush, it would seem that this would have been a positive thing for the apostles, like a form of free advertising. After all, what she was saying was true, and her words would have been like having a free ad campaign played over the local radio station. But Luke records that Paul became annoyed, and finally spoke to the demon who possessed her, saying, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her” (Acts 16:18 ESV). Paul cast the demon out and the publicity campaign came to an end. But we have to ask the question: Why did Paul become so annoyed? Why had the words the girl had been speaking ended up rubbing him the wrong way? It is important to keep in mind that this young girl’s ability came from a demon. The words she spoke concerning Paul and his companions were not hers but were from the demon who possessed her. And it is likely that this demon was causing the words to come out of her mouth in

a sarcastic and demeaning manner. While what she was saying was true, it probably came out with more than a hint of disrespect and intended to ridicule not respect the apostles.

This demon had no intention of truly heralding and honoring the apostles. It was turning their ministry into a three-ring circus. No doubt, her efforts were attracting crowds, but it was making life difficult for Paul and his friends. But Paul set the girl free. Not only had she been a slave girl, she had been enslaved to the demon who had possessed her. But she had been spiritual emancipated. While this would have been a happy occasion for the young girl, it would prove to be a blow to the men who owned her. Without the demon, she was worthless. She had lost her ability to tell fortunes. And these men were so upset, that they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. They wanted justice and, most likely, financial compensation for their loss. But it's interesting that their accusations against Paul and the others says nothing about what had happened. Instead, they say, "These men are throwing our city into confusion. They are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us to accept or practice, since we are Romans" (Acts 16:21 NLT). Basically, they accuse Paul and his companions of proselytizing. They claim that these Jews were trying to convert Roman citizens to Judaism, a crime under Roman law. The crowd, which would have been made up of primarily Roman citizens, joins forces with the two disgruntled slave owners, and the magistrates are forced to beat Paul, Silas and Timothy with rods, then throw them into prison.

Once again, it would be easy to see all of these occurrences as nothing more than chance, the unforeseen, unplanned outcome of life. They just happened. No rhyme or reason behind them. But we have already seen too much take place in the lives of the disciples of Jesus Christ to accept that conclusion. The lives of Paul, Silas and Timothy were being controlled and directed by God Almighty. Their destinations and even their interactions with others were under the divine direction of God. They didn't just happen to end up in Philippi. Their encounter with Lydia wasn't just some form of kismet. The presence of the demon-possessed slave girl wasn't some strange kind of unlucky coincidence. It was the hand of God. And Paul, Silas and Timothy ending up in jail was not some unfortunate turn of events that had caught God off guard and left Him scrambling to intervene. It had all been part of His sovereign will and well-orchestrated plan for these men and their message. Only time would expose God's purposes behind all of these things. We see only the immediate circumstances, while God knows their outcomes. We are restricted in our ability to recognize the handiwork of God, even in the dark days of our lives or the pedestrian circumstances that fill our lives. God doesn't slumber or sleep. He never takes the day off. He is intimately involved in the details of life. Nothing escapes His notice, and nothing is outside the purview of His sovereign will.

The Jailer Who Was Set Free

Acts 16:25-40

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, ²⁶ and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. ²⁷ When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." ²⁹ And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹ And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³² And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³ And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. ³⁴ Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.

³⁵ But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying, "Let those men go." ³⁶ And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, "The magistrates have sent to let you go. Therefore come out now and go in peace." ³⁷ But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out." ³⁸ The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens. ³⁹ So they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. ⁴⁰ So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed. – Acts 16:25-40 ESV

Paul, Silas and Timothy were in Philippi. While there, they had two divine encounters, one with a Gentile businesswoman named Lydia who came to faith in Christ. The other was with a young slave girl from whom Paul cast out a demon. The second, more visible and public encounter, ended up getting Paul and Silas in a lot of trouble. The slave girl had used her demon-possession to tell people's fortunes, and her owners made a great deal of money from her unique abilities. So, with her demon gone, she was worthless to her owners and they were incensed. They falsely accused Paul and Silas of trying to convert Roman citizens to Judaism, which was a capital offense. The crowds turned on them and the local magistrates had them severely beaten and thrown in jail. That would lead to yet another divine encounter.

In this case, Paul and Silas, finding themselves in jail, made the most of the situation. Luke records that, at midnight, the two of them were occupying their time by praying and singing hymns, with the rest of the prisoners as their (excuse the pun) captive audience. As per his usual style, Luke does not tell us what they were praying or the hymns they were singing. Were they praying for release? Perhaps. Or were they praying for the spiritual well-being of Lydia and those in her household who had come to faith? Possibly. Were they praising God for His power

and for the privilege of suffering for the cause of Christ? I would say, yes. But whatever it was that they were praying and singing, right in the middle of it all, God showed up. Probably not in the way Paul and Silas were expecting. But He showed up in the form of a powerful earthquake that shook the building where they were being kept. It was so violent that it rocked the very foundations of the structure, forced open the locked doors of all the cells and, even more amazingly, broke the bonds that held every prisoner in the jail captive. It was a literal get-out-of-jail-free card – for everyone. And the poor jailer realized it. Luke says that, when this man was startled awake by the noise and saw what had happened, “he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped” (Acts 16:27 ESV). He most likely assumed that the prisoners were going to kill him. And even if they didn’t, the Roman magistrates would have him killed for letting all the prisoners escape. And this is where the truly amazing part of the story takes place. Paul called out to the man, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here” (Acts 16:28 ESV). Think about that. Paul and Silas had been praying, and in the midst of their prayer an earthquake had taken place. An earthquake so powerful that it opened cell doors and broke chains from the moorings in the walls. And yet, Paul and Silas were still there. They hadn’t taken off. And even more incredibly, neither had any of the other prisoners. Now, compare this event with one that had taken place earlier and is describe for us by Luke in Acts 12.

⁶ The night before Peter was to be placed on trial, he was asleep, fastened with two chains between two soldiers. Others stood guard at the prison gate. ⁷ Suddenly, there was a bright light in the cell, and an angel of the Lord stood before Peter. The angel struck him on the side to awaken him and said, “Quick! Get up!” And the chains fell off his wrists. ⁸ Then the angel told him, “Get dressed and put on your sandals.” And he did. “Now put on your coat and follow me,” the angel ordered.

⁹ So Peter left the cell, following the angel. – Acts 12:6-9 NLT

Peter was in jail and he was doing nothing but sleep. No prayers. No hymns. Yet, God sent an angel who miraculously released Peter from his chains and led him out of the prison and into the streets – a free man.

But Paul and Silas, their chains off and the doors of the prison wide open, stood there. And somehow, the other prisoners were standing there with them. Just consider how preposterous that sounds. Every single prisoner, when given the chance to have their freedom and escape whatever sentence hung over them, had chosen to stay. That, in and of itself, is a miracle, an act of God. But what happens next is the real point of the story. This was not about Paul and Silas becoming free men. In fact, the next morning, when the magistrates attempted to let them go, Paul and Silas refused to leave. They were both Roman citizens and had been wrongly beaten and imprisoned, and they were going to demand justice.

But back to the jailer. He was in shock “and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas” (Acts 16:29 ESV). Somehow, he knew that these two men were responsible for all that had happened. They were the ones in charge. And it’s interesting to note that the very first

question he asked them was “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” He didn’t ask them to explain what had happened. He didn’t want to know the source of the power behind what had happened. No, he simply asked what he had to do to be saved. As 21st-Century Christians, who are on this side of the resurrection and who have available to us the rest of the story, we tend to read into these words something that is probably not there. We hear this man asking how he can be saved or born again. We interpret his words as a request to have the plan of salvation explained to him. But keep in mind, this man was an employee of the Romans. It is most likely that he was a Roman himself, possibly a former Roman soldier. Philippi, as a Roman colony, was heavily populated by Romans. But even if this man was a Macedonian who was employed by the Romans, he would have been a pagan. There is no indication that he had heard the gospel before. And when Paul and Silas had been praying and singing, he had been fast asleep. So, it is most likely that he was asking Paul and Silas what he needed to do to keep them from killing him. To him, they were two powerful Jewish magicians or sorcerers who had cast a demon out of a slave girl. Now, they had somehow caused a massive earthquake and opened up the doors of the prison and set themselves free. He was petrified.

But Paul takes advantage of the man’s question and gives him an answer he would have never expected. “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:31 ESV). It is doubtful that this man understood what any of this meant. And Luke tells us that Paul and Silas “spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house” (Acts 16:32 ESV). They explained what it meant to believe in the Lord Jesus. They described the nature of God’s saving grace, made possible through faith in His Son’s death and resurrection. And the man believed, along with those in his household, and they were all baptized – right there in the prison compound where the man most likely lived. After providing Paul and Silas with food and treatment for their wounds, the man “rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God” (Acts 16:34 ESV).

Paul and Silas had not been the ones to find freedom. It was this man and the members of his household were set free by God. Jesus had once said, “The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free” (Luke 4:18 NLT). This story is a fulfillment of that statement by Jesus. Those who had been held captive by sin and death found freedom in Christ. They had been set free from the penalty of sin and death and been given new life in Christ. Their spiritual chains had been broken. Paul would later write to Timothy, one of his companions on this journey.

²⁵ Gently instruct those who oppose the truth. Perhaps God will change those people’s hearts, and they will learn the truth. ²⁶ Then they will come to their senses and escape from the devil’s trap. For they have been held captive by him to do whatever he wants. – 2 Timothy 2:25-26 NLT

The Philippian jailer, whose job it had been to hold men captive in prison, had been provided with release from the prison cell of sin and the death sentence that hung over his head as a result of his rebellion against God. The imprisonment of Paul and Silas had been yet another

divine encounter, orchestrated by God and intended for the spread of the gospel. These two men could have walked out that night, but they hadn't. They were not obsessed with their own freedom. They were captive to the will of God and their commission from Jesus, to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth – even in the less-than-pleasant confines of a prison.

The ending of this story is what really makes it special. With all that happened the night before, God confirms that none of it had happened to set Paul and Silas free. That wasn't going to be necessary. The entire event had been in order for the jailer and his household to come to faith in Jesus. Because the very next morning the magistrates attempted to set Paul and Silas free. We are not told why. But somewhere along the way, the magistrates had made the determination to release them. And when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were terrified. As Roman citizens, Paul and Silas were guaranteed a just trial and protection from any kind of degrading punishment, such as beatings. The magistrates could do nothing but beg for forgiveness and ask that Paul and Silas leave town. They knew that the locals were still up in arms and that harm might come to Paul and Silas if they stayed. So, after visiting with Lydia and encouraging the local believers, Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke departed. But they left behind the firstfruits of what would become a growing congregation of believers.

Turning the World Upside-Down

Acts 17:1-9

¹ Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ² And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, ³ explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.” ⁴ And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women. ⁵ But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. ⁶ And when they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, ⁷ and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” ⁸ And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. ⁹ And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go. – Acts 17:1-9 ESV

When Paul, Silas and Timothy left Philippi, it appears they left Luke behind in Philippi or that he traveled elsewhere. There is a subtle shift from the use of “we” to “they” in Luke’s record of the events in this chapter. So, it would seem that he was not with them on this phase of the journey, which took them down the Egnation Road through the cities of Amphipolis and Apollonia, to their final destination of Thessalonica. Thessalonica was the central city and capital of Macedonia and was located about 100 miles from Philippi. This was likely a three-day’s journey. Luke does not tell us whether they stayed more than a day or two in Amphipolis and Apollonia, but they would have had to spend the night somewhere along the way. It is easy for us to forget how difficult these kinds of trips would have been for Paul and his companions. They had no source of income. They were not paid evangelists but subsisted off of the gifts they received from the believers among whom they ministered. In fact, Paul told the church in Corinth that his ministry among them had been underwritten by the churches in Macedonia.

⁸ I “robbed” other churches by accepting their contributions so I could serve you at no cost. ⁹ And when I was with you and didn’t have enough to live on, I did not become a financial burden to anyone. For the brothers who came from Macedonia brought me all that I needed. I have never been a burden to you, and I never will be. – 2 Corinthians 11:8-9 NLT

But even with the generous gifts of the Macedonians, Paul made it clear to the believers in Corinth that his travels had not been without their fair share of discomfort and deprivation.

²⁷ I have worked hard and long, enduring many sleepless nights. I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food. I have shivered in the cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm. – 2 Corinthians 11:27 NLT

And Paul would later write to the believers in Philippi, telling them that he had no regrets. He had not become bitter over the trials and travails that accompanied his life as an apostle and evangelist for Jesus Christ.

¹¹ ...for I have learned how to be content with whatever I have. ¹² I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. – Philippians 4:11-12 NLT

Even while in Thessalonica, Paul and his companions did not burden anyone with their physical needs, instead they paid their own way. Paul would later write to the believers in Thessalonica, reminding them of that very fact.

⁷ For you know that you ought to imitate us. We were not idle when we were with you. ⁸ We never accepted food from anyone without paying for it. We worked hard day and night so we would not be a burden to any of you. – 2 Thessalonians 3:7-8 NLT

Upon their arrival in Thessalonica, Paul made his way to the local synagogue, “as was his custom.” For three consecutive Sabbaths, Paul and his companions “reasoned” with the Jews, “explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead” (Acts 17:3 ESV). The Greek word translated as “reasoned” is *dianoigon*, and it means “to converse, discourse with one, argue, discuss.” There was a great deal of give and take going on in Paul’s discussions with the Jews as he used the Hebrew Scriptures to show them the prophecies concerning the Messiah and how Jesus had been the fulfillment of those prophecies. The point on which Paul focused was the often-overlooked aspect of the Messiah’s suffering and death. While the Old Testament prophecies had clearly predicted the death of Jesus, the Jews had chosen to ignore it, instead focusing on the victorious, kingdom-making aspect of the Messiah’s rule and reign. They were expecting a triumphant Messiah, not a suffering servant. But Paul, using their own Scriptures to prove his point, told them, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ” (Acts 17:3 ESV). The term “Christ” is the Greek equivalent of Messiah. Paul was desperately trying to convince them of the validity of Jesus’ claim to be the Messiah. Yes, He had died, but He had risen from the dead – as proof that He was who He had claimed to be: The Son of God and the Savior of the world.

And Luke records that some were persuaded and followed Paul and Silas, including many devout Greeks and some of the leading women in the city. But it would seem from Paul’s letter, written to the Thessalonians at a later time, that the majority of the converts had been Gentiles.

*...they keep talking about the wonderful welcome you gave us and **how you turned away from idols** to serve the living and true God. – 1 Thessalonians 1:9 NLT*

But as always, there was opposition. The more devout Jews in Thessalonica took offense at the words of Paul and Silas, seeing their teaching as heresy and an affront to Judaism. So, they stirred up trouble, using some “wicked men” as plants to infiltrate the crowd and cause

dissension. It didn't take long before a mob was formed, a group of vigilantes intent on taking the law into their own hands. They set their sights on the home of Jason, a recent convert to Christianity, searching for Paul and Silas. Unable to locate the three missionaries, they dragged Jason and some of the other believers before the city authorities, accusing Jason of harboring criminals. As far as the mob was concerned, Paul and his companions were turning the world upside-down, propagating revolutionary thoughts and ideals. They were a danger to the community. They twisted the words of Paul, saying that he was "acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus" (Acts 17:7 ESV). Yes, Paul had preached that Jesus was the Messiah, but he had never promoted Jesus as a replacement for Caesar, or even of Herod, the king of the Jews. Paul had not been concerned with an earthly kingdom any more than Jesus had been. During his trial before Pilate, Jesus had clearly said:

"My Kingdom is not an earthly kingdom. If it were, my followers would fight to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish leaders. But my Kingdom is not of this world." – John 18:36 NLT

But the enemy always twists the words of God. Those opposed to the gospel refuse to see the benefits of what Jesus came to offer, instead focusing their attention on what they stand to lose. They fret over their potential loss of freedom. They obsess over the rights they will have to forfeit, failing to see the many benefits they stand to gain. Caring more about temporal, earthly-based outcomes, they miss out on the eternal nature of the gospel message and God's gracious offer of life everlasting.

The words of these "wicked men" swayed the crowd, disturbing them greatly. The truth that Paul and Silas had proclaimed had been obscured by lies. The good news had been twisted and perverted until it sounded like bad news. And the selfless messengers of that good news had been portrayed as self-seeking, radical troublemakers who were out to overthrow the government, not transform lives. Paul would later write to the believers in Corinth, explaining the inability of some to comprehend the content of the gospel.

¹⁸ The message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction! But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God. ¹⁹ As the Scriptures say,

*"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise
and discard the intelligence of the intelligent."*

²⁰ So where does this leave the philosophers, the scholars, and the world's brilliant debaters? God has made the wisdom of this world look foolish. ²¹ Since God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never know him through human wisdom, he has used our foolish preaching to save those who believe. ²² It is foolish to the Jews, who ask for signs from heaven. And it is foolish to the Greeks, who seek human wisdom. ²³ So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense. – 1 Corinthians 1:18-23 NLT

In Thessalonica, there were some who believed. But there were many more who turned their backs on the good news regarding Jesus Christ. They heard, but they did not believe. They were offered the free gift of salvation, but they refused to accept it. They listened to the lies of wicked men. They preferred the words of the enemy over the truth of God. Paul and his companions had been accused of turning the world upside-down, and that is exactly what they had been doing. They were presenting a radical message that contradicted the wisdom of this world and stood in direct opposition to the lies of the prince of this world: Satan. Paul and his companions were offering freedom sin and death, but those blinded by the lies of Satan preferred to live in darkness rather than have their sins exposed by the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

New and Strange Things

Acts 17:10-21

¹⁰ The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. ¹¹ Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. ¹² Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men. ¹³ But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the crowds. ¹⁴ Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. ¹⁵ Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as Athens, and after receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they departed.

¹⁶ Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. ¹⁷ So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. ¹⁸ Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, "What does this babbler wish to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities"—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰ For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean." ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new. — Acts 17:10-21 ESV

Paul, Silas and Timothy did as the local city officials had requested and left Thessalonica. It would appear that their departure was not based on any kind of fear for their lives, but in order to prevent any further mistreatment of those who had come to faith in Christ. Jason, who had been their host while they were there, had been arrested and been forced to post bond. While the city authorities ended up regretting their mistreatment of Paul and Silas, because both of the men were Roman citizens, they would not be able to control the mob mentality that the local Jews had created. Had Paul and Silas stayed, it is likely that the persecution of the local Christians would have increased. So they left.

Their next stop was the city of Berea, about 50 miles southwest of Thessalonica. Once there, they made a beeline to the local synagogue and, this time, they were received with open arms. In fact, Luke records that the Jews in Berea “were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they eagerly received the message, examining the scriptures carefully every day to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11 NLT). Notice what they did. As Paul and Silas shared with them everything regarding Jesus – His incarnation, ministry, teachings, death, burial and resurrection, the Bereans eagerly listened, but then they turned to their Hebrew Scriptures to validate what they had heard. No doubt, Paul and Silas had used Old Testament prophecies to verify their claim that Jesus was the Messiah. But rather than take these strangers’ words at face value, the Bereans did their homework. They investigated and

validated what they had heard by comparing it with the Scriptures. All in order “to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11 ESV). What they were hearing was new to them. They were far enough away from Jerusalem to have been ignorant of much of what Paul and Silas shared with them. Their knowledge of Jesus and all that had happened to Him would have been limited. It is likely that they may have heard bits of news concerning the events surrounding Jesus’ arrest, trials and death. They may have even heard rumors about His supposed resurrection. But it is doubtful that anyone had shared with them the things that Paul and Silas had, regarding this obscure Jewish rabbi being the Messiah. And Luke tells us that many of them believed, including some influential Greek women. This is exactly what had happened in Thessalonica. But this time, there were no irate Jews to stir up trouble and turn the crowds against Paul and Silas. At least, not ones from Berea. The disgruntled, unhappy Jews did show up, but they came all the way from Thessalonica. When they had heard that Paul and Silas were propagating their message about Jesus in Berea, they couldn’t resist the urge to do something about it. Once again, they agitated and stirred up the crowds, most likely using the same tactic they had used in Thessalonica: Hiring the services of the local rabble. The end result was that Paul, the recognized leader and spokesperson of the team, was encouraged to leave for Athens, while Silas and Timothy remained behind.

Once again, it would be easy to view this as a setback or some form of defeat. But the gospel had been shared, there were those who believed and now, Paul was able to turn his attention elsewhere. God seems to have been keeping Paul constantly on the move. Based on his temperament, Paul would have likely preferred to have stayed and continued to teach and encourage the new believers in Berea. He was a natural disciple maker. But God had other plans for him. His job was to spread the good news to the Gentiles and all the way to the ends of the earth. He could not afford to stay in one spot very long. He was to be an evangelist, not the pastor of a local congregation. So, God was constantly keeping Paul on the move, allowing outside pressure to propel him forward and further into the far-flung reaches of the Gentile world. His next stop was Athens.

Paul arrived in Athens alone. This appears to be the first time he found himself operating solo, with no base of support or source of camaraderie. And he was in the middle of one of the most highly pagan cultures of his day. Athens was the cultural and intellectual center of the Greek world. While its zenith as a city had come some 500 years earlier, Athens was still a formidable and influential metropolitan area. It was filled with people from all over the world and from all walks of life. And the number of its temples and idols was truly staggering. And Luke makes note of the fact that, as Paul awaited the arrival of his two companions, he made his way around the city and “his spirit was greatly upset because he saw the city was full of idols” (Acts 17:16 NLT). There were statues to false gods everywhere. No doubt, Paul sensed the spiritual darkness that pervaded the city. In his mind, this was a battlefield where the forces of evil were going to be pitted against the forces of righteousness. He, a single man, was going to attempt to shine the light of the gospel into the darkness that shrouded the people of Athens.

Paul began his ministry where he always did, in the local synagogue. He found solace and comfort in meeting with his fellow Jews who would have shared his repulsion for all the idolatry

that filled the city. The synagogue would have been an oasis in the spiritual wasteland that was Athens. But Paul didn't spend all his time in the synagogue. He ventured out into the local marketplace, where he soon found himself debating with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. The belief system of the Epicureans was best summed up by one of their own, a man named Diogenes, who wrote, "Nothing to fear in God; Nothing to feel in death; Good [pleasure] can be attained; Evil [pain] can be endured." For an Epicurean, the gods were distant and disconnected from human affairs. They played no part in the daily lives of men. They did not believe in an afterlife and so, they did not think the gods would punish men for the deeds they had done in this life. They saw death as nothing more than the end of life. The Stoics were essentially pantheists, believing that God is in everything, and everything is God. According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the Stoics held "that emotions like fear or envy (or impassioned sexual attachments, or passionate love of anything whatsoever) either were, or arose from, false judgements and that the sage—a person who had attained moral and intellectual perfection—would not undergo them." For the Stoic, the goal was achieving the status of "sage" or one who had achieved the necessary knowledge to see and experience life properly. They believed that "the sage is utterly immune to misfortune and that virtue is sufficient for happiness."

These various groups were known for their openness to debate. It was not uncommon for them to sit and discuss their various views and counter one another's perceptions with their own. So, when Paul showed up, they were more than willing to listen to him, stating, "What does this babbler wish to say?" (Acts 17:18 ESV). The term, "babbler" literally referred to a bird picking up seeds but was used to describe someone who made a habit of picking up the words of another. In their minds, Paul was simply propagating a philosophy he had concocted by listening to and borrowing from a variety of other men. In their minds, he was nothing more than "a preacher of foreign divinities" (Acts 17:18 ESV). They had their gods. He had his. But they were willing to listen to what he had to say. In fact, they were curious enough that they brought him to the Areopagus, where they asked Paul to explain this "new teaching" he was presenting. The Areopagus was both a place, Mars Hill, and the name of the group, the council of Ares, who met there.

Paul found himself standing before an esteemed group of philosophers and thinkers who described his teaching as strange and expressed their desire to know more. Luke describes the nature of what went on in these gatherings, saying, "the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there used to spend their time in nothing else than telling or listening to something new" (Acts 17:21 NLT). It seems that they had an insatiable desire for novelty and the unknown. As we will see tomorrow, they even had an idol to "the unknown god." Paul will refer to them as religious, but in truth, they were blind. They loved strange and new things. They were drawn to that which they didn't know and had an inordinate attraction to that which they couldn't explain. What an opportunity for Paul. What a perfect setting for this man's talents and gift sets to shine forth. Paul was a brilliant theologian with a vast knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures. He was filled with the Holy Spirit and equipped with a zeal for the gospel that was going to make him a formidable adversary in any debate setting. These men wanted to him to explain what it was he was teaching. They were eager to hear something new. And Paul would

be more than happy to oblige them. God had sent Paul to Athens for this very reason. He had chosen Paul for just such a situation. There was no one else better equipped and more qualified for this opportunity. And, as we will see, Paul took full advantage of the moment provided to him by God. And Paul would follow the wisdom of Peter, expressed in the words he included in one of his later letters.

...but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect. – 1 Peter 3:15 NLT

A God, A Man, A Day

Acts 17:22-34

²² So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, ²⁸ for

“‘In him we live and move and have our being’;

as even some of your own poets have said,

“‘For we are indeed his offspring.’

²⁹ Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. ³⁰ The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

³² Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” ³³ So Paul went out from their midst. ³⁴ But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them. – Acts 17:22-34 ESV

Paul found himself in Athens, all alone, and surrounded by false gods and philosophers who found his message regarding Jesus and the resurrection a bit strange, but equally intriguing. They invited him to address the Council of the Areopagus. The council was made up of aristocrats of noble birth who were members for life. They were a semi-judicial body who, according to the Encyclopedia Britannica, maintained “guardianship of the laws.” These men were powerful and influential, and Paul’s appearance before them was due to their view of him as “a preacher of foreign divinities” (Acts 17:18 ESV). The Epicureans and Stoics who had heard Paul sharing in the marketplace were intrigued by what they deemed as “new teaching.” And Luke makes it clear that Paul was simply “preaching Jesus and the resurrection” (Acts 17:18 ESV). What Paul had been teaching was new to them. They had not heard it before. And so, Paul, taking advantage of the opportunity provided to him by God, addressed this distinguished crowd with his characteristic boldness and zeal.

The first thing Paul did was complement his audience on the obvious of their religious passion. There were idols to gods everywhere. The city was literally chock-full of statues and altars to of all kinds. In fact, they even had an altar dedicated to an unknown god, a point that Paul would exploit for his own purposes. In reality, the abundance of idols in the city had greatly disturbed Paul when he first walked through its streets. Luke records that Paul's "spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols" (Acts 17:16 ESV). The Greek word Luke used is *paroxynō*, which means "to irritate, provoke, rouse to anger." Paul had been upset by what he saw. But he would turn that initial revulsion and resentment into a desire to speak truth to those who were living under the false assurances and faulty hopes they had placed in their pantheon of fictitious gods.

Paul capitalized on their altar to the "unknown god", promising to introduce them to the deity of whom they knew nothing whatsoever, but whom they worshiped, nonetheless. For Paul, this was an outright tragedy. These people were worshiping a god they didn't know, offering sacrifices in an attempt to somehow appease and placate it. How did they know what the god required? They didn't. How would they know if the god had been satisfied with their efforts? They could only guess. But Paul wanted them to know that this "unknown god" could actually be known and, not only that, they could know if he was satisfied with them. Paul began by explaining that the God to whom he was referring was the creator of the universe and all that it contains. And this God was not relegated to living in temples made by men or trapped in the form of an idol shaped by the hands of men. This God was independent of and completely non-reliant upon men. As a matter of fact, men owed everything to this one God, including their very breath and life. It was to this God that all mankind owed its existence. He had made them in His own image and placed them on the earth so that they might seek and know Him.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul would articulate the undeniable reality of God's revelation to men as evidences in His creation. But he would also reveal that man failed to recognize God and honor Him for who He was.

²⁰ For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God. – Romans 1:20 NLT

And Paul would go on to explain that men, unable or unwilling to see the one true God, began to take their innate understanding and awareness of His presence and create their own gods on whom to bestow their worship, honor and praise.

²¹ Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn't worship him as God or even give him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. As a result, their minds became dark and confused. ²² Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools. ²³ And instead of worshiping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols made to look like mere people and birds and animals and reptiles. – Romans 1:21-23 NLT

The streets of Athens were filled with statues and altars to the gods they had created – substitute gods – created by men to stand in the place of God Almighty. Paul even used quotes from two well-known ancient Greek poets, Epimenides and Aratus, to support his contention that the God of whom he was speaking was the creator of all things.

“In him we live and move and have our being...”

“For we are indeed his offspring...” – Acts 17:28 ESV

There was only one God who created all things. There was only one God who was the legitimate Father of all mankind. The rest were charlatans and fakes. If God had formed man, Paul reasoned, how could man then turn around and fashion Him out of gold, silver or stone? This was illogical. Men didn’t make God it was the other way around. And while God had long chosen to overlook the ignorance of men, Paul warned that those days were over. He had revealed Himself, not just through creation, but in the life of His Son, Jesus Christ. God had taken on human flesh and come to dwell with men. The apostle John put it this way in his gospel:

So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father’s one and only Son.
– John 1:14 NLT

And Paul made it clear that the time had come for all men to repent, to change their minds regarding false gods and their offers of fake hope, futile attempts at achieving human righteousness, and wrong notions regarding future judgment. Paul pulled no punches when he stated that God, “has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed” (Acts 17:31 ESV). These men had been intrigued by Paul’s discussions regarding Jesus and His resurrection from the dead. And that was the very man to whom Paul was referring. He had not been just a man, but the very Son of God and the Savior of the world. Not only that, He would be the judge of the world. And the proof of Jesus’ divine nature and God-appointed role as both Savior and Judge had been His resurrection. God had validated Jesus’ claim to be the Messiah and the payment for mankind’s sin debt, by raising Him back to life. Not only had the myriad of gods lining the streets of Athens never lived, they had never died and been raised back to life. They were and always had been lifeless and impotent.

But Jesus was and is different. The author of the Book of Hebrews wrote:

² *And now in these final days, he [God] has spoken to us through his Son. God promised everything to the Son as an inheritance, and through the Son he created the universe.*

³ *The Son radiates God’s own glory and expresses the very character of God, and he sustains everything by the mighty power of his command. When he had cleansed us from our sins, he sat down in the place of honor at the right hand of the majestic God in heaven.* – Hebrews 1:1-2 NLT

Jesus was and is the creator God.

God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him.

– John 1:3 NLT

¹⁵ *Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.*

He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation,

¹⁶ *for through him God created everything*

in the heavenly realms and on earth.

He made the things we can see

and the things we can't see—

such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world.

Everything was created through him and for him. – Colossians 1:15-16 NLT

Jesus was God in human flesh. He had been sent by God to pay for the sins of man and, when His work was completed, He had been raised back to life and returned to His rightful place at His Father side, where He now rules and reigns.

But it was at the mention of the resurrection of Jesus that some in Paul's audience experienced a disconnect. Most Greeks in Paul's day would have rejected the possibility of resurrection. It wasn't that they didn't believe in an afterlife, but that the body and soul were two separate things that would no longer be joined together after death. Restoring a dead body to life was not only unfeasible to them, it was unattractive. In the Greek mindset, separation of the soul from the body was a good thing.

But Paul's efforts did not go unrewarded. In Isaiah 55:11, God declares, "It is the same with my word. I send it out, and it always produces fruit. It will accomplish all I want it to, and it will prosper everywhere I send it." Paul had spoken the truth regarding God, His Son and the offer of salvation. Luke records that, while some mocked and others deferred judgment, others believed, and he gives them names: Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris. There were others as well who remain unnamed, but the bottom line was that Paul declared the truth about a God, a man, and a day. God was that unknown God to whom they had erected an altar. Jesus was the man appointed by God to judge the world in righteousness. And that day of judgment was coming. Paul's audience, at one time ignorant of these truths, was now without excuse.

Do Not Be Silent

Acts 18:1-11

¹ After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ² And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them, ³ and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. ⁴ And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks.

⁵ When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. ⁶ And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." ⁷ And he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. His house was next door to the synagogue. ⁸ Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized. ⁹ And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, ¹⁰ for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people." ¹¹ And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. – Acts 18:1-11 ESV

Eventually, Silas and Timothy rejoined Paul in Athens. But when it was determined that it was time for them to move on again. Paul traveled on to Corinth while Timothy returned to Thessalonica and Silas seems to have gone somewhere else in the region of Macedonia (1 Thessalonians 3:1-2). According to verse five, they would later join Paul in Corinth.

Like Philippi, Corinth was a Roman colony and, at the time of Paul's visit, the largest city in Greece. It was approximately 50 miles southwest of Athens and some 20 times larger in size. It was a busy, cosmopolitan city with a diverse population mix. Paul would discover a vibrant community of Jews there, some who had arrived in town due to a recent decree by the Emperor Claudius, commanding the expulsion of all Jews from the city of Rome. Luke tells us that Paul met one such couple, named Aquila and Priscilla, who had been forced part of the Jewish contingent forced to flee from Rome. Paul would strike up a relationship with these two, even staying in their home and working alongside them in their tent-making business. It's interesting to note that Luke does not describe this couple as having been Christ-followers when Paul met them. He simply says that Paul "found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla" (Acts 18:2 ESV). Luke's description seems to infer that Aquila was a Jew, but that Priscilla was not. Based on her name, she could have been a Roman, and when her husband was forced to leave Rome, she had chosen to leave with him. And nowhere in this account does Luke provide an account of their conversion story. While we know nothing of how or when they came to faith in Christ, we know they eventually did, because Paul would later describe them as believers.

³ Give my greetings to Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in the ministry of Christ Jesus.
⁴ In fact, they once risked their lives for me. I am thankful to them, and so are all the Gentile churches. – Romans 16:3-4 NLT

Corinth had a long-standing reputation for its immorality and decadence. As far back as the fifth century BC, the Greek word, *korinthiazesthai*, had come into common usage, which literally meant “to Corinthianize” and was used to refer to someone being sexually immoral. Prostitutes, of which there were many, were commonly referred to as “Corinthians girls.” When referring to someone as having committed sexual immorality, the euphemism, “to act like a Corinthian” was often used. At the heart of the city stood the temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love. This temple was renowned for its 1,000 temple prostitutes and for the sexual practices offered as part of its religious observances. So, it is easy to see why Paul, when later writing to the believers in Corinth, confessed the sense of fear and trepidation he felt when he first arrived in their city.

¹ When I first came to you, dear brothers and sisters, I didn’t use lofty words and impressive wisdom to tell you God’s secret plan. ² For I decided that while I was with you I would forget everything except Jesus Christ, the one who was crucified. ³ I came to you in weakness—timid and trembling. ⁴ And my message and my preaching were very plain. Rather than using clever and persuasive speeches, I relied only on the power of the Holy Spirit. ⁵ I did this so you would trust not in human wisdom but in the power of God. – 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 NLT

But, despite any sense of fear he might have felt, Paul had come to Corinth for one reason and one reason only. He followed his normal protocol and “reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks” (Acts 18:4 ESV). No doubt, Aquila and Priscilla had provided Paul with introductions into the local Jewish community, and he took full advantage of the opportunity to share the gospel with his fellow Jews. To get some idea just how passionate Paul was about seeing his Jewish brothers and sisters come to faith in Christ, all we have to do is read from his letter to the believers in Rome.

¹ With Christ as my witness, I speak with utter truthfulness. My conscience and the Holy Spirit confirm it. ² My heart is filled with bitter sorrow and unending grief ³ for my people, my Jewish brothers and sisters. I would be willing to be forever cursed—cut off from Christ!—if that would save them. – Romans 9:1-3 NLT

Paul would have been willing to give up his own salvation if it meant that other Jews would experience the joy of knowing Jesus as their Messiah and Savior. Paul was determined and driven to see that all people heard the good news regarding Jesus. Yes, his official assignment from Jesus had been to take the gospel to the Gentiles, and he was obedient to that call. But it did not stop him from caring deeply for his own people and striving diligently to see that they too heard the message of salvation made possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

When Paul and Silas eventually joined Paul in Corinth, they found him hard at work, “occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus” (Acts 18:5 ESV). But his well-intentioned efforts were met with resistance and ridicule. Luke states that the Jews “opposed and reviled him” (Acts 18:6 ESV). They demeaned the messenger as well as his message. And Luke reveals that Paul eventually saw any further efforts to persuade them as futile and a waste of his time, so, “he shook out his garments and said to them, ‘Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles’” (Acts 18:6 ESV). Paul seemed to be following the advice given by Jesus to His 12 disciples when He had sent them out on their first assignment without Him.

“If any household or town refuses to welcome you or listen to your message, shake its dust from your feet as you leave.” – Matthew 10:14 NLT

Paul’s actions were also in line with the counsel God had given to His prophet, Ezekiel, hundreds of years earlier, concerning the people of God.

² “Son of man, give your people this message: ‘When I bring an army against a country, the people of that land choose one of their own to be a watchman. ³ When the watchman sees the enemy coming, he sounds the alarm to warn the people. ⁴ Then if those who hear the alarm refuse to take action, it is their own fault if they die. ⁵ They heard the alarm but ignored it, so the responsibility is theirs. If they had listened to the warning, they could have saved their lives. – Ezekiel 33:2-5 NLT

And when Paul left the synagogue that day, he didn’t have to go far. Luke says that he literally went next door, to the home of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. Evidently, Titius Justus was a Roman and a God-fearer. It could have been that he had been a Jewish proselyte who had been in the synagogue the day Paul decided to walk out and invited him into his own home. They were joined by another man, Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue. And Luke records that Crispus placed his faith in Jesus and became a believer that day, along with those in his household. While Paul had been forced to turn his back on the Jews, God was far from done in the city of Corinth. Luke makes it quite clear that “many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized” (Acts 18:8 ESV). Paul kept up his ministry of sharing the good news and the Holy Spirit did His work of regenerating the hearts of those who heard, so that they might receive the gift of God’s grace made available through His Son’s sacrificial death on the cross.

And Luke provides us with some insight into Paul’s state of mind during this period of his ministry in Corinth. It seems obvious that Paul faced opposition, and that he felt more than a little fearful for his safety and well-being. God gave Paul a vision, in which He reassured His servant that everything was going to be all right.

⁹ “Don’t be afraid! Speak out! Don’t be silent! ¹⁰ For I am with you, and no one will attack and harm you, for many people in this city belong to me.” – Acts 18:9-10 NLT

This does not appear to be an indication that there were already other believers in the city of which Paul was unaware. God seems to be assuring Paul that He had already chosen others to come to faith in Christ who had not yet had the opportunity. So, Paul was to keep speaking and sharing, that those whom God had chosen could hear and accept. Paul would refer to this choosing by God in his letter to the believers in Rome.

²⁹ For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. ³⁰ And having chosen them, he called them to come to him. And having called them, he gave them right standing with himself. And having given them right standing, he gave them his glory. – Romans 8:29-30 NLT

God wanted Paul to know that He had others set aside in Corinth for salvation. All Paul needed to do was be faithful to fulfill his commission. And Paul did just that, remaining in Corinth for another year and a half, proclaiming the gospel and allowing the Holy Spirit to bring to God all those whom the Father had called.

Are You Persuaded to Worship God?

Acts 18:12-18

¹² But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal, ¹³ saying, “This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law.” ¹⁴ But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, “If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, O Jews, I would have reason to accept your complaint. ¹⁵ But since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves. I refuse to be a judge of these things.” ¹⁶ And he drove them from the tribunal. ¹⁷ And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of this.

¹⁸ After this, Paul stayed many days longer and then took leave of the brothers and set sail for Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila. – Acts 18:12-18 ESV

If you recall, during the time Paul was ministering in the city of Corinth, God had given him a vision, telling him to keep doing what he was doing. He reminded Paul not to be afraid, but to trust in His providential plan and protective power. We know from Paul’s own words, written to the believers in Corinth sometime later, that he had struggled with feelings of fear when he first arrived in the city. He confessed, “I came to you in weakness – timid and trembling” (1 Corinthians 2:3 NLT). And while, at this point, nothing negative had happened up to him in Corinth, it was just a matter of time. And God had given Paul His unwavering assurance that all would be well.

“Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.” – Acts 18:9-10 ESV

And then, almost like clockwork, the inevitable happened. A year and a half later, well into Paul’s ministry there, “some Jews rose up together against Paul and brought him before the governor for judgment” (Acts 18:12 NLT). Luke is very specific in terms of his timing, using the proconsulship of Gallio to provide a firm date for this scenario. Gallio was the Roman proconsul or governor of the province of Achaia. Interestingly enough, Gallio a Roman citizen of Spanish descent, whose brother happened to be the Stoic philosopher, Seneca. In some sense, the Roman proconsul served as kind of a supreme court and his decisions on legal matters were binding, containing the full backing of the *bēma* or judgment seat. This was a raised platform from which the proconsul tried cases brought before him. Their accusation against Paul is simple, but direct. “This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law” (Acts 18:13 ESV). Basically, they are claiming that Paul is proselytizing Roman citizens, a crime according to Roman law. The Jews or any other religious were free to promote their religion, but not among those who were of Roman citizenship. These men were trying to get Paul in trouble with the legal authorities. It is the same tactic used by the Jews in Jesus’ day, who tried

to set Him up as a revolutionary and radical, who was stirring up trouble. When they had appeared before Pilate to state their accusations against Jesus, they had said, “This man has been leading our people astray by telling them not to pay their taxes to the Roman government and by claiming he is the Messiah, a king” (Luke 23:2 NLT). They tried to portray Jesus as an insurrectionist, stating, “he is causing riots by his teaching wherever he goes—all over Judea, from Galilee to Jerusalem!” (Luke 23:5 NLT).

The Jews in Corinth are attempting to use the same ploy in their confrontation with Peter, attempting to set Paul up as some kind of radical revolutionary who posed a threat to the government of Rome. One of the last things the Roman government wanted was anyone disturbing the peace or rocking the proverbial boat. They allowed other religions to practice their faith openly and without government interference. But if they stirred up trouble or attempted to sway the allegiance of Roman citizens away from their dedication to the Emperor, they would face stiff consequences.

But Gallio, sitting on his dais, interrupted the proceedings, even before Paul had an opportunity to defend himself. The proconsul simply stated, “Listen, you Jews, if this were a case involving some wrongdoing or a serious crime, I would have a reason to accept your case. But since it is merely a question of words and names and your Jewish law, take care of it yourselves. I refuse to judge such matters” (Acts 18:14-15 NLT). He turned them down flat, deeming their case as non-admissible in his court. He saw through their little ploy and labeled their case as fraudulent and frivolous. It had no business being brought before him for consideration. To him, this was nothing more than a theological dispute among Jews. He could have cared less and, in so many words, told them so. What is easy to miss here, is the weight of Gallio’s apparent non-decision. He had chosen to reject the case, but in doing so he was giving legitimacy to the Christian religion within all the Roman provinces. His action carried weight and set a precedent that would influence the decisions of other, less-powerful proconsuls. From this point forward, the Romans would merely view Christianity as just another sect of the Jews. They would refuse to see it as dangerous or a threat to the Roman way of life or the stability of the government. In their minds, it was a non-factor. This determination would provide a fertile soil in which Christianity was allowed to continue its spread. Because the Roman empire was so vast and encompassed a great many foreign nations, the gospel was given a freedom to go wherever Emperor’s power reigned – all the way to Rome itself.

Paul, while not necessarily vindicated, was at least liberated. But the Jews would find that their attempt to get Paul in trouble would backfire on them. Luke records that “they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue” (Acts 18:17 ESV). The phrase, “they all” most likely refers to the Gentile audience who had gathered to hear what Gallio was going to do. When they heard him reject the case, their anti-Semitic sentiments welled over, causing them to lash out at the Jews by grabbing one of the men who had most likely dragged Paul before the proconsul. Gallio did nothing about this obvious act of vigilantism, most likely thinking it would discourage the Jews from bringing their internal debates before him again.

For Paul, it was business as usual. He continued to preach and spread the gospel. Paul would develop a strong affection for the church in Corinth, later penning two separate letters that he would use to encourage and, in some ways, admonish them in their faith.

⁴ I always thank my God for you and for the gracious gifts he has given you, now that you belong to Christ Jesus. ⁵ Through him, God has enriched your church in every way—with all of your eloquent words and all of your knowledge. ⁶ This confirms that what I told you about Christ is true. ⁷ Now you have every spiritual gift you need as you eagerly wait for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸ He will keep you strong to the end so that you will be free from all blame on the day when our Lord Jesus Christ returns. ⁹ God will do this, for he is faithful to do what he says, and he has invited you into partnership with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. – 1 Corinthians 1:4-9 NLT

Paul's work among the Corinthians had not been without its opposition, but there had also been an eager reception on the part of many. God had made it clear to Paul that there were many in the city who were His (Acts 18:10). He had already chosen them for salvation. All Paul had to do was share the gospel, boldly and faithfully. The results were totally up to God. And God not only saved these people, He filled them with His Spirit and equipped them with all the spiritual gifts they would need to grow as individuals and as a congregation. As Paul later wrote them, they were enriched because of Christ. They were gifted because of Christ. They were going to stay strong to the end, because of Christ. In essence, they were in partnership with Christ – doing His will, growing His church, spreading His gospel and furthering the scope and reach of His Kingdom on this earth.

This little scene involving Paul, the Jews and Gallio, the Roman proconsul, can be easy to blow right by when reading through the Book of Acts. It can be even easier to see it as some kind of divine payback or justice for the Jews because of their efforts to oppose Paul and the message of the gospel. But for us as believers, this event should act as a reminder of the sovereignty of God. The actions of the Jews are almost predictable. They were only doing what they thought to be right. They saw Christianity as a growing threat to Judaism, and they saw Paul as its primary proponent. They were blind to the truth but didn't realize it. The Gentiles who beat Sosthenes were only doing what they believed to be right and true, protecting the integrity of their Greek culture and the Roman rule under which they lived and because of which, they enjoyed peace and security. And Gallio was simply doing his job, refusing to waste his time or governmental resources listening to a case that had no merit or business being brought before him.

But all of these people were operating under the divine umbrella of God's will. He was silently, invisibly accomplishing His preordained prerogatives through the lives of men, whether they realized it or wanted it. Sometimes we mistakenly think that we can somehow thwart or inadvertently derail the plans of God. When we read these words of Jesus in his model prayer: "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10 ESV), we somehow get the wrong impression that we are the ones who bring about God's will. We have to pray for it or request it. We have to help make it happen. But God's will is going to be done

whether I help or not, pray or not, and even desire it or not. The Jews could drag Paul before Gallio, but not without God's permission. The proconsul could refuse to take the case, but not apart from God's sovereign will. The Gentiles could beat the local leader of the Jewish synagogue, but their actions, while unjust and ungodly, would somehow be used by God to further the spread of His Son's Kingdom. We have no way of knowing how the events of that day impacted the local Jewish community. Perhaps it made them more receptive to the gospel. It could have put a damper on their desire to stand up to Paul and oppose the message he was proclaiming. We don't know. But God does. None of the things we see happening in the Book of Acts were arbitrary in nature. Every action had a God-ordained reaction associated with it. Seemingly chance encounters were really divine appointments. What appear to be the spontaneous reactions of unruly mobs would end up producing amazing God-inspired outcomes. The entire Book of Acts is a primer on the sovereignty of God, providing us with a behind-the-scenes glimpse into God's irrefutable involvement in the world as He unfolds and fulfills His plan of redemption for a lost and dying world.