

**A Daily Devotional  
on the Life of Paul  
from the Book of Acts**  
By Ken Miller



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## Conflict in the Camp

Acts 6:1-9

<sup>1</sup> Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

<sup>2</sup> And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. <sup>3</sup> Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. <sup>4</sup> But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." <sup>5</sup> And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. <sup>6</sup> These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

<sup>8</sup> And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.

<sup>9</sup> Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. – Acts 6:1-9 ESV

One of the things that's easy to miss while studying the book of Acts is the sovereign hand of God working behind the scenes. Luke's retelling of the events surrounding the early days of the church and its subsequent growth can come across as nothing more than an historical record. But Luke, while historically accurate and faithful to provide us with a reliable account of those days, does so much more. Under the inspiration of the Spirit of God himself, he pens a detailed chronicle of God's divine orchestration of each and every phase of the church's growth. Events that appear, at first glance, to be little more than chance occurrences or the unplanned results of fate are, on closer examination, the result of God's sovereign hand.

The fact that the Holy Spirit came during the feast of Pentecost is not to be overlooked. The day of Pentecost was an annual spring feast at which the Jews presented the first-fruits of their wheat harvest to God. In essence, as a result of the Spirit indwelling the disciples and empowering them to speak in foreign languages, thousands came to faith in Christ that day. They became the first-fruits of what would become an ever-increasing harvest of believers. As we read through Luke's account, we find a steady stream of examples illustrating God's behind-the-scenes activity in the spread of the gospel and the growth of the church.

Peter and John didn't just *happen* to run into the lame man at the Gate Beautiful leading into the Temple. It had been a divinely ordained encounter. The fact that Peter's healing of the man took place at the hour of prayer, when the Temple grounds were filled with people, was not a case of good timing, but of God's planning. And more than 5,000 people came to faith as a result. Even the arrest of Peter and John, clearly the decision of the high priest and the Jewish council, was actually preordained by God. Their arrest provided them with an opportunity to speak truth to these important religious leaders, but more importantly, it forced the rest of the

disciples to pray, asking God to provide them with boldness. Their arrest proved that there would be strong opposition to their efforts and created in the disciples a growing dependence upon God. It was all part of the plan. And when you consider the fact that the early converts to Christianity were made up of people from all walks of life and economic backgrounds, it explains how the church was able to meet the physical needs of its growing congregation. The rich were selling their properties and giving the proceeds to the apostles so that no one had any need. This was not a case of human generosity, but divine planning. God was at work, bringing into His rapidly growing family a diverse group of individuals, then moving in their hearts so that the needs of all were met.

And we see that same thing illustrated in these opening verses to chapter six. Luke describes a situation that had arisen within the church, that was the result of its continued expansion. He mentions two groups of individuals: The Hellenists and the Hebrews. These were all Jews who had come to faith in Christ and who “worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord’s Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity” (Acts 2:46 NLT). But Luke mentions that “there were rumblings of discontent” (Acts 6:1 NLT). A dispute had arisen within the church between these two groups of people. There was conflict in the camp. And it would be easy to assume that this was out of God’s will and not a part of His plan. But look closer. Take notice of what is really going on here. Sometimes we must look beyond what appears to be the obvious in order to see the subtle, invisible hand of God at work. First of all, this dispute was taking place between two different sets of Jews: First were the Hellenists, or Greek-speaking Jews. These were Jews who had left Palestine as a result of one of the many diasporas or forced dispersions. They had ended up living in foreign lands and had picked up the Greek language and customs. Some would have been in Jerusalem in order to celebrate Passover and the Feast of Pentecost. They could have been part of the original crowd that heard the disciples speaking in tongues and came to faith. Others could have accepted Christ as a result of the message Peter preached in Solomon’s portico. These were Jews who were not native to the land of Israel and who would have been looked down on by the native Hebrews. And that seems to be the source of the conflict. The Hellenistic Jews were complaining that their widows were being overlooked by the native Jews. Keep in mind, this was all taking place within the church. These were new converts to Christianity who were arguing over an issue of discrimination within their own ranks. How could this be of God? Why would He allow this to happen? What good could come from this kind of conflict within the body of Christ?

Luke records that “the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples” (Acts 6:2 ESV). The 11 disciples of Jesus, plus Matthias, Judas’s replacement, called together what was probably the original group of 120 disciples who had been in the upper room at Pentecost. They recognize that the growing church is creating an increasing demand on their time, distracting them from doing what Jesus had commanded them to do: To teach and lead. They express their concern: ““It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables” (Acts 6:2 ESV), and then ask that recommendations be made for men who might step in and help with this dispute and the future distribution of funds and resources within the church. The men whose names are submitted must meet a set of standards. They must be “men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (Acts 6:3 ESV). Now, had this conflict not taken place, this

selection process might never have occurred. It was the growth of the church and the inclusion of Hellenistic and Hebraic Jews that had caused the problem. And the problem had exposed an even more important need: The expansion of the leadership team to meet the growing demands of the ever-increasing congregation.

And Luke records that, “they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch” (Acts 6:5 ESV). What is important to note here is that all seven men have Greek names. Since the original complaint came from the Greek-speaking Jews, it made sense that men who were likely Hellenists themselves would be the best choice to handle the issue. And, whether we see it or not, this is where God’s sovereign hand is at work. Note that one of the men mentioned is Stephen. We will hear more about him in the days ahead. He will play a significant role in the continued spread of the church. But what is really happening here is God’s divine plan preparing the church to spread beyond the confines of Jerusalem and the context of Judaism. If you recall, Jesus had told the disciples, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8 NLT). So far, they had not left the city of Jerusalem. They had not ventured beyond the city walls. Jesus had clearly commanded them to “go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19 NLT). But they were still in Jerusalem.

That’s where God comes in. He was working behind the scenes, orchestrating events in such a way that the gospel would eventually spread beyond the city of Jerusalem and into the rest of Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. In fact, that is what the rest of the book of Acts is all about. And this little dispute between the Hellenists and native Jews would be the impetus. These godly men with Greek names were chosen to meet the needs of the Greek-speaking widows. They were selected to serve. But they would do much more. As we will see, Stephen will end up sharing the gospel and sacrificing his life for the cause of Christ. In the verses that follow, we will see Stephen doing far more than serving widows. He will be sharing the gospel, and the group to whom he ministered was made up “Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and the province of Asia” (Acts 6:9 NLT). They were part of the synagogue of the Freedman. These would have been former Roman slaves who had been granted their freedom and who had become Jews. They would have been considered Hellenists, and who better to share the gospel with them than one of their own: Stephen.

A dispute had resulted in the appointment of a new set of leaders. And those leaders had been Greek-speaking Jews, of whom one was a man named Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, full of grace and power. And he would be far more than an adequate servant or deacon. He would be an evangelist. And, because of the mighty hand of God, working behind the scenes, the gospel was about to break through the confines of Jerusalem and burst beyond the ethnic barrier of Judaism, all the way to the ends of the earth.



## Growing Opposition

Acts 6:10-7:1

*<sup>10</sup> But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. <sup>11</sup> Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." <sup>12</sup> And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, <sup>13</sup> and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, <sup>14</sup> for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us." <sup>15</sup> And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.*

*And the high priest said, "Are these things so?" – Acts 6:10-7:1 ESV*

Stephen found himself in a dispute with some men from the synagogue of the Freedman. These were former Roman slaves who had converted to Judaism and would have been considered Hellenistic or Greek-speaking Jews. Luke tells us they had at one time been citizens of such places as Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia and Asia. And while they were Hellenists, like Stephen, they took exception to his teaching and preaching. Stephen was "full of grace and power" and "was doing great wonders and signs among the people" (Acts 6:8 ESV), but these men were, for some reason, unimpressed. Luke does not reveal to us the content of Stephen's message to them, but he simply records that "they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking" (Acts 6:10 ESV). Stephen was speaking in the power of the Spirit of God and was most likely sharing the good news concerning Jesus' resurrection and His offer of eternal life to all who would accept Him as their Messiah and Savior. But when the Freedman found themselves unable to successfully refute the words of Stephen, they resorted to false accusations and liars. They encouraged others to come forward and accuse Stephen of blasphemy against Moses and God. And when Stephen was eventually hauled in front of the Sanhedrin, they had false witnesses ready to report that, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us" (Acts 6:13-14 ESV). Stephen was being falsely portrayed as a rebel and a radical. All of this should have an eerily familiar ring to it. The apostle Mark records a similar encounter between Jesus and the Sanhedrin.

*<sup>53</sup> They took Jesus to the high priest's home where the leading priests, the elders, and the teachers of religious law had gathered....<sup>55</sup> Inside, the leading priests and the entire high council were trying to find evidence against Jesus, so they could put him to death. But they couldn't find any. <sup>56</sup> Many false witnesses spoke against him, but they contradicted each other. <sup>57</sup> Finally, some men stood up and gave this false testimony: <sup>58</sup> "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this Temple made with human hands, and in three days I will build another, made without human hands.'" <sup>59</sup> But even then they didn't get their stories straight! – Mark 14:53, 55-59 NLT*

Stephen, like Jesus, was simply doing the will of God, but he too faced opposition and the animosity of men who would resort to lies and half-truths in order to shut down the truth of God. What was it that Stephen had been teaching and preaching? Luke does not tell us. But it is quite easy to assume that Stephen was simply teaching what he had been taught by the apostles. And they had been keeping the command of Jesus, giving to them as part of His great commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you**” (Matthew 28:19-20 ESV).

Because of the nature of the accusations against Stephen, it is likely that he had been recounting many of the words of Jesus Himself. He could have been reiterating the content of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, where He had refuted the interpretations of the Scribes and Pharisees concerning the Mosaic Law. Jesus had raised the bar when it came to obedience to the law, demanding behavior that was far more than exterior in nature, but which flowed from the heart. And it was Jesus who had told the crowd that day on the hillside, “I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20 ESV). It had been Jesus who had said, “I tell you, something greater than the temple is here” (Matthew 12:6 ESV). Whatever it was that Stephen had been saying and teaching, there were those who twisted his words and contorted his meaning in order to set him up as a troublemaker. They accused him of blasphemy or speaking evil of Moses and of God. In essence, they were accusing Stephen of attacking everything they held dear: The great patriarch, Moses, and his law; the holy Temple of God, and Yahweh Himself.

What is interesting is that Luke prefaces all of this with the statement that Stephen was “full of grace and power.” He was not belligerent or abusive. He was gracious, kind and operating under the divine influence of the Spirit of God. His words were true. His intentions were pure. His motivation was godly and based on a desire to see others come to faith in Christ. But, like Jesus Himself, Stephen was misunderstood and falsely accused. He was portrayed as a dangerous menace to the Jewish way of life. But Luke portrays Stephen in a completely different light when he describes “his face was like the face of an angel” (Acts 6:15 ESV). Like Jesus on the mount of transfiguration, Stephen literally glowed with the glory of God. And the members of the Sanhedrin, Stephen’s accusers, and the men from the synagogue of the Freedman, all witnessed this phenomenon. Luke describes them as being transfixed, their eyes locked on the glowing face of Stephen. And whether these men recognized it or not, this should remind us of a similar scene recorded in the Old Testament, involving Moses and the people of Israel.

*<sup>29</sup> When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. <sup>30</sup> Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. – Exodus 34:29-30 NLT*

Moses had been with God. Stephen was filled with the Spirit of God. And it showed. But the reaction of the crowd surrounding Stephen would be quite different than that of Aaron and the people of Israel. Luke simply records that the high priest responded by asking Stephen a question: “Are these things so?” (Acts 7:1 ESV). Once again, there is a remarkable similarity between this event and that of Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin on the night He had been betrayed by Judas. Mark records that, after having heard the false accusations against Jesus, the high priest turned to Him and asked, “Have you no answer to make? What is it that these men testify against you?” (Mark 14:60 ESV). And Mark states that Jesus remained silent.

But, as we shall see, Stephen will speak up. He will use the opportunity placed before him to answer each and every accusation against him. But not in an attempt to escape the hostility of the Sanhedrin, but to share the truth regarding Moses, the law, and Yahweh, the God of the Jewish people. He will launch into one of the longest messages recorded in the New Testament. And he will speak under the controlling influence of the Holy Spirit, delivering a powerful message that is not gospel-centered, but an historically based retelling of God’s relationship with the Jewish people. He will take their accusations of blasphemy and soundly refute them, revealing his strong knowledge of Hebrew history, even though he was not a native-speaking Hebrew.

Stephen, full of grace and power, was facing the hostility of a crowd filled with hate and envy. These men could not understand what was going on. They saw Stephen and the other disciples of Jesus as nothing more than a threat to their way of life. He was a nuisance and his message regarding Jesus as the Messiah was a direct threat to their entire belief system. Or so they thought. But Stephen is about to expose their gross misunderstanding of all that they held dear. He is going to use their own heritage against them, revealing that Abraham, Joseph, Moses, the law, the tabernacle, David, and Solomon were all pointing to someone and something far greater: The Righteous One.

Jesus had come and they had missed Him. Or, at least, they had refused to accept Him. Now, the Spirit had come, and they refused to acknowledge Him, and instead, attributed His word to drunkenness on the part of the disciples. Stephen, like the apostles, was “doing great wonders and signs among the people”, but there were those who rejected these outward manifestations of the Spirit’s power, and did all that they could do to discredit God’s messenger, to deny the Spirit’s power and to destroy the gospel of Jesus Christ.



## The Wondrous Ways of God

Acts 7:2-16

<sup>2</sup> And Stephen said:

*“Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran,<sup>3</sup> and said to him, ‘Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.’<sup>4</sup> Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living.<sup>5</sup> Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot’s length, but promised to give it to him as a possession and to his offspring after him, though he had no child.<sup>6</sup> And God spoke to this effect—that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and afflict them four hundred years.<sup>7</sup> ‘But I will judge the nation that they serve,’ said God, ‘and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.’<sup>8</sup> And he gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day, and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.*

*<sup>9</sup> “And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt; but God was with him<sup>10</sup> and rescued him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who made him ruler over Egypt and over all his household.<sup>11</sup> Now there came a famine throughout all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction, and our fathers could find no food.<sup>12</sup> But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers on their first visit.<sup>13</sup> And on the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family became known to Pharaoh.<sup>14</sup> And Joseph sent and summoned Jacob his father and all his kindred, seventy-five persons in all.<sup>15</sup> And Jacob went down into Egypt, and he died, he and our fathers,<sup>16</sup> and they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.” – Acts 7:2-16 ESV*

What is Stephen doing? Why in the world would this Hellenistic Jew take so much time explaining the history of Israel to the high priest and other religious leaders of Israel? It is essential that we keep in mind the accusation that was leveled against Stephen. He is responding to the charge of blasphemy – against God and Moses. This was a serious charge that could easily result in his death, so it was important that he explain himself and prove that he was innocent of any and all charges against him. What appears to be an unnecessary history lecture was actually Stephen’s rebuttal. He is showing that, even as a Hellenistic Jew, he was fully steeped in the history of Israel but, more importantly, he was intimately familiar with the God of Israel.

Stephen begins his defense by describing God as the “God of glory” – a direct reference to Psalm 29:2.

*Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;  
worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness.*

Seven times in this very short Psalm, King David refers to “the voice of the Lord.” He states that the voice of the Lord is powerful, full of majesty, flashes for flames of fire, shakes the wilderness, and causes the wild animals to give birth. For Stephen, the issue is the glory of God as revealed through the voice of God. He speaks. He calls. He commands. And Stephen reminds his listeners about God’s call of Abraham. He appeared to Abraham and said, “Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you” (Acts 7:3 ESV). God had spoken and given very specific directions to their great patriarch. He had directed Abraham to leave Ur and to relocate his family to the land of promise – the land of Canaan. This land would become the Holy Land, the homeland of the Israelites and a possession that brought them great pride. But Stephen reminds them that Abraham, the one to whom the land was promised, never owned an inch of it during his lifetime. Instead, the promise was to be fulfilled to his descendants.

*“But God gave him no inheritance here, not even one square foot of land. God did promise, however, that eventually the whole land would belong to Abraham and his descendants—even though he had no children yet.” – Acts 7:5 NLT*

But before that could happen, the descendants of Abraham would be forced to live “in a foreign land, where they would be oppressed as slaves for 400 years” (Acts 7:6 NLT). It’s vital that we understand what Stephen is doing here. He is portraying the God of Israel as one who speaks, and when He does speak, His words are often difficult to understand, and His ways are beyond our ability to comprehend. Why would God have commanded Abraham to leave Ur, but never have given him possession of the land? Why would He have chosen Abraham to be the father of a great nation, when God knew full well that Abraham’s wife was barren? And when Sarah finally did conceive and the descendants of Abraham began to increase, why did God ordain their slavery in the land of Egypt for 400 years? And why had God sealed His covenant with Abraham by requiring the circumcision of every male member of his household? As we will see, this was a sign of the promise. It was a permanent reminder that God would do what He had said He would do. The sign of circumcision was a mark of ownership. Abraham’s descendants belonged to God.

In this speech, Stephen touches on some of the most critical junctures of Israelite history, pointing out the difficult to comprehend ways of God. Joseph, the favorite son of Jacob, was sold into slavery by his own brothers. But God had a purpose behind these actions. It was Joseph who would rise to power, becoming the second highest official in the land of Egypt. He would be placed by God in a position of power and prominence, fully prepared to respond to the needs of his family when they arrived in Egypt looking to escape the famine in the land of promise. And when Jacob, his remaining sons, and their families arrived in Egypt, they were only 75 in number. Not exactly a great multitude. And Stephen points out that Jacob died and was buried in the land of Egypt. He had left his homeland in a state of devastation, due to a famine. He had given up his possession in the promised land to live in a foreign land. But it had

all been part of God's grand plan for the people of Israel. But Stephen points out that Jacob's bones eventually made it back to Canaan and were buried in a tomb that had originally purchased by Abraham, many years earlier.

Even for the Israelites in Stephen's audience, who knew this story well, it was a reminder of just how remarkable their nation's story really was. It would have been easy for them to forget how they had arrived at where they were. Their establishment as a nation had not been easy. And had it not been for the sovereign hand of God, they would not have existed at all. From the call of Abraham to the captivity of the Israelites in Egypt, it had all been part of God's plan for the people of Israel. And there was more to come. God had not been done. They were not to remain in Egypt. God had plans to get them back to the land of promise. And Stephen will next retell the story of the deliverance of Israel at the hands of Moses – another man, chosen by God, to play a part in the establishment of the nation of Israel, the people of God.

And perhaps you can begin to see where Stephen is going with all this. On the one hand, he is clearly proving His love and respect for God. He is anything, but blasphemous. But even more importantly, Stephen is pointing out that Yahweh was and still is a promise-making, promise-keeping God. Yes, they were in the land and the Jews took great pride in their promised possession of that land. But for Stephen, there was more. There was an ever-greater portion of the promise that they were missing. The land was *an* inheritance, but not *the* inheritance. God had something far greater in store for them than just a portion in the land of promise.



## The Rejected Rescuer

Acts 7:17-29

<sup>17</sup> *“But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt <sup>18</sup> until there arose over Egypt another king who did not know Joseph. <sup>19</sup> He dealt shrewdly with our race and forced our fathers to expose their infants, so that they would not be kept alive. <sup>20</sup> At this time Moses was born; and he was beautiful in God’s sight. And he was brought up for three months in his father’s house, <sup>21</sup> and when he was exposed, Pharaoh’s daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. <sup>22</sup> And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds.*

<sup>23</sup> *“When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel. <sup>24</sup> And seeing one of them being wronged, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian. <sup>25</sup> He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand. <sup>26</sup> And on the following day he appeared to them as they were quarreling and tried to reconcile them, saying, ‘Men, you are brothers. Why do you wrong each other?’ <sup>27</sup> But the man who was wronging his neighbor thrust him aside, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?’ <sup>28</sup> Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?’ <sup>29</sup> At this retort Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons.” – Acts 7:17-29 ESV*

Stephen is subtle. He recounts the history of Israel, but he does so in such a way that he purposefully leaves out certain facts while highlighting others. At this point in his speech, he has transitioned to the point in Israel’s history where they are living in the land of Egypt. Having arrived 400 years earlier as Jacob’s small family unit of no more than 75, their numbers had exploded, and the situation in Egypt had dramatically changed. Joseph and the Pharaoh who had so graciously welcomed Jacob four centuries earlier are both dead. There was a new Pharaoh in charge, and we know from the Exodus account that he feared the sheer numbers of the Israelites. So, he instituted a program of intense oppression and extermination, commanding that all the male babies born to the Israelites be killed. Yet God had other plans. But before we go there, let’s take a look at an interesting statement that Stephen made. In verses 17, it says, “But as the time of the promise drew near, which God had granted to Abraham...” What is Stephen referring to? What promise does he have in mind? If we go back to God’s original call of Abraham, recorded in the book of Genesis, God said to Abraham:

<sup>1</sup> *“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup> And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” – Genesis 12:1-3 ESV*

Is this the promise to which Stephen is referring? Or is it tied to what God said some time later, recorded in chapter 17 of the book of Genesis?

<sup>4</sup> *“Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.*  
<sup>5</sup> *No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have*  
*made you the father of a multitude of nations.* <sup>6</sup> *I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I*  
*will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you.* <sup>7</sup> *And I will establish my*  
*covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their*  
*generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after*  
*you.* <sup>8</sup> *And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings,*  
*all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.”* – Genesis  
 17:4-8 ESV

Was this the promise Stephen had in mind? Or was it this lesser emphasized, but just as significant promise God had made to Abraham regarding the 400-years of affliction his descendants would have to endure in Egypt?

<sup>13</sup> *“Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and*  
*will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years.* <sup>14</sup> *But I will bring*  
*judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great*  
*possessions.* <sup>15</sup> *As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a*  
*good old age.* <sup>16</sup> *And they shall come back here in the fourth generation...”* – Genesis  
 15:13-16 ESV

The truth is, Stephen most likely had all these promises in mind. But he was emphasizing this particular promise because it was essential to the overall plan of God. They would have to be afflicted before they could be rescued. And it is interesting to note that, in the book of Exodus, Moses points out that their affliction by the Egyptians had a positive impact on their numbers. He states, “But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad” (Exodus 1:12 ESV). Even Pharaoh’s decree that the male babies be killed was met with resistance, as the Hebrew midwives refused to obey his command. And one of those babies to be spared was Moses. He would be rescued by the daughter of Pharaoh himself, being raised in his home like a son. And Stephen points out that the day came for Moses, when “it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel” (Acts 7:23 ESV). This is a detail not found in the book of Exodus. Stephen seems to be saying that Moses, after 40 years of living as an Egyptian, was directed by God to visit his Hebrew brothers. And what he saw appalled him. He saw the suffering and the abuse. And his anger resulted in him taking the life of an Egyptian whom he had seen beating a Hebrew slave. And Stephen points out Moses’ motivation for doing what he did: “He supposed that his brothers would understand that God was giving them salvation by his hand, but they did not understand” (Acts 7:25 ESV). Even at that point in his life, Moses seemed to sense a divine call on his life. He had put two and two together and began to realize that he was in the same position Joseph had been in 400 years earlier, when he had been the second-most powerful man in the land of Egypt and had been used by God to spare the Israelites from the famine in the land. Moses wanted to rescue his people. He wanted to use his power and influence to make a difference. But his efforts failed. Rather than viewing Moses as their rescuer and redeemer, the people of Israel sarcastically responded: “Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?” (Acts 7:27 ESV). They questioned his

authority. They refused to accept his validity as a rescuer. So, Moses was forced to run for his life, escaping to the land of Midian, where he would remain for 40 years.

Remember, the audience to whom Stephen was speaking was entirely Jewish in makeup. It included the high priest and the members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council. These men were Sadducees and Pharisees, powerful religious leaders who would have known well the story of Moses. But Stephen is pointing out something they knew, but in a way to make a point they had failed to see. Moses was the God-ordained redeemer of the people of Israel. And yet, when he showed up on the scene, he was rejected. They failed to see him for who he was. In the midst of their captivity and suffering, they had chosen to reject the very one God had sent to be their rescuer. And the other thing Stephen is subtly pointing out is that the 400-years of captivity in Egypt had been part of God's promise to Abraham. Their captivity had to precede their redemption. And yet, through it all, God had been fulfilling the promises He had made to Abraham. He was making of them a great nation. He was blessing them by abundantly multiplying their numbers. But He had chosen to do it in the land of Egypt, not within the land of Canaan. And He was doing it apart from the law, which had not yet been given. He was doing it without a Temple or a sacrificial system. All the things the Israelites held near and dear, and which they had accused Stephen of demeaning or speaking ill of, were non-existent when God was blessing the people of Israel in Egypt. The land of Canaan, the Temple, the Law and the sacrificial system had all become sources of inordinate pride for the people of Israel. They saw themselves as God's chosen people because of those things. They saw no need for this Savior of whom Peter, John, Stephen and the rest of the disciples spoke. They didn't need rescue. They didn't need a redeemer. And like their ancestors, who had rejected Moses, the Jews listening to Stephen had been guilty of rejecting Jesus. In the opening chapter of his gospel, the apostle John recorded the rejection of Jesus by the Jewish people.

*<sup>10</sup> He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. <sup>11</sup> He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. – John 1:10-11 NLT*

Like Moses, Jesus had been rejected. And as in the case of Moses, God was not done with Jesus or the people of Israel. There would be a period of delay. Moses would spend 40 years in the wilderness of Midian, before he received God's official call and commissioning. Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness, suffering hunger and thirst, and enduring the temptations of Satan, before, in "the fullness of time" (Galatians 4:4), He was sent by God to act as the Savior and Redeemer of His people.

Yes, the people of Israel were living in the land of Canaan. They had their glorious Temple and the sacrificial system that went with it. They had the law provided to them by Moses. But for hundreds of years they had lived under the oppression of nations like Rome. Ever since they had returned to the land during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, they had lived without a king, and under the subjection of some foreign power. They were no better off than their ancestors who lived in Egypt. They needed salvation. They were in desperate need of rescue. But in response to God's gracious offer of salvation, made possible through the death and

resurrection of His own Son, the people of Israel were still sarcastically asking, “Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?”

## The Returned Redeemer

Acts 7:30-43

<sup>30</sup> “Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in a bush. <sup>31</sup> When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look, there came the voice of the Lord: <sup>32</sup> ‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob.’ And Moses trembled and did not dare to look. <sup>33</sup> Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. <sup>34</sup> I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt.’

<sup>35</sup> “This Moses, whom they rejected, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’—this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush. <sup>36</sup> This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in Egypt and at the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. <sup>37</sup> This is the Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.’ <sup>38</sup> This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us. <sup>39</sup> Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, <sup>40</sup> saying to Aaron, ‘Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ <sup>41</sup> And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. <sup>42</sup> But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets:

“‘Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices,  
during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?  
<sup>43</sup> You took up the tent of Moloch  
and the star of your god Rephan,  
the images that you made to worship;  
and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.’” – Acts 7:30-43 ESV

Forty years after having fled from Egypt to Midian, Moses received a visit from God. For four long decades he had been a recluse, living in relative isolation, tending sheep and trying to forget that initial stirring in his heart to redeem his people from their slavery in Egypt. But when his first attempt to rally to the cause of the Israelites had failed, he had fled. His own people had rejected him, shouting, “Who made you a ruler and judge over us?” (Acts 7:27 NLT). Now it was time for him to return. But he would be doing things God’s way. He would be acting on behalf of God, speaking His words, and performing signs and wonders in His power. God had a commission and a mission for Moses.

*“I have certainly seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groans and have come down to rescue them. Now go, for I am sending you back to Egypt.”* – Acts 7:34 NLT

Moses had been rejected by the people, but “this man God sent as both ruler and redeemer” (Acts 7:35 ESV). His initial efforts to rescue them had been rebuffed and his motives questioned. His own people refused to see him for who he was: God’s redeemer. But the second time, when he showed up, he would have God’s Good Housekeeping seal of approval and “by means of many wonders and miraculous signs, he led them out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and through the wilderness for forty years” (Acts 7:36 NLT).

The crowd to whom Stephen spoke revered Moses. They saw him as their deliverer and lawgiver. They held him in very high esteem. And the whole reason Stephen was having to give this speech was because he had been falsely accused of speaking against Moses and the law, teaching that the customs they held near and dear were no longer valid.

*“This man is always speaking against the holy Temple and against the law of Moses. We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the Temple and change the customs Moses handed down to us.” – Acts 6:13-14 NLT*

But Stephen clearly states his respect for Moses. He had no intention of undermining his role as Israel’s deliverer and lawgiver. But he did want to point out that Moses had done far more than just give the people the law. He had prophesied that another prophet would come. “God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers” (Acts 7:37 ESV). Moses had known that he was not the end-all. He had been used by God to deliver the people out of bondage, but there was another who would come after him. Peter had picked up on this very same topic in his address to the crowd in Solomon’s Portico.

*<sup>17</sup> “Friends, I realize that what you and your leaders did to Jesus was done in ignorance. <sup>18</sup> But God was fulfilling what all the prophets had foretold about the Messiah—that he must suffer these things. <sup>19</sup> Now repent of your sins and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped away. <sup>20</sup> Then times of refreshment will come from the presence of the Lord, and he will again send you Jesus, your appointed Messiah. <sup>21</sup> For he must remain in heaven until the time for the final restoration of all things, as God promised long ago through his holy prophets. <sup>22</sup> Moses said, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from among your own people. Listen carefully to everything he tells you.’ <sup>23</sup> Then Moses said, ‘Anyone who will not listen to that Prophet will be completely cut off from God’s people.’” – Acts 3:17-23 NLT*

Moses and the law were never intended to be the end-all. Moses was a deliverer, but not the deliver. The law was given by God but was never intended to be the means by which people gain acceptance from God. The apostle Paul tells us quite plainly why the law was given.

*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. – Galatians 3:19 NLT*

*<sup>20</sup> God's law was given so that all people could see how sinful they were. But as people sinned more and more, God's wonderful grace became more abundant. <sup>21</sup> So just as sin ruled over all people and brought them to death, now God's wonderful grace rules instead, giving us right standing with God and resulting in eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. – Romans 5:20-21 NLT*

And despite the high value the people of Israel placed in the law, they had never managed to keep it. In fact, while Moses had been on the mountain top receiving the law from God, the people of Israel had been busy coercing Aaron to make them an idol. Moses was up on Mount Sinai receiving “living oracles” from God, and they were worshiping a false god. Stephen flatly states, “Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts, they turned to Egypt” (Acts 7:39 ESV). While the people of Israel revered Moses, Stephen reminded them that their ancestors had actually turned against him. In essence, they had not only rejected Moses, but God Himself. They had turned back to worshiping one of the gods they had served in Egypt.

For forty long years, the people of Israel would be led by God through the wilderness. He would cloth them, feed them, and guide them. He would protect them from their enemies and bless them with His presence. But all the while they would “serve the stars of heaven as their gods” (Acts 7:42 NLT). And God would indict them for their unfaithfulness during those years.

*<sup>42</sup> “Was it to me you were bringing sacrifices and offerings during those forty years in the wilderness, Israel?*

*<sup>43</sup> No, you carried your pagan gods—  
the shrine of Molech,  
the star of your god Rephan,  
and the images you made to worship them.  
So I will send you into exile  
as far away as Babylon.” – Acts 7:42-43 NLT*

Try to imagine how the high priest and the members of the Jewish council are receiving these words from Stephen. He is recounting some of the less-than-flattering days of their history. He is reminding them of their long track record of unfaithfulness to Moses and, ultimately, to God. They had a long-standing tradition of disobedience. And Stephen would not let them forget that “our ancestors refused to listen to Moses. They rejected him and wanted to return to Egypt” (Acts 7:39 NLT).

What's his point? What is it that Stephen is attempting to do? He is simply reminding them that God had sent them a redeemer and rescuer before, and they had rejected him. And now, God had sent them another Redeemer, the very one Moses had prophesied about, and they had rejected Him as well. Not only that, they had put Him to death. And it seems that the high priest and the members of the Sanhedrin had made idols out of the law and the Temple, worshiping them rather than the One whom God had sent to redeem them. They idolized the city of Jerusalem, the glory of the Temple and the “living oracles” given to them by Moses. But

they refused to recognize and receive the Savior and Redeemer sent to them from God. Jesus addressed this very issue in a discussion He had with some Pharisees who had accused His disciples of breaking the Sabbath law.

*<sup>3</sup> Jesus said to them, "Haven't you read in the Scriptures what David did when he and his companions were hungry? <sup>4</sup> He went into the house of God, and he and his companions broke the law by eating the sacred loaves of bread that only the priests are allowed to eat. <sup>5</sup> And haven't you read in the law of Moses that the priests on duty in the Temple may work on the Sabbath? <sup>6</sup> I tell you, **there is one here who is even greater than the Temple!** <sup>7</sup> But you would not have condemned my innocent disciples if you knew the meaning of this Scripture: 'I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices.' <sup>8</sup> For the Son of Man is Lord, even over the Sabbath!" – Matthew 12:3-8 NLT*

Jesus was greater than the Temple. He was more important than Moses or the law. In fact, He was the fulfillment of the law, having kept it to perfection and satisfied the just demands of God. And what Stephen seems to be pointing out is that, while the Jews had rejected Jesus, He had returned in the form of His Spirit-filled disciples, offering His own people yet another chance to receive salvation and freedom from slavery to sin. But they would have to recognize Him as the returned Redeemer and receive Him as their long-awaited Messiah.

## The Righteous One

Acts 7:44-53

<sup>44</sup> *“Our fathers had the tent of witness in the wilderness, just as he who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. <sup>45</sup> Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David, <sup>46</sup> who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. <sup>47</sup> But it was Solomon who built a house for him. <sup>48</sup> Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says,*

<sup>49</sup> *“Heaven is my throne,  
and the earth is my footstool.  
What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord,  
or what is the place of my rest?  
<sup>50</sup> Did not my hand make all these things?”*

<sup>51</sup> *“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. <sup>52</sup> Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, <sup>53</sup> you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”*  
– Acts 7:44-53 ESV

Having been accused of blasphemy against Moses and God, Stephen refuted those charges by showing his reverence for both. At the same time, he revealed that it was his Jewish brothers who failed to truly honor Moses. In fact, he gave proof that they, like their ancestors, really rejected Moses, refusing to listen to his prophecy regarding the coming Messiah. Not only that, they were guilty of idolatry, just like their ancient ancestors. In fact, they had made idols out of the land of Judah, the city of Jerusalem and the Temple of God. Which is the next topic in Stephen’s message. He had been accused of speaking against the Temple and of having taught that the resurrected Jesus was going to tear it down. These were false accusations, but that didn’t keep Stephen from using them to teach those in his audience an important object lesson regarding the Temple.

He starts out discussing the Tabernacle, the temporary, portable structure that God had commanded Moses to build during Israel’s years in the wilderness. This structure had been of God’s design and had a definitive, God-ordained purpose. The book of Exodus records for us how the Tabernacle was to be used.

<sup>34</sup> *Then the cloud covered the Tabernacle, and the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle.  
<sup>35</sup> Moses could no longer enter the Tabernacle because the cloud had settled down over it, and the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle.*

*<sup>36</sup> Now whenever the cloud lifted from the Tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out on their journey, following it. <sup>37</sup> But if the cloud did not rise, they remained where they were until it lifted. <sup>38</sup> The cloud of the Lord hovered over the Tabernacle during the day, and at night fire glowed inside the cloud so the whole family of Israel could see it. This continued throughout all their journeys. – Exodus 40:34-38 NLT*

It was designed to function during their journey from Egypt to the promised land. Inside, in the Holy of Holies, there was contained the Ark of the Covenant, on top of which was the Mercy Seat, the place of atonement. It was over that spot that the cloud hovered that signified God's presence. Inside the Ark of the Covenant were the tablets of stone that contained the testimony of God, the Ten Commandments, given to Moses on Mount Sinai. God's law and God's presence went before the people of Israel, guiding them morally and literally. Whenever the cloud of God's presence moved out of the Holy of Holies, the people were to pack up the Tabernacle and follow wherever He led, taking the law with them as they went.

And Stephen points out that this had been the pattern all the way up until the people arrived in the land promised to Abraham by God. At that point, the Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant, had ended up in Shiloh. The book of Joshua records: "Now that the land was under Israelite control, the entire community of Israel gathered at Shiloh and set up the Tabernacle" (Joshua 18:1 NLT). Evidently, the Ark and the Tabernacle remained in Shiloh until the day that Israel determined to treat the Ark like a good luck charm and take it into battle against the Philistines. It was captured and, seven months later, returned. But it did not go back to Shiloh. Instead, it ended up in a place called Kiriath-jearim.

*<sup>1</sup> So the men of Kiriath-jearim came to get the Ark of the Lord. They took it to the hillside home of Abinadab and ordained Eleazar, his son, to be in charge of it. <sup>2</sup> The Ark remained in Kiriath-jearim for a long time—twenty years in all. During that time all Israel mourned because it seemed the Lord had abandoned them. – 1 Samuel 7:1-2 NLT*

It seems that the people of Israel had a somewhat spotty relationship with the Tabernacle and the Ark. They had become little more than symbols of God's power and presence. And God would use their loss of respect for the Tabernacle and the Ark to remind their future descendants that He takes obedience to His will quite seriously. Consider these sobering words, spoken by God to His prophet, Jeremiah, and intended for the people of Israel who had saw the Temple as the modern-day version of the Tabernacle.

*<sup>1</sup> The Lord gave another message to Jeremiah. He said, <sup>2</sup> "Go to the entrance of the Lord's Temple, and give this message to the people: 'O Judah, listen to this message from the Lord! Listen to it, all of you who worship here!' <sup>3</sup> This is what the Lord of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, says:*

*"Even now, if you quit your evil ways, I will let you stay in your own land. <sup>4</sup> But don't be fooled by those who promise you safety simply because the Lord's Temple is here. They chant, 'The Lord's Temple is here! The Lord's Temple is here!'" <sup>5</sup> But I will be merciful only*

*if you stop your evil thoughts and deeds and start treating each other with justice; <sup>6</sup> only if you stop exploiting foreigners, orphans, and widows; only if you stop your murdering; and only if you stop harming yourselves by worshiping idols. <sup>7</sup> Then I will let you stay in this land that I gave to your ancestors to keep forever.*

*<sup>8</sup> “Don’t be fooled into thinking that you will never suffer because the Temple is here. It’s a lie! <sup>9</sup> Do you really think you can steal, murder, commit adultery, lie, and burn incense to Baal and all those other new gods of yours, <sup>10</sup> and then come here and stand before me in my Temple and chant, “We are safe!”—only to go right back to all those evils again?” – Jeremiah 7:1-10 NLT*

God went on to tell Jeremiah to give the following message to the people:

*“Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it because of the evil of my people Israel.” – Jeremiah 7:12 NLT*

Shiloh, the former home to God’s Tabernacle, lay in ruins when God spoke these words to Jeremiah. The town’s claim to fame of having once held the Tabernacle of God, was not enough to stop its destruction for its unfaithfulness. And God wants the people of Israel to know that Jerusalem would not fair any better, just because it contained the Temple.

The fact was, the Temple had been David’s idea, not God’s. Which is the point that Stephen seems to be making. It was David who had proposed the idea of building God a great house in which to dwell. But God had responded to David’s grand scheme with the following words:

*<sup>5</sup> “Go and tell my servant David, ‘Thus says the Lord: Would you build me a house to dwell in? <sup>6</sup> I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent for my dwelling. <sup>7</sup> In all places where I have moved with all the people of Israel, did I speak a word with any of the judges of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?”’” – 2 Samuel 7:5-6 NLT*

God would eventually allow David’s son, Solomon, to build the Temple, which Stephen points out. But Stephen showed that it was not a house that God desired, but obedient people. He quotes from the prophet Isaiah to make his point.

*<sup>1</sup> This is what the Lord says:*

*“Heaven is my throne,  
and the earth is my footstool.  
Could you build me a temple as good as that?  
Could you build me such a resting place?*

*<sup>2</sup> My hands have made both heaven and earth;*

*they and everything in them are mine.  
I, the Lord, have spoken!*

*"I will bless those who have humble and contrite hearts,  
who tremble at my word." – Isaiah 66:1-12 NLT*

God desired obedience to His word, not a place in which to dwell. He didn't need a house. He needed His people to humbly submit to His will. And, as Stephen is attempting to point out, God's will was that they submit to and accept Jesus as their Messiah and Savior. God had chosen to dwell among them in the form of His own Son. Jesus, the Son of God, had become God incarnate, God in human flesh. And as the apostle John pointed out in his gospel, "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). The glory of God no longer hovered over the Ark inside the Temple. And with Jesus' departure, the glory of God had come to rest on those who had placed their faith in Jesus as their Savior. God dwells within those who have accepted His Son as the sacrifice for their sin debt. He indwells them in the form of His Holy Spirit. And the author of Hebrews provides us with some exciting news.

*<sup>11</sup> And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. <sup>12</sup> But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, <sup>13</sup> waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. <sup>14</sup> For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.*

*<sup>15</sup> And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying,*

*<sup>16</sup> "This is the covenant that I will make with them  
after those days, declares the Lord:  
I will put my laws on their hearts,  
and write them on their minds,"*

*<sup>17</sup> then he adds,*

*"I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more." – Hebrews 10-11-17 NLT*

God now writes His law on the hearts of men, not on tablets of stone. He resides in the hearts of men, not buildings of brick and mortar. And yet, that was the very thing the people in Stephen's audience refused to accept. So, he blasts them for their stubborn refusal to recognize the hand of God working in their midst. He exposes them as stubborn and stiff-necked, a people who "always resist the Holy Spirit" (Acts 7:51 ESV), just as their ancestors had. Even the Old Testament prophets, who had announced the coming of the Righteous One, had been killed by the people of Israel. And Stephen accuses the high priest and members of the Sanhedrin of having betrayed and murdered Jesus. Just as their ancestors had received the law and had

refused to keep it, they had received the Messiah and had refused to accept Him. The glory of God had appeared right in their midst, and they had ignored Him. Now, the glory of God had shown up in the form of the Holy Spirit, accompanied by signs and wonders, and they refused to believe it. It does not appear that Stephen was attempting to change their minds. He was not trying to convince them to accept Jesus as their Savior. He already knew that their minds were made up and their rejection of Him was permanent and irreversible. And their reaction to Stephen's words will prove him right.



## A People of Faith

Acts 7:54-8:3

<sup>54</sup> Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. <sup>55</sup> But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup> And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." <sup>57</sup> But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. <sup>58</sup> Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. <sup>59</sup> And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." <sup>60</sup> And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

<sup>1</sup> And Saul approved of his execution.

And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. <sup>2</sup> Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. <sup>3</sup> But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. – Acts 7:44-8:3 ESV

Stephen had called out the high priest and the Sanhedrin. These powerful and influential religious leaders of the Jews were the guilty culprits, not him. They were supposed to be the spiritual shepherds of Israel, but Stephen had exposed them for what they were: stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, who always resist the Holy Spirit. They were just like their ancestors, whose rebellion against God Stephen had just outlined for them in great detail. These men were supposed to be man of faith, like Abraham, Joseph, Moses and David. They should have expected the unexpected from God. Of all people, they should have known what the Scriptures said and how God had repeatedly told of new things to come. The author of Hebrews provides further proof that Abraham, Joseph, Moses and David were men of faith.

<sup>8</sup> By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. <sup>9</sup> By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. <sup>10</sup> For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. – Hebrews 11:8-10 ESV

Abraham, whose only possession in the land of Canaan was the tomb in which he buried his wife, believed God and kept waiting for the promise of God to be fulfilled.

<sup>22</sup> By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones. – Hebrews 11:22 ESV

Joseph, who had been sold into slavery by his own brothers, kept faithfully trusting in God, eventually being appointed the second-highest ranking official in the land of Egypt. But he was so convinced of God's promise concerning the promised land, that he made his brothers swear to return his bones there after his death.

*<sup>24</sup> By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, <sup>25</sup> choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. <sup>26</sup> He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. – Hebrews 11:24-26 ESV*

Moses gave up the privileges that came with being the adopted son of Pharaoh, instead risking it all in order to faithfully serve God. He obeyed God, leading the people of Israel out of Egypt and all the way to the land of promise. And then the author of Hebrews sums up his recounting of those patriarchs who exhibited faith in their God.

*<sup>32</sup> And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— <sup>33</sup> who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, <sup>34</sup> quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. – Hebrews 11:32-34 ESV*

All of these individuals led lives of faith. They placed their trust in God, never knowing quite how things were going to turn out but leaving the outcome up to God. But the men to whom Stephen had just delivered his message were men of little faith. They no longer expected God to do great things. They were content with the Mosaic Law, the Temple and their own status as spiritual leaders of Israel. It didn't seem to bother them that they were under oppressive Roman rule and that the spiritual climate within Israel was at an all-time low. Stephen had clearly pointed out that they were just like their ancestors, who had rejected the leadership of Moses and the prophetic warnings of the prophets. The high priest and the Sanhedrin had rejected the Righteous One of God and were now rejecting His Spirit-filled apostles. They wanted nothing to do with the gospel. They rejected the words of Peter, John, and Stephen, refusing to believe that Jesus was the Messiah and had been resurrected from the grave. In fact, it is when Stephen claims to see a vision of the resurrected Lord that these men lose it.

*<sup>55</sup> But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed steadily into heaven and saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honor at God's right hand. <sup>56</sup> And he told them, "Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God's right hand!" – Acts 7:55-56 NLT*

That was all it took. Stephen's Spirit-inspired vision of the risen Lord left the Jewish religious leaders seeing red. They immediately assaulted Stephen, dragging him outside the city, where they stoned him to death. And in doing so, they revealed that their faith was in something other than God. They worshiped the status quo. They had made idols out of the Mosaic Law and the Temple. They were not interested in what God was doing in their midst, but only in

what God had done in the past. These men had no expectation that God would do great things in their midst. Their faith was in what they could see and touch, including their own status as religious leaders and the bricks and mortar of the Temple itself. They took comfort in the law, even though they failed to keep it. They sought salvation through their own self-effort and saw no need for a Savior. In their minds, they were already righteous before God because they were the chosen people of God, the keepers of the law of God, and the proud occupants of the Temple of God.

So, like their ancestors before them, they killed the messenger of God. And in doing so, they refused the message God had proclaimed through him. And this tragic event brought a dramatic change to the atmosphere within Jerusalem. No longer would the city be a safe and inviting environment for the followers of Jesus. Luke points out that “there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem” (Acts 8:1 ESV). And he drops the name of a man who would play a vital role in both the church’s persecution and the gospel’s proclamation: Saul. He is only given a mention in these verses, but in a relatively short period of time, Saul would become a key player in the ongoing drama surrounding the spread of the good news of Jesus Christ.

There are a number of things presaged in these verses. First of all, the future role of Saul as both a persecutor of the church and as its poster-boy for conversion stories. His presence at Stephen’s stoning and his approval of his death, provide us with a glimpse into what was to come. God was at work. He was moving behind the scenes in ways that even the apostles could not have foreseen. Little did they know that the escalating tension between the Jewish religious leaders and the church was going to have a positive impact on the spread of the gospel. We must always recall what Jesus had said to His disciples just prior to His ascension. “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8 ESV). Yet, up until this point in Luke’s account of the church’s growth and spread, the gospel had yet to make it outside the city walls of Jerusalem. But what does he say happened as a result of Stephen’s death and the subsequent persecution of the church? “...and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria” (Acts 8:1 ESV). The new believers were forced to flee for their lives, vacating the confines of Jerusalem and heading out into the surrounding regions, even as far as Samaria. God was using what appeared to be a tragic event to accomplish His divine will for the church. What the people of God had been unwilling or unready to do, He made happen. He used the persecution by the religious leaders to force His own people to do what Jesus had commanded them to do. And this new era in the life of the church was going to take faith. No longer would they be able to remain in the close community they had established and enjoyed in Jerusalem. Unlike the Jews, God was not satisfied with the status quo. The gospel was meant to be spread. The community of faith was meant to be shared. The good news of Jesus Christ was intended for any and all who would hear it and accept it, regardless of race or creed.

Saul, who would later become known to us as Paul, would one day pick up the mantle of Stephen and take the good news to the Gentiles. It was he who wrote, “For I am not ashamed

of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes—the Jew first and also the Gentile” (Romans 1:16 NLT). The man who held the coats of those who stoned Stephen and approved of their actions would one day face stoning himself for preaching the gospel boldly and without apology. He would become a man of great faith, who willingly suffered for the sake of Christ, because he had placed his hope in the future promises of Christ. Which is why he could say, “For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10 ESV).

Stephen, a man of great faith, died at the hands of men of little faith. But the God in whom Stephen had placed his faith was not done. His church, while facing persecution, was far from finished. It would continue to grow. The Spirit would continue to move. Men and women would continue to place their faith in a faithful God who was doing new and exciting things in their midst. And while Saul was busy ravaging the church, our faithful God had plans for Saul that would radically revolutionize his life and forever alter the trajectory of the gospel.

## Seed Scattered

Acts 8:4-13

<sup>4</sup> Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. <sup>5</sup> Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. <sup>6</sup> And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. <sup>7</sup> For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. <sup>8</sup> So there was much joy in that city.

<sup>9</sup> But there was a man named Simon, who had previously practiced magic in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. <sup>10</sup> They all paid attention to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, "This man is the power of God that is called Great." <sup>11</sup> And they paid attention to him because for a long time he had amazed them with his magic. <sup>12</sup> But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. <sup>13</sup> Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed. – Acts 8:4-13 ESV

Immediately following the stoning of Stephen, an intense persecution of the church in Jerusalem had begun. It was as if Stephen's execution was the first step by the Sanhedrin in a much more robust and radical plan for dealing with this troublesome new sect they had labeled "the way". From the moment Stephen was buried and eulogized by devout and faithful friends, the danger facing the church increased rapidly and took on the tone of an official effort on the part of the Jewish leadership to eliminate this heretical group once and for all. Luke reintroduces Saul, the young man who had held the coats of those who had stoned Stephen. But this time, he is presented as an active force in the extermination program instituted by the high priest and the Jewish council. Later on, in this same book, Luke records Saul's own words concerning his work on behalf of the Sanhedrin.

<sup>3</sup> "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. <sup>4</sup> I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, <sup>5</sup> as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished." – Acts 22:3-5 ESV

Saul, who happened to be a Pharisee, thought he had been doing God a favor by arresting and imprisoning Christians. They had fully approved of, and probably sanctioned, his efforts in Jerusalem, and had even given him letters of recommendation to take with him to Damascus so he could catch up with the rapidly spreading influence of "the way". Saul would make it to Damascus, but as a changed man, an event Luke will soon recount. And when Saul arrived in Damascus, the followers of Christ there, reluctant to believe that any change had taken place in

Saul's life, said, "Isn't this the same man who caused such devastation among Jesus' followers in Jerusalem? And didn't he come here to arrest them and take them in chains to the leading priests?" (Acts 9:21 NLT).

Yet, with all this intense animosity aimed at the church of Jesus Christ, there were those who had faithfully picked up the mantle of Stephen and had chosen to follow the rapidly dispersing church, taking the gospel with them. And Luke makes it clear that when the church began to scatter, the original apostles of Jesus had chosen to remain in Jerusalem. So, God raised up others. And one of them was Philip, who happened to be one of the seven Hellenistic Jews, along with Stephen, who had been appointed by the apostles to care for the widows in the church in Jerusalem. Like Stephen, Philip was a man "of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (Acts 6:3 ESV). And like Stephen, Philip saw that his job as a follower of Christ was going to encompass far more than dispersing food to needy widows within the congregation. It's not that this was unimportant, but that there was an even greater need to continue the spread of the gospel. And Philip, as a Greek-speaking Jew, had a natural predisposition and inclination to share the gospel with those who were non-Jews. So, while the apostles remained in Jerusalem, Philip headed for Samaria, where he proclaimed Christ to them. With his arrival in Samaria, the call of Jesus for His disciples to "be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth", was beginning to be fulfilled.

The word that is translated as "scattered" in verse 4 is the Greek word, *diaspeirō*, and it comes from another Greek word, *speirō*, which refers to sowing seed. With the persecution of the church, the seed of the good news of Jesus Christ was being scattered or spread throughout Judea, Samaria and ultimately, as we will soon see, to the ends of the earth. But Philip headed for Samaria. Samaria was a region located north of Jerusalem, and Luke tells us that Philip went to "the city of Samaria", most likely referring to a prominent city within the region, because there is no record of a city bearing that name. It could be that Philip went to Sychar, the very same Samaritan city Jesus had visited with His disciples, and where He had had His encounter with the woman at the well. He had told her, "whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14 ESV). John goes on to record the rest of the conversation Jesus had with this woman.

*<sup>25</sup> The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." <sup>26</sup> Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he." – John 4:25-26 ESV*

She revealed an understanding and awareness of the Messiah, because the Samaritans were considered half-Jews. They were the result of Jews who had intermarried with Gentiles sent to live in the land after the Assyrians had defeated the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. The rest of the Jews considered them as half-breeds religiously and ethnically. While the Samaritans continued to worship Yahweh, they did so from their own temple, located on Mount Gerizim in Samaria. There was no love affair between the Jews and the Samaritans. In fact, in his gospel, Luke records another encounter Jesus had with Samaritans. This time, Jesus was on His way to

Jerusalem and had sent His disciples ahead to a Samaritan city to prepare for His arrival. But the city's residents refused to welcome Jesus because they understood His final destination was Jerusalem. So, James and John, being good Jews and faithful disciples of Jesus, had offered to take care of this ungrateful and disrespectful village of Samaritan half-breeds, asking, "Lord, should we call down fire from heaven to burn them up?" (Luke 9:54 NLT). But Luke records that Jesus, rather than accepting their offer, rebuked them.

Whether Philip went to Sychar or some other city in Samaria, we don't know. But we do know that there was openness to the gospel among the people of Samaria, because John tells us that Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well had significant ramifications.

*<sup>39</sup> Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all that I ever did."<sup>40</sup> So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. <sup>41</sup> And many more believed because of his word. <sup>42</sup> They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world." – John 4:39-42 ESV*

Luke records that when Philip arrived in Samaria, he preached Christ, the Messiah. He performed signs, including casting out unclean spirits and healing the paralyzed and lame. And "there was much joy in that city" (Acts 8:8 ESV). God, in His sovereign will, was using this Hellenistic, Greek-speaking Jew to preach the good news of Jesus Christ to despised and rejected Samaritans. And without realizing it, the Sanhedrin, who would have had nothing but disdain for Samaritans, had actually played a part in their salvation by instigating the persecution of the church and the scattering of the seed of the gospel. God works in mysterious ways.

And Luke records another individual whose life was changed as a result of Philip's efforts. He was a magician or, better yet, a sorcerer named Simon. This man was not a magician as we would think of. He did not practice sleight of hand or perform card tricks. He was a practitioner of the occult, performing miraculous signs, but with the help of demons, not God. And he had established a cult-following there in Samaria, with the people saying of him, "This man is the power of God that is called Great" (Acts 8:10 ESV). He had convinced the people of Samaria that His power was of God, and it could be that some believed him to be the Messiah. But with Philip's arrival in town, Simon suddenly found himself with competition. But he noticed that there was something very different about Philip and his efforts among the people. Philip wasn't trying to amass a following or establish a name for himself. Luke records, "when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women" (Acts 8:12 ESV). Lives were being changed. This wasn't about impressing people with inexplicable displays of power. It was about life change. It was about eternal life and redemption. Simon was amazed at what he saw. And Luke records that he, too, believed and was baptized. But as we will see, it will become clear that Simon was in search of more than salvation. He was after power. He saw what Philip offered as a means to an

end. And when he realizes that the Holy Spirit seems to be the key to Philip's amazing powers and abilities, he will try to purchase this power for himself.

But we'll hold off on that discussion until tomorrow. The real point in these verses is that the enemy was attempting to defeat the cause of Christ but was actually causing it to spread and grow. The dispersion of the church was one of the best things that could have happened. And if you think about it, it all began with a disagreement that had arisen in the church regarding widows whose needs were being overlooked. It was because of this need that seven men were chosen. One of them was Stephen. He would end up preaching a powerful message that would result in his own martyrdom. His martyrdom would lead to intensified persecution against the church by the Jewish leadership. That persecution would cause the church to scatter. That scattering of the church would cause the gospel seed to be sown in places it had never been before. And lives would be changed – forever.

## God's Sovereignty Displayed Through Diversity and Unity

Acts 8:14-25

*<sup>14</sup> Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, <sup>15</sup> who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, <sup>16</sup> for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. <sup>17</sup> Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. <sup>18</sup> Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, <sup>19</sup> saying, "Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." <sup>20</sup> But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! <sup>21</sup> You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. <sup>22</sup> Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. <sup>23</sup> For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity." <sup>24</sup> And Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me."*

*<sup>25</sup> Now when they had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans. – Acts 8:14-25 ESV*

Philip had taken the gospel to a city in the region of Samaria, and many of the residents had believed his message about Jesus Christ as God's appointed Messiah and Savior. When news of this exciting and somewhat unexpected development reached the 12 apostles back in Jerusalem, they sent Peter and John to check it out and to pray over the new converts so that they might receive the Holy Spirit. Now, we must take note of the differences between what took place here and what had happened on the day of Pentecost. On this occasion, the Samaritans who had come to believe in Jesus as their Messiah had not immediately received the filling of the Holy Spirit. Instead, Luke points out that "they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 8:16 ESV). In chapter two, Luke records the coming of the Holy Spirit, and he reveals that the Spirit immediately filled all those in the upper room. They were already believers in Jesus, but on that occasion, all at once, they received the indwelling presence of the Spirit. Then Luke notes that Peter preached to those in the crowd who had gathered because of the disciples speaking in foreign languages, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself" (Acts 2:38-39 ESV).

Those who believed, and there had been about 3,000 of them that day, received the Holy Spirit at the point they expressed their faith in Jesus. It had been immediate. But on this occasion, when Philip had shared the good news with the Samaritans, those who believed in Jesus *did not* immediately receive the Spirit. Why not? He was treating this situation somewhat differently to validate that what was happening was according to His will and authority. While the apostles had chosen Philip to serve the Hellenistic Jewish widows, he had not been appointed an

apostle. He was not one of the original 12 disciples of Jesus. And as Luke has pointed out, there had already been someone performing miraculous acts in Samaria and causing the people to call him, “the Great One—the Power of God” (Acts 8:11 ESV). It seems that God was out to prove that what had happened among the people of Samaria by the hands of Philip was indeed His doing and carried His seal of approval. So, Peter and John arrived, laid hands on those who had believed and been baptized, and “they received the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8:17 ESV).

As we noted in an earlier blog post, it is essential that we not treat the content of the book of Acts as prescriptive. In other words, we cannot afford to treat these isolated events as required or normative practices for the church today. Some have read this passage and concluded that it teaches that the laying on of hands is required before the indwelling of the Holy Spirit can take place. Some believe it prescribes and teaches the idea of a second blessing, accompanied by the filling of the Spirit and signified by miraculous signs, such as speaking in tongues. But as we will see as we continue our study of the book of Acts, what is described as taking place in Samaria was not intended to be viewed as normal or necessary in all future circumstances. It was a unique situation requiring divine approval. The fact that Peter showed up and prayed over these people ties back to the words Jesus spoke to him long before He died and was resurrected. Peter had just confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus responded that this recognition on Peter’s part had been given to him by God, and as a result, Jesus said to Peter:

*<sup>18</sup> And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. <sup>19</sup> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” – Matthew 16:18-19 ESV*

Jesus assigned Peter a certain degree of authority among the disciples. He was given the “keys of the kingdom of heaven” and provided with divine authority to bind and loose. Much of what Jesus said to Peter that day would make no sense until the Holy Spirit came. And we see on this occasion, upon Peter’s arrival in Samaria, that he had the God-given power to bestow upon the new Samaritan believers the power of the Spirit. Peter “opened” the doors to the Samaritans, officially sanctioning their expression of belief in Jesus with the indwelling presence of the Spirit. And this event must have been accompanied by some form of external sign, because it became apparent to those looking on that something extraordinary had happened. Luke makes it clear that something visible happened because he notes, “Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money” (Acts 8:18 ESV). Simon, the magician, who had earlier expressed his faith in Jesus and been baptized, noted that something powerful had happened when Peter and John prayed, and the people received the Spirit. Notice that he only *witnessed* the filling of the Spirit and did not seem to *experience* it himself. He was a spectator, which raises questions about the validity of his salvation experience. The fact that he did not receive the Spirit of God provides proof that his declaration of faith had been a sham. In fact, his whole interest in Jesus and all that Philip had said about Him, had to do with power and personal gain, which is what prompted him to offer Peter and John money so that he could have what they had: The power to bestow the Spirit on

others. He most likely saw this as an incredible money-making opportunity and was willing to purchase a Holy Spirit-bestowing franchise from the apostles. But Peter exposes his self-centered motivation, declaring, “Your heart is not right before God” (Acts 8:21 ESV). Then he calls on Simon to repent, describing him as “full of bitter jealousy” and “held captive by sin” (Acts 8:23 NLT).

But the real point behind the arrival of Peter and John and their prayer over the Samaritan believers was unity. The gospel was beginning to spread, and the first place it had shown up outside the walls of Jerusalem had been Samaria, home of those whom the Jews held in great contempt: The Samaritans. There was great animosity between these two people groups. But there was also great affinity, because the Samaritans shared a common heritage and lineage with the Jews in Jerusalem. They were descendants of the same Jewish ancestors, but the Samaritans had intermarried with Gentiles, marking them as impure to the Jews. They were considered half-breeds and religious heretics, even though they worshiped the same God and believed in the coming of the Messiah. It was important that these new believers be received as part of the family of God and be treated as equals. This had been one of Jesus’ primary prayer requests that night in the garden as He spoke with His Father just hours before His own death on the cross.

*<sup>20</sup> “I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. <sup>21</sup> 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.*

*<sup>22</sup> “I have given them the glory you gave me, so they may be one as we are one. <sup>23</sup> I am in them and you are in me. May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me. – John 17:20-23 NLT*

Jesus had prayed for unity. He wanted them to be one, just as He and the Father are one. And the kind of unity He asked the Father to bestow upon His future disciples was to be such that the world would sit up and take notice. It would provide the world with living proof that He had truly been the Son of God and that His message of life-transformation was real. And what better way to prove to the world of 1st-Century Judea that this message regarding the resurrection of Jesus and the good news of salvation was real than watching Jews and Samaritans loving one and accepting one another as brothers and sisters. This was a miracle. It would have been unheard of and completely unexpected. No one would have seen this coming, not even the apostles or the Samaritans. And Peter and John had their eyes opened as well, seeing clearly, for the first time, that the gospel was open and available to any and all who would believe. And Luke reports that these two apostles returned to Jerusalem, “preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans” (Acts 8:25 ESV).

Something new was happening. The door was opening wide, and the message of the gospel was beginning to spread. And God, in His infinite wisdom, chose to start this exciting new phase

of the gospel's spread by bringing it to the Samaritans. And, as we will see, God was far from done.

## To the Ends of the Earth

Acts 8:26-40

<sup>26</sup> Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” This is a desert place. <sup>27</sup> And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship <sup>28</sup> and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. <sup>29</sup> And the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and join this chariot.” <sup>30</sup> So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” <sup>31</sup> And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. <sup>32</sup> Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this:

*“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter  
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent,  
so he opens not his mouth.*

<sup>33</sup> *In his humiliation justice was denied him.  
Who can describe his generation?  
For his life is taken away from the earth.”*

<sup>34</sup> And the eunuch said to Philip, “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” <sup>35</sup> Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. <sup>36</sup> And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?” <sup>38</sup> And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. <sup>39</sup> And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. <sup>40</sup> But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea. – Acts 8:26-40 ESV

This amazing first-hand account of Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch was most likely conveyed to Luke some 20 years after the fact, when he and Paul visited Caesarea and stayed in Philip's home. He records that occasion in Acts, chapter 21.

*“On the next day we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him.” – Acts 21:8 ESV*

You can easily see from the story of Philip’s mission trip to Samaria, how he got his nickname of “the evangelist”. And this account of his sharing of the gospel with the Ethiopian eunuch only solidifies that designation. He had a heart for the lost and a desire to take the message of salvation to those who found themselves outside the bounds of Judaism. He was a Hellenistic, Greek-speaking Jew, so he knew what it was like to be an outsider. And, like Stephen, he made the perfect choice to take the gospel to the Samaritans, who were considered half-breeds by

the Jews. And now, in this account, we see Philip being led by the Spirit to take the gospel one step further, providing “the evangelist” with a one-on-one witnessing opportunity with a full-fledged foreigner. But it’s interesting to note how God was slowly and methodically providing new opportunities to share the gospel. As half-Jews, the Samaritans were worshipers of Yahweh, so they were highly receptive to the message about the Messiah. And Luke records that the Ethiopian eunuch, though a foreigner, was also a follower of Yahweh, having just left Jerusalem where he had gone to worship. When Philip catches up with him, this high-placed official in the court of Queen Candace is reading from the scroll of Isaiah. And it just so happened that the passage he was reading contained a Messianic prophecy. What an obviously Spirit-inspired appointment. The Spirit had already prepared this man’s heart, and he was ready to hear what Philip had to share with him. It had all been preordained by God.

Everything about this story screams the sovereignty of God. That this man was a highly ranked Ethiopian official who just happened to be a worshiper of Yahweh should not be taken lightly. That he had made the long and arduous trip to Jerusalem to worship at this particular time should not be overlooked. Most likely, he had come during the celebrations of Passover and Pentecost, and his timing could not have been better. The fact that Luke designates this man as a eunuch is an essential point in the story as well. Now, the label “eunuch” does not necessarily mean he was a literal eunuch. This was often used as a title for a high-ranking official in a Near Eastern government. But if he were a literal eunuch who had undergone castration, Deuteronomy 23:1 clearly states that his condition would have been unwelcome in the Temple. “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the Lord.”

He would have been considered unclean and forbidden to worship and offer sacrifices in the Temple. And yet, this is the very man to whom the angel of the Lord led Philip. God was intentional in His directive to Philip. This man represented a unique blend of attributes that made him a particularly fascinating candidate for salvation. He was a foreigner. In fact, according to the ancient Greek historians, Ethiopia was considered the end of the earth. And that is precisely where Jesus had instructed the disciples to be His witnesses. But God had prearranged for this man to be predisposed to the message concerning the Messiah by making him a worshiper of Yahweh. God had a heart for the lost of all nations. He had a divine plan in place to include all people of every tribe, nation, and tongue in His family. And His intentions towards eunuchs were articulated long ago in the Book of Isaiah.

<sup>3</sup> *“Don’t let foreigners who commit themselves to the Lord say,  
‘The Lord will never let me be part of his people.’*

*And don’t let the eunuchs say,*

*‘I’m a dried-up tree with no children and no future.’*

<sup>4</sup> *For this is what the Lord says:*

*I will bless those eunuchs*

*who keep my Sabbath days holy*

*and who choose to do what pleases me*

*and commit their lives to me.*

*<sup>5</sup> I will give them—within the walls of my house—  
a memorial and a name  
far greater than sons and daughters could give.  
For the name I give them is an everlasting one.  
It will never disappear!” – Isaiah 56:3-5 NLT*

This man fit the bill. He was a Sabbath-keeper. He was a faithful follower of God. And now God was going to see that he heard the good news of Jesus Christ. While his status as a eunuch might keep him out of the Temple, it would *not* keep him out of the household of faith and the body of Christ.

The passage the man was reading was Isaiah 53:7-8, a prophetic announcement about the suffering Savior. He was at a loss as to who these verses were referring to, so he asked Philip for an explanation. And Luke records that “beginning with this same Scripture, Philip told him the Good News about Jesus” (Acts 8:35 NLT). Philip introduced this man to Jesus, the Messiah. He most likely told him about Jesus’ incarnation and earthly ministry. He brought him up to speed on Jesus’ trials and death, as well as His resurrection and ascension. And there is little doubt that Philip shared all the events that had happened since Pentecost and the arrival of the Spirit of God. The result was that this man believed and was baptized. It was common practice for Jews to baptize Gentile converts to Judaism. Still, because this man was a eunuch, baptism would have been withheld due to the Deuteronomy 23:1 passage cited earlier. That is most likely why the man asked Philip if there was anything that might prevent him from undergoing water baptism. Philip happily obliged, baptizing the man as soon as they found a body of water in which to do so.

Luke records that, after his salvation and baptism, this man went on his way rejoicing. He most likely returned home to Ethiopia, a changed man with a new message of salvation, which he probably shared with everyone he worked with, including Queen Candace. The gospel was reaching the ends of the earth, and it was God’s doing. He had made it happen. Philip had been nothing more than a willing and obedient servant, listening to the call of God and sharing the good news about Jesus. It was not Philip who led this man to Christ, but God. Philip was nothing more than a witness of the gospel. It was God who had prepared this man’s heart and prearranged the appointment along the highway where Philip was given the privilege of sharing the message of salvation with one whom God had called.

This man represents the very first Gentile convert to Christianity. And it just so happens that he was a foreigner and a eunuch. He was from a distant land, and like the Samaritans, his physical condition would have left him an outsider among the Jews. He would have been viewed as damaged goods and not entirely acceptable in their social and religious contexts. But he was more than welcome in God’s family. And he would become the first fruits of all those who would believe who were outsiders and outcasts. As Paul so aptly reminds us, we were once on the outside, just like this man.

*<sup>11</sup> Don't forget that you Gentiles used to be outsiders. You were called "uncircumcised heathens" by the Jews, who were proud of their circumcision, even though it affected only their bodies and not their hearts. <sup>12</sup> In those days you were living apart from Christ. You were excluded from citizenship among the people of Israel, and you did not know the covenant promises God had made to them. You lived in this world without God and without hope. <sup>13</sup> But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ.*  
– Ephesians 2:11-13 NLT

But we have been united with Christ Jesus. Not only that, as Peter reminds us, we have become part of a holy nation, a people for God's own possession.

*<sup>9</sup> But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. <sup>10</sup> Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.* – 1 Peter 2:9-10 ESV

God has seen to it that the good news about Jesus has reached the ends of the earth, and we are the beneficiaries of that divine plan. But He is not done yet. There are more who need to hear. There are others whose hearts He has prepared and who are waiting to listen to the message of salvation made possible through Jesus Christ. Are you His Philip for this age?

## Blinded by the Light

Acts 9:1-9

<sup>1</sup> But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest <sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup> Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. <sup>4</sup> And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" <sup>5</sup> And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. <sup>6</sup> But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." <sup>7</sup> The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. <sup>8</sup> Saul rose from the ground, and although his eyes were opened, he saw nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. <sup>9</sup> And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. – Acts 9:1-9 ESV

Luke first introduced us to this latest character back at the end of chapter seven, at the stoning of Stephen.

*His accusers took off their coats and laid them at the feet of a young man named Saul.*  
– Acts 7:58 NLT

And in the very next chapter, Luke made mention of the fact that, before Stephen's body had long been in the grave, Saul had begun his intensive persecution of the followers of Christ.

*But Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison.* – Acts 8:3 NLT

And if we fast-forward to chapter 21, Luke provides a detailed account of a speech that Saul gave to the crowd that had gathered after his arrest by the Roman authorities in Jerusalem. Saul provided a first-hand explanation of his role as a persecutor of the church of Jesus Christ.

*<sup>4</sup> "And I persecuted the followers of the Way, hounding some to death, arresting both men and women and throwing them in prison. <sup>5</sup> The high priest and the whole council of elders can testify that this is so. For I received letters from them to our Jewish brothers in Damascus, authorizing me to bring the followers of the Way from there to Jerusalem, in chains, to be punished."* – Acts 22:4-5 NLT

It is not clear whether Saul set out on his mission to rid the world of Christians on his own or whether the high priest and the Jewish council had commissioned him from the get-go. It is evident that at some point, he received orders and official paperwork from the high priest and the Sanhedrin, sanctioning his efforts as a self-proclaimed bounty hunter. Saul had taken his work seriously. He saw the followers of "the way" as nothing but religious radicals and troublemakers. As a devout Pharisee, he was determined to protect the religious way of life

that had been passed down for generations. He would not tolerate what he believed to be a threat to Judaism, and so he had made it his mission in life to eradicate any and all Christ-followers from the face of the earth. And that had been his objective when he had set out for the city of Damascus that fateful day.

But Saul's plans were about to run headlong into God's providential will for his life. He set out that day with one goal in mind: To arrest and imprison Christians. But God had a different outcome in store for him. Saul had plans to arrest Christ-followers, but God had a plan to arrest Saul's efforts and make *him* a follower of Christ. What is so fascinating about the story of Saul's conversion is how it so radically displays the sovereign work of God in this man's spiritual transformation. At no point in the story do we see Saul portrayed as a seeker or as showing any interest whatsoever in a relationship with Jesus Christ. Saul despised Jesus, and he hated all those who believed in His name or preached about His resurrection and claimed that this man could provide forgiveness for sins and everlasting life. Saul wanted nothing to do with Jesus. He wasn't seeking salvation. He wasn't interested in having his sins forgiven or his life made right with God. As a Pharisee, he would have seen himself as righteous before God because of his status as a Jew, his obedience to the Mosaic law, and his zeal for the ways of God. Luke provides us with a glimpse of Saul's mindset prior to his conversion.

*"I am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, and I was brought up and educated here in Jerusalem under Gamaliel. As his student, I was carefully trained in our Jewish laws and customs. I became very zealous to honor God in everything I did, just like all of you today."* – Acts 22:3 NLT

<sup>4</sup> *"As the Jewish leaders are well aware, I was given a thorough Jewish training from my earliest childhood among my own people and in Jerusalem. <sup>5</sup> If they would admit it, they know that I have been a member of the Pharisees, the strictest sect of our religion."* – Acts 26:4-5 NLT

<sup>9</sup> *"I used to believe that I ought to do everything I could to oppose the very name of Jesus the Nazarene. <sup>10</sup> Indeed, I did just that in Jerusalem. Authorized by the leading priests, I caused many believers there to be sent to prison. And I cast my vote against them when they were condemned to death. <sup>11</sup> Many times I had them punished in the synagogues to get them to curse Jesus. I was so violently opposed to them that I even chased them down in foreign cities."* – Acts 26:9-11 NLT

Saul had been a self-righteous, law-abiding Pharisee. He had not been looking for a Savior that day he set out for Damascus. He had been on a mission to seek and destroy Christians. But again, Luke's recounting of Saul's conversion provides a powerful reminder of God's sovereign work in the redemption of men. In fact, Saul himself would later write in his letter to the Romans, quoting from the Old Testament Scriptures:

<sup>10</sup> *"None is righteous, no, not one;*

<sup>11</sup> *no one understands;*

*no one seeks for God.*  
<sup>12</sup> *All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;  
 no one does good,  
 not even one.* – Romans 3:10-12 NLT

Saul had not been a God-seeker that day. In his mind, he thought that what he was doing would bring glory and honor to God. He was attempting to earn God's favor by doing everything in his power to honor God through his actions. But he was blind to the truth. What he believed to be righteous deeds, done to please God, were actually nothing more than proof of his sinful, hopeless condition. And it would take God Almighty to alter the trajectory of Saul's life. In his letter to the Romans, Saul would quote from the psalms, most likely recalling his pre-salvation condition.

<sup>15</sup> *Their feet are swift to shed blood;*  
<sup>16</sup> *in their paths are ruin and misery.* – Romans 3:15-16 ESV

The path on which Saul had set out was going to end in ruin and misery, not just for those he sought to arrest, but for himself. His current life plan was going to end poorly. But then Jesus Christ stepped into his path.

<sup>3</sup> *As he was approaching Damascus on this mission, a light from heaven suddenly shone down around him.* <sup>4</sup> *He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?"* – Acts 9:3-4 NLT

Saul had an unexpected, unplanned encounter with the risen Lord. And Luke makes it clear that Saul had run smack-dab into the one individual he least expected to find.

<sup>5</sup> *"Who are you, lord?" Saul asked.*

*And the voice replied, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting!"* <sup>6</sup> *Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.* – Acts 9:5-6 NLT

Saul had set out that day looking for Christians, not the Christ. He had made plans to find and arrest followers of Christ, but had no expectations that he would run into Christ Himself. But as the proverb so aptly states: "We can make our plans, but the LORD determines our steps" (Proverbs 16:9 NLT). God had Saul right where He wanted him. And none of it was what Saul had planned. Jesus suddenly disrupted his self-made goals for his day and his life. He would eventually make it to Damascus, but totally blind and in need of assistance just to find his way around. The great persecutor was suddenly powerless and helpless. He found himself to be no match for the risen Lord.

But at this point in the story, Saul had no idea exactly who it was that was speaking to him. He asked, "Who are you, lord?" And when Jesus responded, it had to have left Saul in a state of extreme confusion. In his mind, Jesus was dead. How could he be hearing a dead man speak?

Saul is left speechless. He doesn't have a rebuttal or any further questions. He is at a complete loss as to what is going on. So, all he can do is listen to the directions Jesus gives him and allow himself to be led by the hand into the city, where he will await further instructions.

Luke tells us that Saul had lost his sight, his appetite, and the objective of his original mission. There would be no manhunt for Christians and no arrests made. Saul's life, as he had come to know it, was over. Something new was about to begin, and it would all be the sovereign work of God. Saul's life was about to take a dramatic and diametrically different turn. His days of denying Christ were over. His self-important plans to eliminate Christ and His followers were over. And the reality of the words he would later pen in one of his letters to the Corinthians was about to set in.

*...anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun! – 2 Corinthians 5:17 NLT*

## A Chosen Instrument

Acts 9:10-19

<sup>10</sup> Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." <sup>11</sup> And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, <sup>12</sup> and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." <sup>13</sup> But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." <sup>15</sup> But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. <sup>16</sup> For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." <sup>17</sup> So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." <sup>18</sup> And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized; <sup>19</sup> and taking food, he was strengthened. – Acts 9:10-19 ESV

Why Saul? It's virtually impossible to read the story of this man's miraculous conversion and not wonder why God chose to use someone like him. After all, he was a card-carrying member of the Pharisees and a proud persecutor of the church, who took his job very seriously.

<sup>10</sup> "I caused many believers there to be sent to prison. And I cast my vote against them when they were condemned to death. <sup>11</sup> Many times I had them punished in the synagogues to get them to curse Jesus. I was so violently opposed to them that I even chased them down in foreign cities. – Acts 23:10-11 NLT

And yet, here God refers to Saul as His "chosen instrument." The Greek word, translated "chosen" is *eklogē*, and it means, "the act of picking out, choosing or electing" ("G1589 – eklogē – Strong's Greek Lexicon (KJV)." Blue Letter Bible). It is a variation of a similar word (*eklektos*) used by Peter in his first letter when referring to the believers to whom he was writing.

<sup>1</sup> I am writing to God's **chosen** people who are living as foreigners in the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. <sup>2</sup> God the Father knew you and **chose you** long ago, and his Spirit has made you holy. As a result, you have obeyed him and have been cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ. – 1 Peter 1:1-2 NLT

God had chosen Saul. He had hand-picked him for salvation. And that fact, coupled with Saul's far-from-stellar track record, should remind us that salvation is not based on our human effort or any sense of merit. And no one understood the reality of that fact better than Saul himself, who would later pen these words:

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

*For God saved us and called us to live a holy life. He did this, not because we deserved it, but because that was his plan from before the beginning of time—to show us his grace through Christ Jesus. – 2 Timothy 1:9 NLT*

*...he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit. – Titus 3:5 NLT*

Saul, later writing under his Greek name, Paul, would repeatedly declare that God’s gracious act of redeeming men and women was solely based on the finished work of Christ on the cross. No one earned God’s favor. No one deserved His mercy. And Saul would become the poster boy for God’s saving grace. If anything, he deserved God’s wrath. He merited God’s anger and retribution for persecuting the children of God and, as Jesus had pointed out to Saul, the Son of God Himself. And yet, God had plans for Saul. But His decision to save Saul must not be seen as some knee-jerk reaction on God’s part, a last-minute Hail Mary pass heaved up in the hopes of staying in the game. God had not been caught off guard by Saul’s activities. He had not been surprised by Saul’s determination to persecute the followers of “the Way.” In fact, Saul himself would come to recognize that his calling by God had been anything but reactionary. His calling by God had been preordained and predetermined by God, long before Saul had been born.

<sup>15</sup> But even before I was born, God chose me and called me by his marvelous grace. Then it pleased him <sup>16</sup> to reveal his Son to me so that I would proclaim the Good News about Jesus to the Gentiles. – Galatians 1:15-16 NLT

Saul, before his Damascus-road encounter with the resurrected Christ, was just another man living his life apart from God, trapped in his own sinful state and deserving of condemnation by God for his rebellion against him. Sure, Saul was religious and even zealous in trying to please God. He would even state that, before he came to faith in Christ, “I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault” (Philippians 3:6 NLT).

But he was lost and an enemy of God. And it wasn’t because he persecuted the church. It was because he was born in sin and shared in the condemnation announced by God against Adam. That Saul understood this reality is reflected in his letter to the church in Rome.

*When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam’s sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned. – Romans 5:12 NLT*

*...everyone died—from the time of Adam to the time of Moses—even those who did not disobey an explicit commandment of God, as Adam did. – Romans 5:14 NLT*

*For Adam's sin led to condemnation... – Romans 5:16 NLT*

*For the sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over many. – Romans 5:17 NLT*

*Yes, Adam's one sin brings condemnation for everyone... – Romans 5:18 NLT*

It wasn't Saul's persecution of the church that got him in trouble with God. He was already condemned because of his association with Adam. He had inherited not only Adam's sin nature and predisposition toward sin, but Adam's guilty status as a sinner against God. He was born with a death sentence leveled against him, before he had committed a single indiscretion against God. But God, in His grace, had chosen Saul for salvation. He had predetermined to make Saul His chosen instrument, and to transform him from a condemned sinner, whose sinful state showed up in a misguided attempt to earn favor with God through persecuting the church, to a fully justified and forgiven servant of God who would himself endure persecution on behalf of God.

And God told a reluctant Ananias, "Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel. And I will show him how much he must suffer for my name's sake" (Acts 9:15-16 NLT). Saul's choice by God was not going to result in a trouble-free life. He would not discover himself enjoying a painless, sin-free existence, devoid of problems and characterized by unending joy and abounding blessings. No, he would serve *and* suffer. He would obey *and* undergo persecution. He would experience God's blessing *and*, at the same time, know what it was like to experience ridicule and rejection. And Saul would never lose sight of his own unworthiness before God. He would never get over the fact that his salvation was undeserved and unmerited. He would later write:

*For I am the least of all the apostles. In fact, I'm not even worthy to be called an apostle after the way I persecuted God's church. – 1 Corinthians 15:8 NLT*

But this man, chosen by God, was redeemed by God and re-purposed to live a life that brought glory to the cause of Christ and the Kingdom of God.

None of this makes sense to us. It seems an odd way for God to accomplish His divine will. Even Ananias was a bit surprised and confused by God's determination to send him to meet with Saul. He even attempted to bring God up to speed on Saul's most recent activities.

<sup>13</sup> *"But Lord," exclaimed Ananias, "I've heard many people talk about the terrible things this man has done to the believers in Jerusalem!"* <sup>14</sup> *And he is authorized by the leading priests to arrest everyone who calls upon your name."* – Acts 9:13-14 NLT

But, ultimately, God convinced Ananias that He knew what He was doing, and Ananias went, somewhat reluctantly, and did what God had commanded. And Luke records that when Ananias laid his hands on Saul, "Instantly something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he got up and was baptized" (Acts 9:18 NLT). Saul was not only having

his physical sight restored but also having his spiritual eyes opened for the very first time. This extremely religious, well-educated young man was, for the first time in his life, able to truly see, to discern the ways of God, and to accept the offer of salvation made possible through Jesus Christ. He was living out precisely what the apostle John wrote in the opening to his gospel.

*<sup>9</sup> The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.*

*<sup>10</sup> He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. <sup>11</sup> He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. <sup>12</sup> But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. <sup>13</sup> They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.*  
– John 1:10-13 NLT

## A Changed Man

Acts 9:19-25

*<sup>19</sup> For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus. <sup>20</sup> And immediately he proclaimed Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is the Son of God." <sup>21</sup> And all who heard him were amazed and said, "Is not this the man who made havoc in Jerusalem of those who called upon this name? And has he not come here for this purpose, to bring them bound before the chief priests?" <sup>22</sup> But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ.*

*<sup>23</sup> When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him, <sup>24</sup> but their plot became known to Saul. They were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him, <sup>25</sup> but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket. – Acts 9:19-25 ESV*

Saul was a man of action. Once he got his sight and his strength back, he was back at it again. But this time, his mission in life had a distinctly different direction to it. He was a changed man. He had come to know Jesus in a very real and personal way. The very one Saul had discounted as dead and had viewed as nothing more than a cause célèbre on which the disciples were building their religious revolution. No, he had discovered that Jesus was anything *but* dead. This Galilean, whose name was causing so much trouble for the Jewish religious leaders, was alive and had appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus. Saul had been blinded by His glory and convicted by His words: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:5 ESV).

It is interesting to note that Jesus' words to Saul were few. What is particularly fascinating is what Jesus doesn't say. He never claims to be the Messiah. He doesn't offer Saul living water or eternal life. He doesn't speak to Saul about his need to be born again. Once Jesus had introduced himself to Saul, He said, "But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do" (Acts 9:6 ESV). Nothing more, nothing less. Short and sweet. But they made an impact on Saul. The whole experience left Saul more than just physically blind. He was spiritually rocked. His religious sensibilities had been shattered. All he knew to be true had been turned on its head. And while he found himself unable to see, he had a new insight and spiritual eyesight he had never had before.

The only other words we have recorded by Luke that reveal what was said to Saul are those spoken by Ananias.

*"Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." – Acts 9:17 ESV*

And the next thing we know, Saul is proclaiming Jesus in the synagogues of Damascus, giving proof that He really was the Son of God. His words confounded the Jews. His message confused

them. They had a difficult time reconciling what Saul was saying with the reputation that had preceded him. Rather than defending Jesus as the Messiah, he should have been apprehending Christians. But Luke tells us, “Saul’s preaching became more and more powerful, and the Jews in Damascus couldn’t refute his proofs that Jesus was indeed the Messiah” (Acts 9:22 NLT).

In these verses, we get a glimpse into Saul’s personality. He was an intense individual who had a strong inner drive. He was determined and disciplined. It’s what made him so good at his job as a Pharisee and as a persecutor of the church. And now that he was a follower of Christ, he had the added incentive of the indwelling Holy Spirit. God had taken this hard-driving, passionate, and self-motivated man and transformed him into a Spirit-filled, heat-seeking missile for the cause of Christ. Luke’s description of the early days of Saul’s conversion provides us with a teaser of what the rest of his life would look like. God had redeemed Saul’s zeal and inner drive. Those very same qualities that Saul had used to persecute Jesus and His church, God would now use to proclaim Jesus and build the church.

It didn’t take long before Saul found himself on the receiving end of the persecution he used to mete out. Now, he was the hunted. Luke simply tells us that “some of the Jews plotted together to kill him” (Acts 9:23 NLT). They wanted him dead, and they set guards at all the gates of the city to watch for him so they could murder him. But Saul escaped. And he would later provide further details regarding his escape, revealing that the Jews had even enlisted the aid of the local city officials in their plot to have him killed.

*<sup>32</sup> When I was in Damascus, the governor under King Aretas kept guards at the city gates to catch me. <sup>33</sup> I had to be lowered in a basket through a window in the city wall to escape from him. – 2 Corinthians 11:32-33 NLT*

What Luke provides us with in these verses is a summary or abridged version of Saul’s conversion. Later, Saul, writing under his Greek name, Paul, would provide more detail about all that had happened in those days.

*<sup>15</sup> But even before I was born, God chose me and called me by his marvelous grace. Then it pleased him <sup>16</sup> to reveal his Son to me so that I would proclaim the Good News about Jesus to the Gentiles.*

*When this happened, I did not rush out to consult with any human being. <sup>17</sup> Nor did I go up to Jerusalem to consult with those who were apostles before I was. Instead, I went away into Arabia, and later I returned to the city of Damascus.*

*<sup>18</sup> Then three years later I went to Jerusalem to get to know Peter, and I stayed with him for fifteen days. <sup>19</sup> The only other apostle I met at that time was James, the Lord’s brother. <sup>20</sup> I declare before God that what I am writing to you is not a lie. – Galatians 1:15-20 NLT*

In his Acts account, Luke does not include Saul's detour into Arabia. But according to Saul, after his conversion, he went into the wilderness and then returned to Damascus. And it would be three years before he made his trip to Jerusalem, recorded by Luke in the following verses of this chapter.

It was most likely during his time in the wilderness of Arabia that Saul received additional insight from the Holy Spirit regarding his mission and commission. Saul would arrive back in Damascus fully convinced that Jesus was the Messiah and he would be fully prepared to defend that belief, even if it cost him his life. And this determination would not fade with time. Luke states, "Saul increased all the more in strength" (Acts 9:22 ESV). He grew stronger in his faith. His assurance that Jesus truly was the Messiah and that He alone was how men could be made right with God grew stronger with each passing day. We aren't told what happened during Saul's days in the Arabian wilderness, but we can easily assume it was Spirit-directed and filled with further insight from Jesus Himself. Saul most likely wrestled with God, debating with Him about Old Testament passages and receiving divine insight into the many prophetic passages that spoke of the coming Messiah. Saul received a theological education from the Godhead. When he showed back up in Damascus, he was fully convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. And his determination regarding that matter would grow stronger over time. Saul would not relent. He would never retreat from his belief that the good news of Jesus Christ was real and needed to be shared with any and all, which is what he would later write in his letter to the Romans.

*<sup>16</sup> "For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes—the Jew first and also the Gentile. <sup>17</sup> This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith. As the Scriptures say, "It is through faith that a righteous person has life." – Romans 1:16--17 NLT*

Saul had met Jesus. He had received the Holy Spirit of God. He had been chosen as an instrument for God. And his life would never be the same again. He had a new mission in life. He had a new purpose for life. And all that had come before, all that he had accomplished up until that time, had all become futile and pointless. His Jewish citizenship, his membership in the sect of the Pharisees, his education and his many accomplishments were nothing when compared to his newfound knowledge of Jesus as his Savior.

*<sup>5</sup> "I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin—a real Hebrew if there ever was one! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. <sup>6</sup> I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault.*

*<sup>7</sup> I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. <sup>8</sup> Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." – Philippians 3:5-8 NLT*



## All on God's Timetable

Acts 9:26-31

<sup>26</sup> And when he had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. <sup>27</sup> But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. <sup>28</sup> So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. <sup>29</sup> And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. <sup>30</sup> And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

<sup>31</sup> So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied. – Acts 9:26-31 ESV

Two contrasting passages bookend this little pericope regarding Saul's life. The first is found at the beginning of chapter eight.

<sup>1</sup> And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. <sup>2</sup> Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. <sup>3</sup> But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. – Acts 8:1-3 ESV

The second is found in verse 31 of chapter nine.

*So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.*

Notice the differences. In the first passage, the church is mentioned as being located only in Jerusalem and as suffering great persecution. As a result of that persecution, its congregants were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samara. Then, by the time Luke closes out his introduction to Saul, his conversion and ministry, we find the church is now located throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. Not only that, but it is also experiencing peace, spiritual and numerical growth, the fear of the Lord, and the comfort of the Holy Spirit. God was at work. His will was being accomplished. Persecution by the high priest, the Sanhedrin, or even Saul himself, could do nothing to stop the sovereign will of God from being fulfilled just as He had planned. He knows the schemes of men, even before they do. He knows the thoughts of men, even before they've had a chance to think them. King David wrote about this all-knowing aspect of God's nature.

- <sup>1</sup> *O Lord, you have examined my heart  
and know everything about me.*
- <sup>2</sup> *You know when I sit down or stand up.  
You know my thoughts even when I'm far away.*
- <sup>3</sup> *You see me when I travel  
and when I rest at home.  
You know everything I do.*
- <sup>4</sup> *You know what I am going to say  
even before I say it, Lord. – Psalm 139:1-4 NLT*

So, despite the best laid plans of men, God's will was being accomplished. His church was growing and prospering, even in the face of opposition and adversity. And God had taken one of the primary instigators of persecution against the church and miraculously transformed him into His chosen instrument, a powerful tool for the spread of the gospel and the growth of the church.

According to Galatians 1:15-20, Saul spent three years in Damascus before he ever attempted to make the journey to Jerusalem, home of the original congregation of believers and headquarters of the 11 original disciples of Jesus. And when he finally arrived in Jerusalem, he was met with fear and skepticism. Even after three years, they doubted whether he was really a changed man. His former reputation still preceded him. But Barnabas brought Saul to the apostles and told them all that had happened on the road to Damascus and how Saul had become a powerful proclaimer of Jesus throughout that entire region. If you recall, Barnabas, also known as Joseph, was a Levite from Cyprus who sold a portion of his land and gave the proceeds to the apostles to care for the needs of the poor within the church family. So, he was well known to the apostles and had a good reputation among them. They had even nicknamed him Barnabas, which means "Son of Encouragement." His endorsement of Saul played a vital role in securing their acceptance of this former enemy of the church, and it opened up the opportunity for Saul to minister freely among them, preaching the gospel and debating with the Jews who still refused to accept Jesus as their Messiah. And Luke records that Saul also disputed with the Hellenists or Greek-speaking Jews. In doing this, Saul was carrying on the work of Stephen, the young man whose death he had approvingly observed as recorded in chapter six. Stephen had been a Hellenist, as Saul was, and now Saul was picking up where Stephen had left off, debating with the Greek-speaking Jews and boldly defending the deity of Christ and the truth regarding His claims to be the Messiah, the Son of God. But it seems that he fared no better than Stephen, because Luke tells us, "they were seeking to kill him" (Acts 9:29 ESV), and so, he was forced to leave town, escaping to Tarsus, by way of Caesarea.

Luke gives the impression that Saul fled from Jerusalem at the insistence of his fellow disciples, who, no doubt, feared for his life. But Saul would later testify that Jesus Himself had commanded his departure from Jerusalem.

*<sup>17</sup> “After I returned to Jerusalem, I was praying in the Temple and fell into a trance. <sup>18</sup> I saw a vision of Jesus saying to me, ‘Hurry! Leave Jerusalem, for the people here won’t accept your testimony about me.’*

*<sup>19</sup> “‘But Lord,’ I argued, ‘they certainly know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. <sup>20</sup> And I was in complete agreement when your witness Stephen was killed. I stood by and kept the coats they took off when they stoned him.’*

*<sup>21</sup> “But the Lord said to me, ‘Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles!’” – Acts 22:17-21 NLT*

So, it would appear that Saul had not fled for his life, but under direct orders from Jesus, and with the clear intent to take the gospel to the Gentiles. Saul also revealed that he was in keeping with the word spoken to him by Ananias immediately after his blinding encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, Ananias had given him the following message from Jesus: “For you are to be his witness, telling everyone what you have seen and heard” (Acts 22:15 NLT). And now, that commission from Jesus was going to be fulfilled. He was going to take the gospel to the Gentiles. And, as we will see, he would end up taking the gospel to places it had never been heard before, among people who knew nothing about Judaism, the Messiah, or the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And what a perfect candidate Saul made for this assignment. He was a Jew, but hailed from Tarsus, a Greek-speaking province. He was also a Roman citizen, a former Pharisee, and a serious student of the Hebrew Scriptures. He had the perfect blend of attributes and a personality profile well-suited to what Jesus had commissioned him to do. On top of that, he now had the Spirit of God living within him, guiding, directing, and empowering him for the task at hand. And he would prove to be a formidable force for the gospel for many years to come.

We are not provided with any details regarding Saul’s activities during his time in Tarsus. Still, we can easily assume that he continued to do what he had done before: To preach boldly in the name of Jesus (Acts 9:28). We do know from chapter 11 that it would be about six years before Barnabas arrived in Tarsus, seeking out Saul, to take him to Antioch in Syria. Here is Luke’s record of the reunion between these two men.

*<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, the believers who had been scattered during the persecution after Stephen’s death traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch of Syria. They preached the word of God, but only to Jews. <sup>20</sup> However, some of the believers who went to Antioch from Cyprus and Cyrene began preaching to the Gentiles about the Lord Jesus. <sup>21</sup> The power of the Lord was with them, and a large number of these Gentiles believed and turned to the Lord.*

*<sup>22</sup> When the church at Jerusalem heard what had happened, they sent Barnabas to Antioch. <sup>23</sup> When he arrived and saw this evidence of God’s blessing, he was filled with joy, and he encouraged the believers to stay true to the Lord. <sup>24</sup> Barnabas was a good*

*man, full of the Holy Spirit and strong in faith. And many people were brought to the Lord.*

*<sup>25</sup> Then Barnabas went on to Tarsus to look for Saul. <sup>26</sup> When he found him, he brought him back to Antioch. Both of them stayed there with the church for a full year, teaching large crowds of people. (It was at Antioch that the believers were first called Christians.),  
– Acts 11:19-26 NLT*

No doubt, the six years that Saul spent in Tarsus, where the inhabitants were predominantly Greek-speaking and non-Jews, he had ample opportunity to practice his preaching of the gospel to Gentiles. He would have had plenty of chances to debate and dispute with those who found his message unconvincing. It is also likely that he would have spent time poring over the Hebrew Scriptures, studying the Old Testament passages for all references to the Messiah. So, by the time Barnabas summoned him to accompany him back to Antioch, Saul would have been well-prepared for the task at hand.

Everything was falling into place. The divine plan for Saul's life was happening just as God had ordained it. There was not a single aspect of his life that was outside of God's will or devoid of God's divine influence. He was God's chosen instrument, and God was preparing him for a long and fruitful ministry.

## Spiritual Healing

Acts 9:32-43

<sup>32</sup> Now as Peter went here and there among them all, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda. <sup>33</sup> There he found a man named Aeneas, bedridden for eight years, who was paralyzed. <sup>34</sup> And Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed." And immediately he rose. <sup>35</sup> And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord.

<sup>36</sup> Now there was in Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which, translated, means Dorcas. She was full of good works and acts of charity. <sup>37</sup> In those days she became ill and died, and when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room. <sup>38</sup> Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, hearing that Peter was there, sent two men to him, urging him, "Please come to us without delay." <sup>39</sup> So Peter rose and went with them. And when he arrived, they took him to the upper room. All the widows stood beside him weeping and showing tunics and other garments that Dorcas made while she was with them. <sup>40</sup> But Peter put them all outside, and knelt down and prayed; and turning to the body he said, "Tabitha, arise." And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. <sup>41</sup> And he gave her his hand and raised her up. Then, calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. <sup>42</sup> And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. <sup>43</sup> And he stayed in Joppa for many days with one Simon, a tanner. – Acts 9:32-43 ESV

The gospel continued to spread. It had already moved beyond the boundaries of Jerusalem into the neighboring region of Samaria. Now, Luke provides with an overview of how it was taken to Lydda and Joppa, two cities located on the Mediterranean coastal plain, northwest of Jerusalem. And Luke records that it was Peter who made the trip to these two cities. His journey to Lydda was most likely part of a trip he made to visit the believers who existed in the cities outside of Jerusalem. Verse 31 tells us: "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up" and Luke records that "Peter went here and there among them all, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda" (Acts 9:32 ESV). Peter was checking in on all those cities where the gospel had been taken and people had responded. He felt a responsibility to gain a first-hand report on what was happening and to encourage all those who had placed their faith in Christ. It was while he was in Lydda, visiting the saints who lived there, that he heard about a man named Aeneas, who was paralyzed and had been bedridden for eight years. Other than the physical ailment from which he suffered we know nothing else about this man. His name is Greek, so he could have been a Hellenistic Jew. But we are not told whether he was one of the saints in Lydda or not. But Peter, upon meeting the man, boldly declared to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed" (Acts 9:34 ESV), and Luke records that the man "immediately rose." His healing was instantaneous and complete, a clear work of God. And the immediate outcome of this miraculous healing was not just the man's renewed capacity to walk, but his neighbors' acceptance of the gospel. Luke simply states that, upon seeing Aeneas healed, "they turned to the Lord" (Acts 9:35 ESV).

It is always interesting to consider why the Spirit of God inspired the writers of the gospels and the other books of the New Testament to include the accounts of the healings that they did. Surely, these were not all the healings that Jesus and the disciples performed. But they are all very particular in terms of their descriptions. There were many who were lame and could not walk. There were others who were blind and could not see. Jesus and the disciples all cast demons out of those who were possessed. And then, as we will see in the following verses, there are several accounts of those who were dead and then brought back to life. All of these have spiritual implications. They were physical healings, but they mirror what was happening on a spiritual level in the lives of those who came to faith in Christ. At one time they were unable to walk the path that God had chosen for them. They were incapable of following the precept and laws of God faithfully. Like a paralyzed man who was hindered by his body's disability, the lost were totally incapacitated by their sinful condition. They could never have turned to God on their own. And the blind, while physically incapable of sight, were really unable to see spiritually. They were blind to the realities of their own sin and their inability to achieve righteousness on their own. And Jesus placed this spiritual condition on all, including the Pharisees, who He referred to as "blind guides." They were spiritually sightless and devoid of any ability to see truth. Then there were the dead, like Dorcas, whose lives had expired and their ability to live any kind of life was gone, let alone to live righteously. They represent all those who are dead in their trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1, 5; Colossians 2:13). Every healing performed by Jesus and the disciples was intended to be a representation of man's spiritual plight. Jesus spoke of this very thing when He had read from the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue in Nazareth.

<sup>18</sup> *"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,  
<sup>19</sup> and that the time of the Lord's favor has come."*

<sup>20</sup> *He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. All eyes in the synagogue looked at him intently. <sup>21</sup> Then he began to speak to them. "The Scripture you've just heard has been fulfilled this very day!"* – Luke 4:18-21 NLT

Jesus had come to open the eyes of the blind – the spiritually blind. He had come to release those who were restricted, not by physical paralysis or non-functioning limbs, but by their own sinful state. He came to set free those who were trapped by their own state of spiritual death and condemnation, not just physical death. Jesus came to feed the spiritually hungry and to enrich the lives of the spiritually impoverished. And every physical healing He performed was a living lesson in the kind of power He possessed and proof of His claim to be the Messiah, the Savior of the world.

While in Lydda, Peter received word from Joppa, a coastal city about ten miles to the east, that a disciple there named Tabitha had recently died. Upon hearing of her death, two men from

Joppa had been sent to Peter with a simple, yet urgent message: “Please come to us without delay” (Acts 9:38 ESV). Why were they so insistent that Peter hurry? What was the rush? Tabitha was already dead, and her body had been laid in an upper room. It would seem that the disciples in Joppa fully expected Peter to do something about this situation. They weren’t just asking him to come in order to perform her funeral. They expected something far greater to happen. So, Peter made his way to Joppa and, upon arrival, he made a beeline to the room where Tabitha’s body lay. There, he found a weeping widow who showed him the clothes that Tabitha had hand-sewn for them. This woman had been a generous and compassionate individual, who had served the local community well. The women who had gathered to mourn her death were expressing their grief over having lost a friend and benefactor. But Peter ushered them from the room, then kneeled by the body and prayed. After some time, he turned to the body and said, ““Tabitha, arise.” And she did. She came back to life. And Luke somewhat anticlimactically states: “Then, calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive” (Acts 9:41 ESV). No emotion. No excitement. It’s almost as if Luke is overly casual in his description of this episode, as if he was not surprised at all by what he had seen. To a certain degree, the members of the early church had an expectation that these kinds of things would happen. They were become somewhat normal occurrences and no longer shocked those who witnessed them. But to those outside the church, these kinds of things were far from normal or expected. And when news got out that Tabitha was alive, Luke reports that “many believed in the Lord” (Acts 9:42 ESV).

This chapter closes with an interesting side note. It states that Peter remained in Joppa, staying the home of a man named Simon, who just so happened to be a tanner. This little aside can be easily overlooked by those of us in the modern, western church. To us, it simply sounds like Peter stayed in the home of a gracious host, enjoying his hospitality. But notice that Luke reports that Simon was a tanner. That means, as part of his profession, this man worked with the carcasses of dead animals. To any God-fearing Jew, this man’s occupation would have made him unclean and, therefore, to be avoided at all costs. But with this very brief note at the close of this chapter, we get a glimpse into a change that seems to be taking place in Peter’s heart and life. He is opening up to the idea that Jesus wants the gospel to go to ALL men, not just some. It has obviously been extended to Samaritans and Hellenistic Jews. Now, Peter is about to discover that God is going to open up the door to even those whom the average Jew would consider unclean and undeserving of God’s grace and mercy: The Gentiles.



## A Tale of Two Visions

Acts 10:1-16

<sup>1</sup> At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, <sup>2</sup> a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. <sup>3</sup> About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, “Cornelius.” <sup>4</sup> And he stared at him in terror and said, “What is it, Lord?” And he said to him, “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. <sup>5</sup> And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. <sup>6</sup> He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea.” <sup>7</sup> When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those who attended him, <sup>8</sup> and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa..

<sup>9</sup> The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. <sup>10</sup> And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance <sup>11</sup> and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. <sup>12</sup> In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. <sup>13</sup> And there came a voice to him: “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.” <sup>14</sup> But Peter said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.” <sup>15</sup> And the voice came to him again a second time, “What God has made clean, do not call common.” <sup>16</sup> This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven. – Acts 10:1-16 ESV

Peter is in Joppa, the guest of Simon, the tanner. He is continuing his ministry among the believers there and sharing the gospel with the Hellenistic Jews who lived there. But his world was about to get rocked. While Peter had apparently become open to the idea of Samaritans and Hellenistic Jews coming to faith in Christ, he was about to learn that God had much broader, bigger plans for the gospel. Up until this point, it appears that Peter and the other apostles were somewhat reluctant to take the gospel to the Gentiles. It seems that their self-imposed requirement was that the gospel only be shared with those who had a pre-existing relationship with Judaism. Thus, they had been willing to approve of Philip’s work among the Samaritans, because of those individuals were technically part-Jewish and worshiped Yahweh. And it seems that those who came to faith in Lydda and Joppa had been Greek-speaking or Hellenistic Jews. Even Simon, the tanner, with whom Peter was lodging in Joppa, was most likely a Hellenistic Jew who had come to faith in Christ. So, it appears that some formal link to Judaism had become a necessary requirement before anyone could hear the gospel message. But all that was about to change.

First, Luke introduces us to Cornelius, a centurion in the Roman cohort who lived in Caesarea, a city located up the Mediterranean coast, about 30-miles north of Joppa. This man was a Gentile, but Luke describes him as “a devout man who feared God with all his household” (Acts 10:2 ESV). As an officer in the Roman army, it is doubtful that Cornelius had taken steps to become a full proselyte of the Jewish religion. That would have required circumcision and

would be an extremely dangerous thing for a man in his position to do. After all, he was part of the Roman army that occupied Palestine and whose responsibility it was to enforce Roman law. But Luke makes it clear that this man worshiped the God of the Hebrews and was favorably disposed to the Jewish people. He regularly gave financial gifts to the poor and needy and even prayed to Yahweh. And it was during the ninth hour, the Jewish hour of prayer, that Cornelius received a vision from God.

It is significant to note that God appeared to Cornelius long before any human representative did. In essence, God was giving His divine approval of not only Cornelius, but of all those who, like him, were outside the Jewish faith, but predisposed to having a relationship with God. This man had been drawn to God. He worshiped and prayed to God. Now, he was actually having an encounter with God. And the word he received from God, through the mouth of an angel, was quite clear:

*<sup>4</sup> “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. <sup>5</sup> And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. <sup>6</sup> He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea.” – Acts 10:4-6 ESV*

Cornelius received instructions to send for Peter. God was very specific. He wanted Peter to be the one who to play a part in this man’s conversion. And so, Cornelius, petrified by what he had seen and heard, obeyed and sent two men to Joppa to find and bring back Peter.

Meanwhile, 30 miles away in Joppa, Peter was given his own vision from God. And his was dramatically different, and no less disturbing. Peter had gone up the roof of Simon’s house in order to pray and, while praying, he fell into a trance. It’s important to note that Luke describes Peter as having been hungry when he started his prayer time. His physical condition of hunger is going to play an important part in the overall context of the vision he was given by God. While waiting for his lunch to be prepared, Peter fell into a trance and had a dream about food. Not exactly an abnormal or unlikely scenario, but it is the nature of the food in Peter’s dream that make it significant. In his dream, he saw a giant sheet being let down from heaven, and in that sheet “were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air” (Acts 10:12 ESV). And we know from Peter’s reaction, that these creatures were all considered uncommon and unclean to Jews. They were all from the list found in Leviticus 11.

*<sup>4</sup> You may not, however, eat the following animals that have split hooves or that chew the cud, but not both. The camel chews the cud but does not have split hooves, so it is ceremonially unclean for you. <sup>5</sup> The hyrax chews the cud but does not have split hooves, so it is unclean. <sup>6</sup> The hare chews the cud but does not have split hooves, so it is unclean. <sup>7</sup> The pig has evenly split hooves but does not chew the cud, so it is unclean. <sup>8</sup> You may not eat the meat of these animals or even touch their carcasses. They are ceremonially unclean for you. – Leviticus 11:4-8 NLT*

*<sup>10</sup> But you must never eat animals from the sea or from rivers that do not have both fins and scales. They are detestable to you. – Leviticus 11:10 NLT*

<sup>13</sup> *“These are the birds that are detestable to you. You must never eat them: the griffon vulture, the bearded vulture, the black vulture, <sup>14</sup> the kite, falcons of all kinds, <sup>15</sup> ravens of all kinds, <sup>16</sup> the eagle owl, the short-eared owl, the seagull, hawks of all kinds, <sup>17</sup> the little owl, the cormorant, the great owl, <sup>18</sup> the barn owl, the desert owl, the Egyptian vulture, <sup>19</sup> the stork, herons of all kinds, the hoopoe, and the bat. – Leviticus 11:13-19 NLT*

Added to this list were various winged insects. Any and all of these creatures were forbidden and declared unclean by God. The Jews were not allowed to eat or touch them. To do so would make them ceremonially unclean. And yet, when the sheet descended from heaven, it was filled with nothing but these kinds of creatures. To make matters worse, a voice from heaven commanded, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat them.” The sheet had come from heaven. The voice had come from heaven. But the creatures were unclean. They were unacceptable and unholy. Why in the world was God commanding Peter to satisfy his hunger by consuming what was forbidden? Peter, shocked and outraged by the mere thought of doing such a thing, vehemently told God, “No!” and proudly stated, “I have never eaten anything that our Jewish laws have declared impure and unclean” (Acts 10:14 NLT). This little exchange between Peter and God reminds me of another awkward moment that took place sometime earlier between he and Jesus.

Jesus had just finished telling Peter and the other disciples that He was headed to Jerusalem, where He was going to be arrested, tried and executed. But He had also informed them that He would be raised from the dead. But Peter wasn’t listening. Instead, he took Jesus aside and rebuked Him.

*But Peter took him aside and began to reprimand him for saying such things. “Heaven forbid, Lord,” he said. “This will never happen to you!” – Matthew 16:22 NLT*

Later, on the very night Jesus was betrayed, He told the disciples that each of them would end up denying Him. But Peter had responded, “Even if everyone else deserts you, I will never desert you” (Matthew 26:33 NLT). But Jesus broke the news to Peter that he would actually deny Him three times. To which Peter responded, “No! Even if I have to die with you, I will never deny you!” (Matthew 26:35 NLT).

Peter had developed a habit of arguing with Jesus and now, he was doing the same thing with God the Father. Three separate times, God told Peter, “What God has made clean, do not call common” (Acts 10:15 ESV). And I don’t think Luke’s mention of these three repetitive declarations by God is unimportant. If you recall, Peter had ended up denying Jesus three separate times on the night that He was betrayed. And, when Peter had encountered the resurrected Jesus, they had had an exchange, where Jesus asked Peter three separate times, “Do you love me?” And each time, Peter had responded, “Yes!” But with each of Peter’s statements of affirmation, Jesus had repeatedly commanded him to “Feed my sheep!” In fact, His exact words were:

*“Then feed my lambs.” – John 21:15 NLT*

*“Then take care of my sheep.” – John 21:16 NLT*

*“Then feed my sheep.” – John 21:17 NLT*

Peter had been commanded by Jesus to care for His sheep. And now, Peter was going to learn that his definition of what it meant to be one of Jesus’ sheep was quite different than that of Jesus Himself. In fact, Jesus had clearly spoken concerning His sheep:

*<sup>14</sup> “I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me, <sup>15</sup> just as my Father knows me and I know the Father. So I sacrifice my life for the sheep. <sup>16</sup> I have other sheep, too, that are not in this sheepfold. I must bring them also. They will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock with one shepherd. – John 10:14-16 NLT*

There were sheep, “that are not in this sheepfold”, for whom Jesus had died. And Cornelius was one of them. Much to Peter’s chagrin, the gospel message was not reserved for the Jews. It was not restricted to those who had some kind of ethnic alliance with the Hebrew people. It was for any and all. Peter was about to learn what Paul would later write: “For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes--the Jew first and also the Gentile” (Romans 1:16 NLT).

## Good News for All

Acts 10:17-43

<sup>17</sup> Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean, behold, the men who were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon's house, stood at the gate <sup>18</sup> and called out to ask whether Simon who was called Peter was lodging there. <sup>19</sup> And while Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you. <sup>20</sup> Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them." <sup>21</sup> And Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for. What is the reason for your coming?" <sup>22</sup> And they said, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say." <sup>23</sup> So he invited them in to be his guests.

The next day he rose and went away with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him. <sup>24</sup> And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. <sup>25</sup> When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. <sup>26</sup> But Peter lifted him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am a man." <sup>27</sup> And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered. <sup>28</sup> And he said to them, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. <sup>29</sup> So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me."

<sup>30</sup> And Cornelius said, "Four days ago, about this hour, I was praying in my house at the ninth hour, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing <sup>31</sup> and said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. <sup>32</sup> Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.' <sup>33</sup> So I sent for you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord."

<sup>34</sup> So Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, <sup>35</sup> but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. <sup>36</sup> As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), <sup>37</sup> you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: <sup>38</sup> how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. <sup>39</sup> And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, <sup>40</sup> but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, <sup>41</sup> not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. <sup>42</sup> And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. <sup>43</sup> To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." – Acts 10:17-43 ESV

Peter was at a loss as to what the meaning behind his vision might be. But even as he wrestled over the possible implications of his dream, he was told by the Holy Spirit that he would be receiving three visitors and that he was to accompany them. That was all the detail he received from the Spirit. And, just as the Spirit had said, the three men arrived at Simon's house, in search of Peter. When Peter asked them the purpose behind their visit, they replied: "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say" (Acts 10:22 ESV). This entire encounter had the hand of God all over it. Cornelius was spoken to by an angel from God. Peter had received a vision, clearly given to him by God. Then he had received a word directly from the Spirit of God. Peter may not have known what his vision meant, but he no doubt understood that God was behind all that was happening. And so, after hosting his guests for the evening, he accompanied them the next day to Caesarea, not knowing what God had in store for him there.

We know from Acts 11:22, that Peter did not go to Caesarea alone. He had invited six other brothers from Joppa to join him on the trip. The journey most likely took them about two-day's time. And when they arrived at the home of Cornelius, they found it packed with the centurion's family and friends. Luke informs us that Cornelius, in a sign of gratitude and veneration, fell down at Peter's feet and worshiped him. There is no indication that he knew of Peter's status as an apostle of Jesus. He simply knew that this man had been sent to him by God with something important to share with him. But Peter, informing Cornelius that he too, was nothing more than a man, had him stand and explain what it was that he wanted. Cornelius recounted to Peter the vision and message he had received from the angel, then he explained that he and his guests were eagerly waiting to hear what God had to say to them through His messenger, Peter. "Now we are all here, waiting before God to hear the message the Lord has given you" (Acts 10:33 NLT).

Luke doesn't tell us when Peter finally put all the dots together. But sometime between when he arrived at Cornelius' house, saw the crowd of Gentiles gathered, and heard Cornelius' description of his vision, Peter grasped the significance and meaning of his own vision. Here he was in a Gentile's home, surrounded by other Gentiles who eagerly waited to hear him deliver a message to them from God. And Peter, as a good Jew, saw the absurdity of it all. He even told Cornelius and his guests, "You know it is against our laws for a Jewish man to enter a Gentile home like this or to associate with you. But God has shown me that I should no longer think of anyone as impure or unclean" (Acts 10:28 NLT). The vision of the sheet filled with unclean creatures and the command from God to "Rise, Peter; kill and eat" (Acts 10:13 ESV), all began to make sense. He remembered the words of God, "What God has made clean, do not call common" (Acts 10:15 ESV), and he realized that Cornelius and the people gathered in his home were Gentiles whom God saw as clean, not unclean and common. They were acceptable to God, so they must be acceptable to Peter. To a Jew, a Gentile was considered unclean and to avoided at all costs. They were uncircumcised and did not keep the strict dietary laws of the Jews. They did not obey the Mosaic law. So, any contact with them made a Jew ceremonially unclean. And yet, here was Peter, under the direct command of God, sitting in the home of a Gentile, and a Roman centurion at that, getting ready to share the gospel. God was doing

something new. He was opening up the door of salvation and including those outside of what had once been the closed doors of the Jewish nation. The apostle Paul would later remind the Gentile believers in Ephesus of the significance of their inclusion into the family of God.

*<sup>11</sup> Don't forget that you Gentiles used to be outsiders. You were called "uncircumcised heathens" by the Jews, who were proud of their circumcision, even though it affected only their bodies and not their hearts. <sup>12</sup> In those days you were living apart from Christ. You were excluded from citizenship among the people of Israel, and you did not know the covenant promises God had made to them. You lived in this world without God and without hope. <sup>13</sup> But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ.*  
– Ephesians 2:11-13 NLT

He would remind the believers in Corinth that they were a fellowship made up of Jews and Gentiles, a blended family chosen and adopted by God. "Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into one body by one Spirit, and we all share the same Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:13 NLT). And here was Peter experiencing this new phenomenon for the very first time. This was an historic moment. It was a paradigm-shifting point in time. Nothing would ever be the same. The playing field was being leveled. There would no longer be the haves and the have-nots, clean and unclean, Jew and Gentile, circumcised and uncircumcised. And Paul would make that point perfectly clear in his letter to the Galatian believers.

*<sup>26</sup> For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>27</sup> And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes. <sup>28</sup> There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup> And now that you belong to Christ, you are the true children of Abraham. You are his heirs, and God's promise to Abraham belongs to you.* – Galatians 3:26-29 NLT

All of this would have been a shock to Peter's system. As a devout Jew, this was antithetical to all he had ever believed. He was part of the chosen race. He was a member of the holy nation, God's people, the Jews. But Peter saw the hand of God in all of this. When God had commanded him to go to the home of Cornelius, he had obeyed. "So when I was sent for, I came without objection" (Acts 10:29 ESV). He may not have fully understood what was going on, but he knew it was the will of God, and that was enough for Peter. And when he saw what God was doing in Cornelius' home, he fully grasped that God had far greater plans for the gospel than he or the other apostles had ever understood. God was non-discriminatory. In fact, Peter told Cornelius and his guests, "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34 ESV). Peter got it. The vision of the sheet made sense now. Gentiles, or non-Jews, were no longer to be considered unclean and unacceptable.

Which is what led him to later write to the highly blended congregations located in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia:

<sup>9</sup> *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.* <sup>10</sup> *Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.* – 1 Peter 2:9-10 ESV

Jews and Gentiles together were to make up the body of Christ. And so, Peter began to explain to the house full of Gentiles eagerly listening to his voice all that God had done through Jesus Christ, relating His ministry, death, burial and resurrection. And he told them the commission that Jesus had passed on to he and his companions.

<sup>42</sup> *“And he ordered us to preach everywhere and to testify that Jesus is the one appointed by God to be the judge of all—the living and the dead.* <sup>43</sup> *He is the one all the prophets testified about, saying that everyone who believes in him will have their sins forgiven through his name.”* – Acts 10:42-43 NLT

But notice that the “everyone” in Jesus’ order had just taken on a new meaning. No longer was the gospel restricted to Jews living in Jerusalem. It had already begun to spread outside the city walls and had even been taken to Samaritans and Hellenistic Jews living outside of Jerusalem. It had been shared with the Ethiopian eunuch. And now, Peter was sharing the good news with a house full of Gentiles in the city of Caesarea.

## Amazed and Appalled

Acts 10:44-11:3

*<sup>44</sup> While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. <sup>45</sup> And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. <sup>46</sup> For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, <sup>47</sup> “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” <sup>48</sup> And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.*

*<sup>1</sup> Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. <sup>2</sup> So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, <sup>3</sup> “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.”— Acts 10:44-11:3*  
ESV

Peter preached the gospel to a house full of Gentiles and something incredible happened. They came to faith. Now, that alone should not have surprised Peter and his six companions. They had seen thousands of people respond to the gospel message, placing their faith in Christ. But this was the first time they had seen it happen to non-Jews or Gentiles. And what made this particular occasion even more amazing was that Cornelius, and those among his family and friends who placed their faith in Christ, immediately received the filling of the Holy Spirit. If you recall, back in chapter eight, Philip took the gospel to the Samaritans and Luke records, “But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women” (Acts 8:12 ESB). They believed and were baptized, but it was not until Peter arrived that they received the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

*<sup>14</sup> Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, <sup>15</sup> who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, <sup>16</sup> for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. <sup>17</sup> Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. — Acts 8:14-17*

Why was the situation in Cornelius’ house different? They simply believed and were not even required to undergo water baptism. Luke simply states that the Holy Spirit fell on all those who heard the word. In verse 16 of chapter 11, Peter infers that these new converts had received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. And not only that, they received the Spirit in the same that he and the 119 other disciples had on the day of Pentecost.

*<sup>15</sup> “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. <sup>16</sup> And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ <sup>17</sup> If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to*

*us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?"*  
 – Acts 11:15-17 ESV

They had the exact same experience as that of the Jewish disciples of Jesus. They received the Spirit *and* they spoke in foreign languages. And more than likely, they spoke in Aramaic, because the men who accompanied Peter from Joppa were Jews and they were able to understand that they were praising God. These Greek-speaking, Gentile converts to Christianity were experiencing the same powerful display of the Spirit's indwelling and confirming presence as Peter, James and John had. And it was all based on nothing more than their faith in the gospel message as proclaimed to them by Peter.

So, why the difference? How come the Samaritans had been required to wait for the arrival of Peter and have him lay hands on them before they could receive the Holy Spirit? Luke never provides us with an explanation. He simply records the facts as they occurred. Once again, we have God seemingly breaking established protocol. Not only was He doing a new and seemingly unacceptable thing by having Peter take the gospel to unclean, uncircumcised Gentiles, He was pouring out His Spirit on them without any involvement by one of His chosen apostles. All of this would have left Peter and his six companions perplexed and bewildered. What was God doing? What was He thinking? And Luke records that Peter and his fellow Jews were amazed at what they were seeing. This would not have been what they expected. It was hard enough for them to fathom God allowing Gentiles to embrace the gospel. But for Him to do so without requiring them to undergo water baptism, signifying their repentance, was hard to understand. These Gentiles were immediately anointed by the Spirit of God, with no additional or prerequisite steps placed upon them. What we have here is the inaugural occurrence of what will be many more Gentile conversion stories. And they will all follow this same basic pattern.

Immediately after their acceptance of Christ as Savior and their acceptance by God as illustrated by their baptism in the Spirit, these new converts were baptized in water, signifying their acceptance and membership into the family of God, the body of Christ. And just as Peter's vision of the sheet filled with unclean creatures had been a shock to his system, this day's events was a real-life illustration of what God had been trying to tell him through that vision. "What God has made clean, do not call common" (Acts 10:15 ESV). The word "common" has a much more intense meaning in the Greek. It is *koinoō*, and it refers to something that is defiled, unholy, or profane. God had been trying to tell Peter that Gentiles, who were seen as "common" or defiled by the Jews, were no longer to be viewed that way. He was declaring them clean. And Peter had just seen God confirm His words with actions. The apostle Paul would later write of the significance behind that day's events.

*<sup>12</sup> The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ. <sup>13</sup> Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into one body by one Spirit, and we all share the same Spirit. – 1 Corinthians 12:12-13 NLT*

That day, in the home of a Roman centurion, Peter was given a shocking introduction into God's new dispensation of grace. In that room there stood Jews and Gentiles, each of whom had expressed their faith in Christ as their Savior and had received the gift of the Holy Spirit as confirmation. They had all things in common. They were co-equals. They were brothers and sisters in Christ. And as Paul would later tell the Galatians: "There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28 NLT). This was a new day.

But not everyone was going to be thrilled with God's seeming change in plans. When word got back to Jerusalem that Gentiles had received the word of God and been baptized in the Spirit of God, they were not exactly thrilled. This had not been what they were expecting. It wasn't that they were unwilling for Gentiles to be included in hearing the gospel message. Jesus had made that pretty clear in His commissioning of them as His witnesses. It was just that they thought there would be more requirement involved, such as circumcision, conversion to the Jewish faith, keeping of the Mosaic law, and more. After all, these people were common and unclean. They were out of step with the holy demands of God's righteous commands as given to Moses. There had to be more for them to do. And when Peter arrived back in Jerusalem, he was met with criticism from the circumcision party. This is a reference to those Jews who had come to faith in Christ, but who held strong ethnic-religious ties to their Jewish faith. After all, Jesus had been a Jew and a rabbi. He was the Messiah who, according to the Old Testament prophets, was to be the Savior of the Jewish people. These people put a high stock in things like circumcision and the keeping of the various dietary restrictions and Jewish religious observances. So, they were not exactly thrilled to hear that the Gentiles in Caesarea had been baptized into the body of Christ without any additional requirements placed upon them. In fact, they look down their noses at Peter and express their disdain for his activities in Caesarea: "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them" (Acts 11:3 ESV). As far as they were concerned, Peter had violated the law of God. He, a Jew, had defiled himself by associating with common, unclean Gentiles. But they were in for a shock. Their preconceived notions of how things should be were about to be rocked. They were going to hear about Peter's vision about the sheet filled with unclean animals. They were going to share his shock at God's command to "kill and eat." They would reel upon hearing Peter's recounting of all that happened in the home of Cornelius. And I find it interesting that Peter doesn't bother to bring up that his host during his stay in Joppa had been a man who practiced the unclean trade of tanning animal hides. Peter kept that little tidbit to himself.

But the bottom line is going to be that the church was entering a new and exciting dispensation, where the grace of God was going to be extended to all and all who would believe in the name of His Son. Men, women, slaves, freemen, Jews, Gentiles, Romans, tax collectors, prostitutes, priests, widows, businessmen, shepherds, fishermen, and even tanners. We may not always agree with God's ways. We may not approve of His methodology. But God doesn't ask for our advice or our permission. He simply asks that we trust Him and willingly submit to His divine plan for our lives and the redemption of the world.



## Don't Oppose What God Approves

Acts 11:4-18

<sup>4</sup> But Peter began and explained it to them in order: <sup>5</sup> "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. <sup>6</sup> Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. <sup>7</sup> And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' <sup>8</sup> But I said, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' <sup>9</sup> But the voice answered a second time from heaven, 'What God has made clean, do not call common.' <sup>10</sup> This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. <sup>11</sup> And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. <sup>12</sup> And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. <sup>13</sup> And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; <sup>14</sup> he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' <sup>15</sup> As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. <sup>16</sup> And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' <sup>17</sup> If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" <sup>18</sup> When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."— Acts 11:4-18 ESV

The first question we have to ask ourselves when reading this section of Luke's account, is why did he include it? After all, it simply appears to be a retelling by Peter of all that happened while he was in Caesarea. In fact, it is virtually identical to what Luke wrote in chapter 10. But the key difference is the audience to whom Peter is sharing the story of the conversions of Cornelius and all the other Gentiles who had gathered in his house to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. Peter is addressing his fellow apostles in Jerusalem. He is explaining to a room full of Jews what went down in Caesarea. And he is having to do so because he had been accused of wrongly associating with Gentiles. There were some in Jerusalem who, when they had received news of what had happened in Caesarea, were less-than-happy. In their minds, Peter had done the unthinkable. He, a Jew, had mingled with the unclean. He had defiled himself by associating with those whom the Mosaic law declared to be common and unclean. When Peter had arrived back in Jerusalem, rather than rejoicing with him over the exciting news of the conversions of Cornelius and his friends, these men said, "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them" (Acts 11:3 ESV).

Their response brings to mind the kind of reactions Jesus had received from the religious leaders regarding what they believed to be His questionable choices in relationships.

<sup>10</sup> Later, Matthew invited Jesus and his disciples to his home as dinner guests, along with many tax collectors and other disreputable sinners. <sup>11</sup> But when the Pharisees saw this,

*they asked his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with such scum?” – Matthew 9:10-11 NLT*

*<sup>1</sup> Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. <sup>2</sup> This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them! – Luke 15:1-2 NLT*

For some in the Jerusalem church, the idea of Peter eating with Gentiles was unacceptable. To think that he shared the gospel with them was even more disconcerting. How could he do such a thing? Well, Peter goes out of his way to tell them. He explains all that had led to his decision to make the journey to Caesarea. And he makes it clear that this had been God’s decision, not his own. He had simply obeyed orders and followed the divine directions given to Him by God. He recounts the vision he had received from God. And he once again makes note of the fact that the sheet containing all the unclean creatures had descended to him *out of* heaven. It had come from God’s very throne room, which meant that the very creatures Peter had viewed as unclean and defiled, had come from God’s presence. He had sent them. And at the end of the vision, the same sheet, full of supposedly unclean creatures, ascended *back* into heaven. And three separate times, God had told Peter, “What God has made clean, do not call common” (Acts 11:9 ESV).

Notice what God said to Peter. He was very specific in His word choices. God had told Peter that he had “made clean” these once unclean animals. The Greek word Luke used is *katharizō*, and it means to cleanse or purify. In a levitical or sacrificial sense, it means to pronounce something clean that has been purified by sacrifice. In a moral sense, it means to free something from defilement of sin and from faults (“G2511 - *katharizō* - Strong's Greek Lexicon (KJV).” Blue Letter Bible). God was telling Peter that He had made a divine determination to purify what had at one time been considered unclean. He had done it. God had declared the creatures to be clean. He had passed judgment and declared His decision. And He had expected Peter to accept it.

And the vision had been just that: A vision. It had been a visual tool used to teach Peter a real-life lesson regarding Gentiles and his view of them. God was about to let down a sheet full of unclean creatures, in the form of Cornelius, his family members and friends. But God had cleansed them through the sacrifice of His Son. Their sin debts had been paid for on the cross. They had once been defiled by their sin and separated from God as a result of their impurity, but God had done something to redeem and restore them. He had sent His Son to die for them. And long before Peter and his six companions had made the trip to Caesarea, God had already chosen those who would be saved there. And Peter was not to call common what God had already made clean. God had chosen to remove the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles. Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, wrote of this important determination on God’s part.

*In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us. – Colossians 3:11 NLT*

The gospel was not reserved just for Jews. Jesus had come as the Jewish Messiah, but He had become the Savior of the world. And once again, Paul describes that what Jesus did on the cross had opened up the doors of heaven to all – both Jews and Gentiles.

*<sup>13</sup> But Christ has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the law. When he was hung on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing. For it is written in the Scriptures, "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." <sup>14</sup> Through Christ Jesus, God has blessed the Gentiles with the same blessing he promised to Abraham, so that we who are believers might receive the promised Holy Spirit through faith. – Galatians 3:13-14 NLT*

Peter had seen this happen first-hand. He had seen God bless the Gentiles with the same blessing He promised to Abraham. He had watched in amazement as the Holy Spirit filled those Gentile converts and empowered them in the very same way He had the disciples on the day of Pentecost. And Peter could only say, "If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" (Acts 11:17 ESV). Peter knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that what he had witnessed in Caesarea had been of God. His vision, Cornelius' vision, the coming of the Spirit, the gift of tongues – it had all been evidence of God's divine hand. And he had no desire to stand opposed to the will of God.

And Luke simply records that when the Jewish believers in Jerusalem "heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, 'Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life'" (Acts 11:18 ESV). Like Peter, they saw that this was of God and that they had no business standing in opposition to what God had predetermined to do. If He had decided to deem Gentiles worthy of receiving the gospel, who were they to stand in His way.

As we will say later in Luke's account, many of the same individuals who had called Peter to task over his association with Gentiles, would raise their voices again in protest over the growing movement to convert Gentiles to the faith. In fact, in chapter 15, we will see where Paul and Barnabas are accused of not requiring circumcision of all Gentile converts. Luke records, "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'" (Acts 15:5 ESV). These men were teaching that Christianity was nothing more than a kind of reformed Judaism. They were demanding that all the requirements of the Mosaic law be kept in order to any Gentile to be accepted as a true believer. This matter will come up repeatedly in the later chapters of Luke's account, as we see Paul and others continue to spread the good news regarding Jesus Christ to the Gentiles.

There were those who could not accept what God was doing. It went against their preconceived notions of religious right and wrong. They had put God in a box and determined that there was only one way for people to have a right relationship with Him – and that was through some form of law-keeping or adherence to a set of religious rules. But Paul, the apostle who spent his life ministering the gospel to the Gentiles, would later write:

*<sup>27</sup> Can we boast, then, that we have done anything to be accepted by God? No, because our acquittal is not based on obeying the law. It is based on faith. <sup>28</sup> So we are made right with God through faith and not by obeying the law.*

*<sup>29</sup> After all, is God the God of the Jews only? Isn't he also the God of the Gentiles? Of course he is. <sup>30</sup> There is only one God, and he makes people right with himself only by faith, whether they are Jews or Gentiles. – Romans 3:27:30 NLT*

Peter and Paul were ministering in a new day. The rules had changed. The Redeemer had come. The way of salvation had been paved by the blood of Jesus Christ. No more hopeless attempts to try and live up to God's holy standards on your own. No more need for physical circumcision. God was circumcising hearts and setting apart a people for His own, whom He had declared to be clean. And that would include Jews and Gentiles.

## Just as He Had Planned It

Acts 11:19-30

*<sup>19</sup> Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. <sup>20</sup> But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. <sup>21</sup> And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. <sup>22</sup> The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. <sup>23</sup> When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, <sup>24</sup> for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. <sup>25</sup> So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, <sup>26</sup> and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.*

*<sup>27</sup> Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. <sup>28</sup> And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). <sup>29</sup> So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. <sup>30</sup> And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul. – Acts 11:19-30 ESV*

In this section, Luke begins to introduce yet another phase of the church's continuing spread and growth. Back in chapter eight, he had described one of the ramifications of Stephen's martyrdom. It was the increased persecution of the church, in part, because of the efforts of Saul. Yet, in spite of the intensification of the persecution, he said, "the believers who were scattered preached the Good News about Jesus wherever they went" (Acts 8:4 NLT). Then, by way of example, he chronicled Philip's trip to the region of Samaria and all that happened as a result. Here in chapter 10, Luke picks up where he left off, letting us know that the persecution of the church had resulted in a dispersion of the Christians well beyond Samaria. The believers who fled Jerusalem "traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch" (Acts 10:19 ESV). But then Luke adds a telling detail, revealing that these Jewish believers kept their efforts to share the gospel restricted to their own people: The Jews. He says that they spoke the word to no one but Jews. This is significant because he shares it immediately after detailing the dramatic outcome of Peter's journey to Caesarea, where Gentiles came to faith and received the anointing of the Spirit of God just as the disciples had on the day of Pentecost. This provides us with an important insight into the early days of the church. As the church continued to grow and the gospel made its way outside the confines of Jerusalem and Judea, the effort developed multiple fronts, each seemingly with its own emphasis and distinct motivation. Those Jewish believers who escaped and made their way to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch in Syria, were still under the impression that this new religion was little more than a new branch of reformed Judaism. It was a religion of Jews and for Jews. After all, Jesus had been a Jew and had claimed to be the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. So, it made sense that they would concentrate their efforts to share the gospel by focusing on fellow Jews. And, as Jews, the thought of sharing

their new-found faith with a Gentile would never have crossed their minds. Remember, it took a vision and a word from God to get Peter to go to the home of Cornelius.

Cyprus, Phoenicia and Antioch were located hundreds of miles from Jerusalem and illustrate the ever-expanding reach of the gospel. Antioch, located in the region of Syria, was 300 miles from the city of Jerusalem and, at that time, would have been the third-largest city in the entire Roman empire. It was a bustling metropolis, made up of people from all walks of life and from all over the world. It is estimated that Antioch had a population of anywhere from 500,000 to 800,000 people, with a seventh of them being Jews. As a city, it had a reputation for decadence and its citizens' love of pleasure. And yet, Antioch would become a major hub for Christianity in the coming years.

As the believing Jews made their ways to these various destinations, they faithfully shared the good news regarding Jesus Christ. Luke tells us that, in Antioch, they included Hellenistic Jews in their target audience. And he records that "a great number who believed turned to the Lord" (Acts 10:21 ESV). Even though they were restricting their outreach to Jews, God was blessing their efforts. And when news of what was happening in Antioch got back to the leadership of the church in Jerusalem, they sent Barnabas to check it out. When he arrived, Barnabas was greatly encouraged by what he saw and spent time exhorting those in the church there "to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose" (Acts 10:23 ESV). He knew that the days ahead would be difficult. It was not going to be easy to live out their new faith in the midst of a culture like that in Antioch. These people, as Jews, were already in the minority. Now, as believers, they were going to face further rejection by their own people. So, Barnabas felt compelled to strengthen the fledgling church by remaining with them for a prolonged period of time. And knowing he would need help, he traveled to Tarsus to enlist Saul in his efforts. This would begin an important new phase in the God-ordained ministry of Saul. And it is essential that we recognize God's sovereign hand at work in all these details. Stephen's martyrdom had resulted in persecution and the dispersion of the church. It had also resulted in Saul's intensified efforts in that persecution, after he approvingly watched the stoning of Stephen. And yet, the resurrected Jesus had confronted Saul as he made his way to Damascus to round up Christians and, as a result, Saul had undergone a dramatic conversion. And some three years later, when Saul had traveled to Jerusalem, it had been Barnabas who acted as his host and sponsor, introducing him to the apostles and explaining the dramatic details behind Saul's conversion. Now, when the leaders in Jerusalem felt compelled to send a representative to Antioch to investigate all that was going on, they *just so happened* to choose Barnabas. This was anything but a case of happenstance or blind fate. It was the hand of God. Barnabas was chosen because God had ordained it. And his arrival in one of the largest, predominantly Gentile cities in the Roman empire was something God orchestrated. Now, he would have Saul working by his side, a man whom Jesus had chosen to be His witness to the Gentiles. It's important that we recall the words spoken by Jesus to Ananias, commanding him to go lay hands on Saul.

*"Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel."* – Romans 9:15 ESV

Here in this chapter, we see God instigating what will be another new front in the war against sin and death. He is putting one of His primary weapons into the battle, sending Saul into an environment where his gifts and abilities will be used by the Spirit of God to accomplish great things for the Kingdom. It had probably been close to nine years since Saul's conversion, and during that time, he would have been growing in his faith and honing his Spirit-given abilities as a messenger of the gospel. God had been preparing Saul for this very occasion.

Luke records that Saul and Barnabas spent a year in Antioch; ministering, evangelizing, and growing the fledgling congregation there. Interestingly, Luke provides us with the insight that it was at this point in the timeline of the church that believers came to be known and referred to as Christians. This was most likely about ten years after Jesus' death, burial and resurrection. A decade had passed and the church, formerly called "the way" was now known for the name of the One whose name they believed and placed their faith in. This name is significant in that it contains three important characteristics. First of all, "Christ" is the Greek translation of Messiah. The Messiah was the Jewish Savior, promised by God in the Hebrew Scriptures. So, we have in the name "Christian", an obvious link to the Jewish roots of Jesus. But Christ would become the primary name by which Gentiles would commonly refer to Jesus. It became like a second name for Him, much as we use it today. And the ending, "ians" is of a Latin derivation, the language of Rome and of the predominate language of the empire. Luke's inclusion of the seemingly insignificant fact that the name, "Christian" had become the primary means by which believers were described is more important than we might imagine. The faith was becoming universalized. It was making inroads into the various cultures of the day, and developing a reputation as a free-standing religion, separate and distinct from Judaism or any other pagan religion. It was slowly, but surely, becoming a fixture in the culture of the day.

Luke ends this chapter with what appears to be another interesting, but unimportant anecdote: A prophecy regarding an eminent worldwide famine. Once again, we have to look beyond the black and white nature of Luke's reporting of Agabus' prophecy. Why did Luke, under the inspiration of the Spirit, include this information at this point in his book? As we will see, this famine will play a significant part in the future of the church. And Luke provides some insight into how it will impact the ministry of Saul himself.

*<sup>29</sup> So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. <sup>30</sup> And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul. – Acts 10:29-30 ESV*

The church in Jerusalem would suffer greatly because of this famine. The Jews there, already suffering from persecution because of their faith, would find themselves living in relative poverty and barely able to exist. While there had been a time, in the early days of the church in Jerusalem, when the rich believers had been able to provide for the less fortunate in their midst, after the arrival of the famine, that would no longer be possible. Now, the global church would provide for the needs of those in Jerusalem. And Saul would make it part of his life's mission to raise funds among the predominantly Gentile congregations to which he ministered, and to see that those resources made their way back to the church in Jerusalem. God would

even use a famine to accomplish His will regarding the spread of the gospel and the unity of the church around the world. As it spread, God would see to it that it remained unified in its love and mission.

## Rescued by God

Acts 12:1-11

<sup>1</sup> About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. <sup>2</sup> He killed James the brother of John with the sword, <sup>3</sup> and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. <sup>4</sup> And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people. <sup>5</sup> So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.

<sup>6</sup> Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison. <sup>7</sup> And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands. <sup>8</sup> And the angel said to him, "Dress yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." <sup>9</sup> And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. <sup>10</sup> When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him. <sup>11</sup> When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." – Acts 12:1-11 ESV

In the preceding chapter, Luke mentioned the famine taking place in the land of Judea. This devastating natural disaster had left the congregation in Jerusalem in a state of great need and physical suffering. So much so, that an effort was made on the part of the new Gentile converts to raise funds to send to the church in Jerusalem to assist them in their time of need. Luke records that Barnabas and Saul made a trip to Jerusalem to deliver the generous gift of the Gentile church.

<sup>29</sup> So the believers in Antioch decided to send relief to the brothers and sisters in Judea, everyone giving as much as they could. <sup>30</sup> This they did, entrusting their gifts to Barnabas and Saul to take to the elders of the church in Jerusalem. – Acts 11:29-30 NLT

But chapter 12 presents an even greater problem taking place back in Jerusalem. The persecution of the church was continuing to increase in magnitude and intensity. Now, Herod, the pseudo king of the Jews, who had been appointed by Rome, was getting in on the act. Herod Agrippa I was part-Jew but was greatly disliked by the Jewish people because of his close association with the Roman emperor Gaius, who had given him his position. In an effort to curry favor of the Jewish people, Herod used his political office to carry out attacks on the church, even going so far as to have James, the brother of John, executed. And when he saw how much this pleased the Jews, he made plans to do the same thing to Peter. The murder of James, one of the original apostles and a leader in the Jerusalem church, would have had a

devastating impact on its members. And, while the news of his death would have surprising and unexpected, Jesus Himself had predicted it. Years earlier, while Jesus was still on the earth, James and his brother, John, had come to Jesus with a request.

*<sup>35</sup> Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came over and spoke to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do us a favor."*

*<sup>36</sup> "What is your request?" he asked.*

*<sup>37</sup> They replied, "When you sit on your glorious throne, we want to sit in places of honor next to you, one on your right and the other on your left."*

*<sup>38</sup> But Jesus said to them, "You don't know what you are asking! Are you able to drink from the bitter cup of suffering I am about to drink? Are you able to be baptized with the baptism of suffering I must be baptized with?"*

*<sup>39</sup> "Oh yes," they replied, "we are able!"*

*Then Jesus told them, "You will indeed drink from my bitter cup and be baptized with my baptism of suffering." – Mark 10:35-39 NLT*

James was dead. And Peter was next. At least, that was Herod's plan. It was as if his plan was to eliminate the leadership of the church, one man at a time. And he was serious about it, having Peter arrested and thrown in jail.

This entire section of the Book of Acts provides us with an important interlude or break that separates the spread of the church to the Gentiles, as recorded in chapter 11, and Saul and Barnabas' trip to Cyprus, where they continued their evangelistic efforts among the Gentiles. As the gospel made its way into the world, the heat in Jerusalem was intensifying and the rejection of the gospel by the Jews was becoming increasingly volatile and violent. Yes, there had been thousands of Jews who had come to faith in Jesus, but as a nation, both politically and religiously, they were standing opposed to Jesus' claim to be their Messiah. John, the brother of James, recorded the nature of Israel's rejection of Jesus, illustrated in their corporate refusal to accept Him as their Messiah.

*<sup>37</sup> But despite all the miraculous signs Jesus had done, most of the people still did not believe in him. <sup>38</sup> This is exactly what Isaiah the prophet had predicted:*

*"Lord, who has believed our message?  
To whom has the Lord revealed his powerful arm?"*

*<sup>39</sup> But the people couldn't believe, for as Isaiah also said,*

*<sup>40</sup> “The Lord has blinded their eyes  
and hardened their hearts—  
so that their eyes cannot see,  
and their hearts cannot understand,  
and they cannot turn to me  
and have me heal them.”*

*<sup>41</sup> Isaiah was referring to Jesus when he said this, because he saw the future and spoke of the Messiah’s glory. <sup>42</sup> Many people did believe in him, however, including some of the Jewish leaders. But they wouldn’t admit it for fear that the Pharisees would expel them from the synagogue. <sup>43</sup> For they loved human praise more than the praise of God. – John 12:37-43 NLT*

Now, years later, and long after Jesus had been put to death by the religious authorities of Israel and the Roman government, His disciples were facing the same threat of execution. But the hardness of the hearts of the people of Israel, while disappointing, had a purpose. It opened up the door to the Gentiles. Because of Israel’s rejection of Jesus as their Messiah, the gospel was taken to non-Jews, so that they might enjoy the righteousness and redemption provided by faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior. And Paul, himself a devout Jew, would later write that Israel’s rejection of Jesus would not be permanent in nature.

*<sup>11</sup> Did God’s people stumble and fall beyond recovery? Of course not! They were disobedient, so God made salvation available to the Gentiles. But he wanted his own people to become jealous and claim it for themselves. <sup>12</sup> Now if the Gentiles were enriched because the people of Israel turned down God’s offer of salvation, think how much greater a blessing the world will share when they finally accept it. – Romans 11:11-12 NLT*

This was all part of God’s divine plan. Had the Jewish nation, as a whole, not turned its back on Jesus, the persecution and scattering of the church would not have taken place. But it did, because that is the way God ordained it. Even Peter’s arrest, while clearly the decision of Herod, was part of God’s sovereign, pre-established will.

Luke tells us that when Peter was arrested, the rest of the church got busy lifting him up in prayer. They feared for the worst. James was dead, and they had no reason to expect that the same thing would not happen to Peter. So, they took their need to God. Luke doesn’t tell us what they prayed, but we can easily assume that they pleaded for God to spare Peter’s life and to deliver him from the hands of Herod. And God did just that. The story of Peter’s deliverance provides us with a startling, but often overlooked reminder of God’s power. Herod, the king of the Jews, who had the full authority of the Roman empire behind him, had placed Peter in jail and had every intent to put him to death. And Luke tells us that, on the very night he had determined to carry out his plan, God stepped in. And He did so in a dramatic and memorable way. Peter was sound asleep, chained to two Roman soldiers, when suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared, filling the cell with dazzling light. Luke doesn’t tell us what happened to the two

guards, but they were either paralyzed or, perhaps, even killed by the angel. All we know is that Peter's chains dropped off and, after having gotten dressed, he walked out of the prison a free man. And the whole time this was going on, Peter thought he was dreaming. It wasn't until he had made his way out of the prison complex and the angel suddenly disappeared, that Peter realized that what had happened was real and not a dream.

*"Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." – Acts 12:11 ESV*

God had much more for Peter to do. His work on behalf of the kingdom was not yet complete. In John 21, we have Jesus' prediction of Peter's death, but this was not the time or the place. Herod, even as powerful as he was, stood powerless before God Almighty. His execution of James could not have happened without God's approval. We don't know why God allowed James to die by the sword, any more than we know why God allowed Stephen to be stoned to death. And God is not obligated to explain Himself to us. But we can rest in the fact that God, in His sovereign will and almighty power, was in full control of all the circumstances surrounding His church. He was going to use each and every event – the good, the bad and the ugly – to accomplish His divine will for the spread of the gospel and the growth of the church. And as we will see later on in this same chapter, God would eventually deal with Herod, revealing that no one stands outside of or aloof from God's sovereign hand and righteous judgment.

## Touched by an Angel

Acts 12:12-25

<sup>12</sup> When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. <sup>13</sup> And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. <sup>14</sup> Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. <sup>15</sup> They said to her, "You are out of your mind." But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, "It is his angel!" <sup>16</sup> But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. <sup>17</sup> But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Tell these things to James and to the brothers." Then he departed and went to another place.

<sup>18</sup> Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. <sup>19</sup> And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there.

<sup>20</sup> Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for peace, because their country depended on the king's country for food. <sup>21</sup> On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat upon the throne, and delivered an oration to them. <sup>22</sup> And the people were shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" <sup>23</sup> Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last.

<sup>24</sup> But the word of God increased and multiplied.

<sup>25</sup> And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark. – Acts 12:12-25 ESV

After his miraculous release by God from prison and from Herod's intentions to put him to death, Peter made his way to the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark. John Mark was the cousin of Barnabas, the man who enlisted Saul's help in Antioch. We are not told why Peter chose Mary's house as his destination, but it could have been that it was the one place of closest to the prison where he could seek refuge. Luke tells us that there were many believers who had gathered at Mary's home in order to pray for Peter. When he arrived, a young servant girl named Rhoda, was the one who responded to his knocks at the gate. But when she heard his voice, she was so surprised that she left him standing there and ran to inform the rest that Peter was standing outside the gate. Her news was met with incredulity and skepticism. Whatever it was that they had been praying for, it evidently had not been for Peter's release. They refused to accept Rhoda's word that Peter was standing outside the gate. They even went so far as to claim that it must have been his angel. The Greek word, *aggelos*, was typically used

to refer to a divine being or messenger from God. We cannot be sure exactly what those inside Mary's house meant when they used this word under these circumstances. They could have simply been saying that Peter had sent them a human messenger with news of his condition. That would have been a legitimate use of the word. But they could have also believed that it was an actual angel, sent from God with news about Peter. Finally, they might have been using the word in the sense of a guardian angel, sent by God to rescue Peter. Whatever they meant it seems that they were reticent to believe that it was actually Peter standing outside the gate. After all, they had just recently heard the devastating news that James, the brother of John, had been executed by Herod. So, even since Peter's arrest, they had been anticipating similar news. There is no indication in this passage that they had been praying for or expecting God to free Peter. They certainly could have been, but it seems odd that they were so dumbfounded and disbelieving when Peter showed up outside the place where they had been praying.

In fact, Peter was left to stand outside, knocking on the gate, hoping to gain entrance. He had found it was easier to get *out* of Herod's prison than it was to get *into* Mary's home. But eventually, they opened the gate and found Peter standing there, just as Rhoda had said, and they were amazed. The Greek word that Luke uses to refer to their reaction has a much more robust meaning than just amazement. It refers to a sense of astonishment or bewilderment. It was even used to refer to someone being out of their mind or insane. They were legitimately shocked to see Peter standing there. They had been expecting the worse. And they must have been shouting, crying, laughing and jumping up and down in excitement, because Luke indicates that Peter had to get them to quiet down long enough for him to tell them what had happened. And we can only imagine that they stood by in rapt silence as he related the details of his escape: The angel, the helpless prison guards, the chains falling away, and the self-opening prison gate. It was an amazing story and it must have left them awed and amazed at the power of their God.

When Peter had finished, he told them to take this news to James (the half-brother of Jesus) and the rest of the original apostles. This James, who had been in the upper room with the rest of his brothers on the day of Pentecost, had become a leading figure in the Jerusalem church and would later write the book that bears his name. Peter wanted these men to know what had happened to him, so that they might be encouraged by the news. Then, Luke tells us Peter departed. We are not told where he went or what he did. But it is likely that he left Jerusalem for a time in order to lessen the risk any of the other followers of Christ might face for harboring him as a fugitive. We know that Herod, upon discovering that Peter had somehow escaped, ordered a search for Peter, but he was never found. And, as a result, Herod had all the guards, whom he deemed responsible for Peter's escape, executed. Then, Herod himself left Jerusalem and traveled to Caesarea, where he had a palace. He got out of town. We don't know whether his departure was to save face or because he couldn't stand hearing the news circulating through the streets of Jerusalem that Peter had been miraculously rescued by God. This powerful man had failed in his attempt to put an end to the growth of Christianity. Even with his impressive resources and backed by the power of Rome, he was no match for the cause of Christ. In fact, Luke reveals that Herod's days were numbered.

Some dignitaries from Tyre and Sidon came to visit Herod at his royal palace. They were dependent upon Herod and his government for food, so even though they were at odds with the king, they found themselves having to grovel before him on behalf of their people. Luke goes out of his way to describe Herod in his royal robes, sitting on his royal throne and giving a royal speech before these men and all those in attendance. And these men, in spite of their dislike for Herod, were forced to listen, then to shower him with flattering accolades, shouting, “The voice of a god, and not of a man!” (Acts 12:22 ESV). And Herod basked in the glory of their words, thoroughly enjoying the experience of being compared to a god. But his pride and pleasure at being deified would not last long. Luke records, “Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last” (Acts 12:23 ESV). Herod was struck down by God. The angel who struck Peter’s side in order to wake him up and set him free, struck Herod with a debilitating and devastating disease. According to the Jewish historian, Josephus, Herod would suffer for five days and then die. Peter was alive and well, doing the will and the work of God. Herod was dead, for having tried to oppose to the will of God and eliminate the messengers of God.

And Luke matter-of-factly states that “the word of God increased and multiplied” (Acts 12:24 ESV). The gospel didn’t skip a beat. The kingdom of God continued to spread. And the chapter ends with the announcement that Barnabas and Saul left Jerusalem returned to Antioch, accompanied by John Mark. It was business as usual. There was work to be done. The death of James had not diminished the zeal and enthusiasm of the disciples. They mourned, but they went on with the work Jesus had assigned to them. Peter’s arrest had shaken them, but God had proven to them that He was in charge. He was not done with Peter and they were not done with their job of taking the gospel to the nations.

The work of spreading the gospel is not without its risks. There will always be enemies and opposition. We will always face difficulties and trials as a result of our faithful obedience to fulfill the commission given to us by Jesus. But like Peter and the other disciples, we have work to do. We must remain faithful and diligent to do what we have been called to do. As we will see, Peter didn’t give up. He didn’t quit or run in fear, viewing his work on behalf of Jesus as too dangerous or risky. He knew he could end up in jail again. He was well aware that his life could end in violent death, just like James. But as long as God gave him breath and kept setting him free from imprisonment, he would keep telling the good news of Jesus Christ to anyone who would listen.



## Too Blind to See

Acts 13:1-12

<sup>1</sup> Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. <sup>2</sup> While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." <sup>3</sup> Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

<sup>4</sup> So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. <sup>5</sup> When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John to assist them. <sup>6</sup> When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus. <sup>7</sup> He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. <sup>8</sup> But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. <sup>9</sup> But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him <sup>10</sup> and said, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? <sup>11</sup> And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time." Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand. <sup>12</sup> Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord. – Acts 13:1-12 ESV

At the close of the previous chapter, we saw that Peter left Jerusalem for parts unknown, while Saul and Barnabas headed back to Antioch in Syria, with John Mark as their traveling companion. In the opening verses of chapter 13, we get a glimpse into how God communicated with His church in those early years. He had equipped the church with prophets, teachers and a variety of other leaders. Paul would later include these very same offices or positions in his list of those through whom God had gifted the church.

<sup>11</sup> Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. <sup>12</sup> Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. <sup>13</sup> This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ. – Ephesians 4:11-13 NLT

Both Barnabas and Saul are included in Luke's list, indicating that they were each either a prophet or a teacher, or perhaps both. Some believe, because of the way the list is configured in the Greek, that there are two groups of individuals listed; one being the prophets in the church in Antioch, with Barnabas being one of them. The second group is made up of the two men with the gift of teaching: Manaen and Saul. It is impossible to know who had what gift, but

it is clear that God was speaking to and through these men in order to give His divine directions for future ministry. We have already seen how God used the stoning of Stephen and the increased level of persecution against the church to spread the gospel by forcing the Christians to disperse from Jerusalem. We have also seen God use a dream to communicate His will to Peter, commanding him to go to Caesarea and minister to Cornelius and his household. Now, we see God speaking through men whom He had endowed with the gift of prophecy. But notice that there was not any one man who stood up and spoke up, acting as the voice of God and proclaiming His will to the rest in the room. It seems from the text, that these men were gathered together for prayer and had been fasting, most likely seeking God's direction. And it would appear that God gave them a unified, corporate manifestation of His will by speaking to them through His Holy Spirit, who told them, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2 ESV). These two men, who were both part of the group that had gathered to pray and fast, were set apart by God for a specific task. This was the call of God, not that of men. Somehow, through the voice of the Spirit, God had communicated to these men that Saul and Barnabas were to be given a specific, God-ordained assignment, and Luke records, "after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off" (Acts 13:3 ESV).

Both of these men had become huge assets to the church there in Antioch. But the leadership recognized the clear call of God on their lives and, in spite of the loss of their services, gladly sent them on their way, having commissioned them by the laying on of hands. They didn't allow their own needs or desires to get in the way. I am sure they would have loved to have kept both Saul and Barnabas there in Antioch, but God had other plans. And Luke makes it clear that those plans were being directed by the Spirit of God. Their next destination was the island of Cyprus and, as would become their habit on the rest of their journeys, they made it their first priority to visit the local synagogue before they did anything else. While recognized as the apostle to the Gentiles, Saul never lost his deep desire to see his fellow Jews come to faith in Christ. Years later, in his letter to the Roman believers, he would write: "Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved" (Romans 10:1 NLT). In that very same letter, he will go on to say:

*<sup>13</sup> I am saying all this especially for you Gentiles. God has appointed me as the apostle to the Gentiles. I stress this, <sup>14</sup> for I want somehow to make the people of Israel jealous of what you Gentiles have, so I might save some of them. <sup>15</sup> For since their rejection meant that God offered salvation to the rest of the world, their acceptance will be even more wonderful. It will be life for those who were dead! – Romans 11:13-15 NLT*

And one of the most powerful indicators of his love for his fellow Jews and his deep desire to see them saved, is found in an earlier portion of his letter to the Romans:

*I would be willing to be forever cursed—cut off from Christ!—if that would save them.  
– Romans 9:3 NLT*

So, we will see Saul and Barnabas make it a habit to visit the synagogues within each city they visit, focusing a good portion of their efforts in attempting to persuade Jews to accept Jesus as their Messiah.

Having visited the local synagogue, the three men made their way across the island, eventually running into a man named, Bar-Jesus, described as a magician and a Jewish false prophet. It's interesting to note that Saul and Barnabas are on the island of Cyprus because God spoke truth to men who were real prophets of God. Now, two of these men, Saul and Barnabas, one or both who were gifted by God as a prophet, run into a false Jewish prophet. This man is described by Luke as a magician, a fairly innocuous term that sounds a bit non-intimidating to us. But in that day and age, it had a far more robust meaning. A magician could refer to a wise man, teacher, priest, physician, astrologer, seer, interpreter of dreams, soothsayer, or sorcerer. In many cases, their so-called magic had direct ties to the occult. Like the magicians in Pharaoh's court who had opposed Moses, Bar-Jesus most likely utilized demonic powers to perform signs and wonders. Interestingly enough, his name literally means, "son of a savior."

Luke indicates that Bar-Jesus had some kind of relationship with the local proconsul, a man named Sergius Paulus, who held the distinction of being the highest-ranking Roman official on the island. Sergius Paulus, upon hearing of the arrival of Saul and Barnabas, summoned them to appear before him, but Bar-Jesus, also known by his nickname, Elymas (Sorcerer), tried to intervene, seeing these two men as competition. He had the ear of the Roman proconsul and was not interested in having Saul and Barnabas interfere by sharing "the faith." But Saul, now mentioned as Paul for the first time in Luke's account, confronts this man, declaring in no uncertain terms his disdain for Bar-Jesus and his unholy agenda. "You son of the devil, full of every sort of deceit and fraud, and enemy of all that is good! Will you never stop perverting the true ways of the Lord?" (Acts 13:10 NLT). Paul saw this man for what he was: an enemy of the gospel. Out of jealousy and motivated by selfish ambition, he was attempting to dissuade Sergius Paulus from hearing the good news of Jesus Christ. And Paul, under the indwelling power and inspiration of the Spirit of God, struck Bar-Jesus blind. This man, who supposedly had the power to provide insight and wisdom by way of his sorcery, was suddenly without sight. The one who claimed to be a Jewish prophet, with the power to see into the future and declare the will of God, could not see his own hand in front of his face. His physical blindness became an apt representation of his moral and spiritual blindness. No longer would he mislead people with his lies. Instead, he would have to be led by the hand just to make his way around the city of Paphos.

And while Paul's display of Holy Spirit induced power left one man blind, it opened up the eyes of another. Sergius Paulus "believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord" (Acts 13:12 ESV). Paul had not just shut down Bar-Jesus, he had opened up the Scriptures to the proconsul, revealing to him the truth regarding Jesus and His offer of salvation. This Roman official believed. He heard the good news and received the gift of eternal life made possible through Jesus Christ's death on the cross. There on the island of Cyprus, Luke records only the salvation of a single individual: a Roman proconsul. His emphasis seems to be less about how many were saved, than about *who*. The nature of the evangelistic

efforts of the church was dramatically shifting. It was moving out of Jerusalem and Judea and away from the Jews. Bar-Jesus had been a Jew, but he had been struck blind because of his unbelief and opposition to the gospel. He is an apt representation of the entire Jewish nation at this point in time. He was mired in deceit, selfishness, idolatry and evil. He saw the gospel as competition, not a means of salvation. But Sergius Paulus, a pagan with no prior knowledge of Yahweh or any concept of who the Messiah might be, was miraculously converted to the faith. His eyes were opened, and his life was irrevocably changed forever.

## I Am Doing a Work

Acts 13:13-41

<sup>13</sup> Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John left them and returned to Jerusalem, <sup>14</sup> but they went on from Perga and came to Antioch in Pisidia. And on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. <sup>15</sup> After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it." <sup>16</sup> So Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said:

"Men of Israel and you who fear God, listen. <sup>17</sup> The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with uplifted arm he led them out of it. <sup>18</sup> And for about forty years he put up with them in the wilderness. <sup>19</sup> And after destroying seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance. <sup>20</sup> All this took about 450 years. And after that he gave them judges until Samuel the prophet. <sup>21</sup> Then they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. <sup>22</sup> And when he had removed him, he raised up David to be their king, of whom he testified and said, "I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will." <sup>23</sup> Of this man's offspring God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised. <sup>24</sup> Before his coming, John had proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. <sup>25</sup> And as John was finishing his course, he said, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but behold, after me one is coming, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.'

<sup>26</sup> "Brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to us has been sent the message of this salvation. <sup>27</sup> For those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize him nor understand the utterances of the prophets, which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him. <sup>28</sup> And though they found in him no guilt worthy of death, they asked Pilate to have him executed. <sup>29</sup> And when they had carried out all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. <sup>30</sup> But God raised him from the dead, <sup>31</sup> and for many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people. <sup>32</sup> And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, <sup>33</sup> this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm,

"You are my Son,  
today I have begotten you.'

<sup>34</sup> And as for the fact that he raised him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, he has spoken in this way,

"I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David.'

<sup>35</sup> Therefore he says also in another psalm,

*“You will not let your Holy One see corruption.”*

<sup>36</sup> For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption, <sup>37</sup> but he whom God raised up did not see corruption.

<sup>38</sup> Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, <sup>39</sup> and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. <sup>40</sup> Beware, therefore, lest what is said in the Prophets should come about:

<sup>41</sup> *“Look, you scoffers,  
be astounded and perish;  
for I am doing a work in your days,  
a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you.”* – Acts 13:13-41 ESV

Here we have Luke’s record of the initial leg of Paul and Barnabas’ first of three missionary journeys. And we will see that that it combines the divine will of God working through the lives of men. In verse four of this chapter, Paul and Barnabas are sent out by the leadership of the church in Antioch of Syria, but under the direction of the Holy Spirit. Their first stop was the island of Cyprus, where they ran into a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus. It just so happened that this man, who also was a sorcerer or magician, had a close relationship with the Roman governor, a man named Sergius Paulus. The seemingly chance encounter Paul and Barnabas had with Bar-Jesus led to this man’s blinding and the Roman governor’s salvation. It had been a divine appointment all along. And now, as Paul and Barnabas leave Cyprus, we are told by Luke that they made their way to Pisidian Antioch, located in Asia Minor, in what is now modern Turkey. But what prompted them to go to this seemingly remote location? It is clear, from Luke’s perspective, that they were being directed by the Holy Spirit, but there is no indication that from the text that Paul and Barnabas received a direct order from the Spirit to focus their efforts on this particular city. Recent scholarship has shown that the Roman governor, Sergius Paulus, whom Paul and Barnabas had helped lead to Christ, had connections in Pisidian Antioch. His family owned a large estate there. So, it would seem that he encouraged the two men to carry the good news of Jesus to his family members who lived in Pisidian Antioch. What this reveals is how God orchestrates events, even our relational encounters, in such a way, that we moves, unseen, guiding and directing our steps. When Paul and Barnabas had set out for Cyprus, they had no idea they would meet the Roman governor and see him come to faith in Christ. And they most likely had no hard and fast plans to place Pisidian Antioch on their missionary itinerary. But upon meeting Sergius Paulus and hearing of his concern for the spiritual well-being of his distant family members, Paul and Barnabas made it a priority to go and share the gospel there.

Upon their arrival, they made their way on the Sabbath to the local synagogue, as was becoming their custom. Their arrival had not gone unnoticed, because when the traditional reading of the Scriptures was complete, they were asked to say a few words to the congregation. It seems a bit odd that Paul and Barnabas were giving the privilege of addressing the crowd gathered in the synagogue. If news had reached Pisidian Antioch of all that had

happened on Cyprus, and the ministry Paul had had among the Gentiles in Antioch in Syria, the Jews in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch would most likely not have welcomed these two men as they did. But given the chance to speak, Paul took full advantage of it. And he presents a sermon that has a very familiar ring to it, echoing what Peter had said in Acts 2 and the message Stephen delivered in Acts 7. Paul started his message by addressing his audience. “Men of Israel and you who fear God, listen” (Acts 13:16 ESV). This would have included native Jews and Gentiles who had converted to Judaism. Then, he proceeded to give them a history lesson. He started by recalling God’s establishment of Israel as a great nation while they were living in the land of Egypt. He reminds them of God’s miraculous deliverance and the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness that their ancestors endured. But eventually, they arrived at the land promised to Abraham, and conquered the nations that lived there. And 450 years later, God gave them a series of judges, then their first king, a man named Saul. He was followed by the great king, David, a man after God’s own heart. And then, Paul gets to the real point of his message. “Of this man’s offspring God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised” (Acts 13:23 ESV). His goal all along had been to get to the topic of Jesus, the son of David and the Savior of the world. Paul wastes no time, but cuts to the chase, telling his audience “to us has been sent the message of this salvation” (Acts 13:26 ESV). But the Jews living in Jerusalem and Judea had refused to accept the very one who had brought them salvation. They had failed to recognize Jesus as the fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. Even His suffering and death had been predicted and, without even knowing it, the religious leaders in Jerusalem had helped fulfill these prophecies by having Jesus put to death. And Paul makes it clear that “though they found in him no guilt worthy of death, they asked Pilate to have him executed” (Acts 13:28 ESV). But God raised Him from the dead.

At this point, Paul had them. They were either incensed or totally intrigued by what he had to say. Because of their distance from Jerusalem and the events surrounding Jesus’ crucifixion, this may have been the first time many of them had heard this news. But as Jews and God-fearing Gentiles, they would have known about the Messiah and would have found the words of Paul, if nothing else, fascinating. And Paul let’s them know why he and Barnabas are there: “...we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus” (Acts 13:32-33 ESV).

Paul wants them to understand that the Scriptures they revered and read each and every Sabbath day in the synagogue, spoke of Jesus. He uses the psalms of David to show them that these passages were prophetic, speaking of the coming Messiah. Jesus, because He died and was raised back to life, did not undergo any decay. His body was spared the normal and natural effects of death. This was not true of King David, who had written, “You will not let your Holy One see corruption” (Acts 13:35 ESV). David had not been speaking of himself, but of one to come. And Paul lets them know, in no uncertain terms, that Jesus had been that one. He had come. He did die. But He was raised back to life. And Paul and Barnabas were witnesses of that reality. And the truly good news was that “through this man Jesus there is forgiveness for your sins. Everyone who believes in him is made right in God’s sight—something the law of Moses could never do” (Acts 13:38-39 NLT). There’s the crux of Paul’s message: Justification. How are sinful men made right with a holy God? Not by keeping the law. That was an impossible task. It

always ended in failure, because the law was always intended to show man his sin. Paul would later write a letter to the people living in this part of the world, telling them, “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” (Galatians 3:19 NLT). And one day, he would also write to the believers in Rome, telling them, “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).

Paul was offering this devout Jews and God-fearing Gentiles an opportunity to be made right with God, through faith in Jesus Christ. But he warns them to not repeat the sins of their ancestors, who had scoffed at the words of God. Quoting from the book of Habakuk, Paul repeats the words God had spoken to the people in Habakuk’s day. “I am doing a work in your days, a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you” (Acts 13:41 ESV). Paul warns his audience to not treat God’s words with disbelief. He wants them to understand that God was doing a work in their day. He had sent His Son, Jesus, to die for the sins of mankind, so that the penalty for sin could be paid for and the consequences of death eliminated once and for all. But they must believe. They must trust that what Paul is saying is true and that Jesus was the promised Messiah and Savior of the world.

God was doing a work among them, but they ran the risk of missing it if they refused to see it for what it was: God’s plan of salvation made possible through the death and resurrection of His very own son.

## Unworthy of Eternal Life

Acts 13:42-52

<sup>42</sup> As they went out, the people begged that these things might be told them the next Sabbath.

<sup>43</sup> And after the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who, as they spoke with them, urged them to continue in the grace of God.

<sup>44</sup> The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. <sup>45</sup> But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him. <sup>46</sup> And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. <sup>47</sup> For so the Lord has commanded us, saying,

*"I have made you a light for the Gentiles,  
that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth."*

<sup>48</sup> And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. <sup>49</sup> And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region. <sup>50</sup> But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. <sup>51</sup> But they shook off the dust from their feet against them and went to Iconium. <sup>52</sup> And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit. – Acts 13:42-52 ESV

Paul and Barnabas enjoyed a surprisingly positive response from the little speech Paul had given in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch. Unlike previous occasions, like the one when Stephen preached a similar sermon, but was met with anger and stoning; Paul and Barnabas were begged to come back the following Sabbath. The people were intrigued by all that Paul had to say and wanted to hear more. When the meeting broke up, Paul and Barnabas found themselves surrounded by a crowd of Jews and Gentile converts to Judaism, who had, most likely, been moved by Paul's closing words:

<sup>38</sup> *"Brothers, listen! We are here to proclaim that through this man Jesus there is forgiveness for your sins. <sup>39</sup> Everyone who believes in him is made right in God's sight—something the law of Moses could never do. – Acts 13:38-39 NLT*

They were intrigued. They had never heard anything like this before. And before parting ways with these highly inquisitive people, Paul and Barnabas urged them "to continue in the grace of God." The Greek word translated as "continue" actually carries the meaning of abiding or remaining in something. Paul and Barnabas clearly recognize that the grace of God has been extended to these people and encouraged them to remain in that grace – willingly open to

what God may have to show them in the days ahead. One of the worst things these people could do was to harden their hearts and resist the good news that Paul and Barnabas were sharing. They had heard the message of salvation made possible through Christ's death and resurrection, but they had not yet accepted it. But Paul and Barnabas knew that God was not done yet. They wanted their audience to remain open to what God was planning to do in their midst.

A week later, Paul and Barnabas made their way to the synagogue again. But this time they were met by a larger-than-capacity crowd, because virtually everyone in the city had shown up to hear what these two men had to say. Word had gotten out and the curiosity level was high. And, evidently, there were non-Jews or Gentiles in the crowd. They would not have been allowed into the synagogue, but they showed up anyway, hoping to catch a glimpse of these two strangers who were teaching about freedom from sin. But the Jews, angered by and jealous of the amount of notoriety and popularity Paul and Barnabas enjoyed, began to push back and refute their teaching. Luke records that they slandered Paul, most likely hurling all kinds of false accusations against him, in an attempt to undermine his credibility among the rest of the Jews.

But Paul and Barnabas refused to back down, instead speaking out boldly in their own defense by declaring that they were only doing what they had been told to do: Sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, with the Jewish people. That is why they had originally showed up at the synagogue in the first place. But Paul lets these incensed Jews know that, in rejecting the gospel message, they were turning their backs on eternal life. Not only that, they were freeing Paul and Barnabas to take the very same message of salvation to the Gentiles. And Paul uses an Old Testament Messianic prophecy from the Book of Isaiah to make his point.

*"I have made you a light to the Gentiles,  
to bring salvation to the farthest corners of the earth."* – Isaiah 49:6 NLT

This was God speaking of His own Son, proclaiming that He had entered the world in order to bring the light of the gospel to the whole world, to the farthest corners of the earth. This meant that Jesus had come in order to die for all mankind, not just the Jewish people. In fact, in that same passage in Isaiah, the voice of the Messiah Himself is heard:

<sup>5</sup> *"...the one who formed me in my mother's womb to be his servant,  
who commissioned me to bring Israel back to him.  
The Lord has honored me,  
and my God has given me strength.*

<sup>6</sup> *He says, "You will do more than restore the people of Israel to me."* – Isaiah 49:5-6 NLT

From the very beginning, Jesus had come to do far more than simply establish Israel as a great nation once again. He was not a Messiah who was going to come and set up an earthly kingdom and restore to Israel the glory and grandeur they had enjoyed during the days of David and Solomon. That day will come, but it is in the far-distant future. First, Jesus came to die as a

payment for the sins of mankind. He came to offer Himself as a sinless sacrifice, an unblemished lamb, capable of satisfying the just demands of a holy and righteous God.

The apostle John opens up his gospel with these sobering words:

*<sup>9</sup> The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.*

*<sup>10</sup> He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. <sup>11</sup> He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. <sup>12</sup> But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. <sup>13</sup> They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.*

– John 1:9-13 NLT

Jesus came to the Jewish people. He was born a Jew, a descendant of King David himself. He was raised by Jewish parents and circumcised as an infant, just like every other Jewish boy. He grew up going to synagogue with His parents. He made the annual trips to the city of Jerusalem for the celebrations of Passover and Pentecost. And all during His life, He had kept the law of God perfectly, having never sinned or violated a single command of His heavenly Father.

But John tells us Jesus was rejected by His own. He was the very Light of God, the reflection of God's own glory and character, but the Jewish people, for the most part, refused to see Him for who He was. They rejected the Light, preferring to live in darkness. John expands on this very thought later on in his gospel.

*<sup>18</sup> "There is no judgment against anyone who believes in him. But anyone who does not believe in him has already been judged for not believing in God's one and only Son.*

*<sup>19</sup> And the judgment is based on this fact: God's light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil. <sup>20</sup> All who do evil hate the light and refuse to go near it for fear their sins will be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But those who do what is right come to the light so others can see that they are doing what God wants."*

– John 3:18-21 NLT

And we see this lived out in the pages of Luke's account. The Jews who were verbally assaulting Paul and Barnabas, were rejecting the Light as expressed in the gospel message these two men had preached. Rather than rejoice in the news that they could have forgiveness for and freedom from their sins, they balked, fearing the very idea of having their sins exposed. They were self-righteous hypocrites, who would rather have men think well of them, than have confess their sin so that God would forgive them.

And when the Gentiles, who had gathered to hear what Paul and Barnabas had to say, heard them say that the gospel was now available to them, they were ecstatic. Luke writes that "they were very glad and thanked the Lord for his message; and all who were chosen for eternal life became believers" (Acts 13:48 NLT). Rather than reject the Light, they gladly received it, having the darkness in which they had lived for so long, illuminated by the glory of the grace of God.

They came to the light and they were saved. Unlike many of the Jews in the crowd that day, the Gentiles willingly and gladly exposed their sinfulness to the bright light of Christ and found that they received forgiveness, cleansing, acceptance and salvation. Not condemnation. Not rejection.

But those living in darkness did what they naturally do: They tried to hide their sin by getting rid of the light. They stirred up others in the city, influential others, to come to their cause and oppose the teaching of Paul and Barnabas. And they were successful, inciting a mob to chase Paul and Barnabas out of town. But these two men simply did as Jesus had instructed the disciples when He had sent them out. "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). But when they walked out of the city of Pisidian Antioch, they left behind a vibrant group of energized Gentile believers, who Luke describes as "filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 13:52 NLT). These men and women became lights in the midst of the darkness of Pisidian Antioch, and their presence would continue to have a cleansing, purging and transformative impact on that city for years to come.

## Some Were Saved

Acts 14:1-7

<sup>1</sup> Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. <sup>2</sup> But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. <sup>3</sup> So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. <sup>4</sup> But the people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews and some with the apostles. <sup>5</sup> When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to mistreat them and to stone them, <sup>6</sup> they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country, <sup>7</sup> and there they continued to preach the gospel. – Acts 14:1-7 ESV

After the Jews incited the wealthy and influential citizens to turn against Paul and Barnabas, they departed the city and made their way east, to Iconium, located on the easternmost border of the region known as Phrygia. Iconium was a Greek city-state, that due to its more distant location, had allowed its citizens to resist the influences of Rome, and maintain their more Grecian way of life and thinking. The city benefited from its location along a major trade route that linked Ephesus with Syria and the rest of the Mesopotamian world. Iconium was a virtual island of green in a sea of desert. It was lush and filled with vineyards, orchards and farms. And according to Greek mythology, it was the place where the gods, Prometheus and Athena, after a devastating world-wide flood destroyed all of mankind, made a race of new human beings by forming them out of mud and then breathing life into them. It was an eclectic city, made up of all kinds of people and, therefore, willing to tolerate a wide range of religious beliefs and practices.

When Paul and Barnabas arrived in town, they followed their usual pattern, and made their way to the local synagogue. As before, they found a congregation made up of ethnic Jews as well as God-fearing Jews or converted Gentiles. Luke tells us that, as a result of their ministry at the synagogue, “a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed” (Acts 14:1 ESV). They found a receptive audience. These people responded positively to the message of forgiveness of sin and eternal life proclaimed to them by Paul and Barnabas. But, as usual, there were those who stood opposed to what they were saying and doing. Luke records that unbelieving Jews, or those Jews who resisted the message of Jesus as the Messiah and Savior of the world, “spurned God’s message and poisoned the minds of the Gentiles against Paul and Barnabas” (Acts 14:3 NLT). The message of the gospel was met with receptivity *and* animosity, acceptance *and* resistance. There were those who had their eyes opened and their hearts softened, while others remained blinded and hard-hearted, completely resistant to what they had heard. One of the things we should notice here is that both groups heard the very same message, spoken by the very same individuals. So, why did some respond positively while others reacted negatively. Were some more spiritual than others? Was it because some were more intelligent and able to comprehend what Paul and Barnabas were saying? Or could it be that some were just worse sinners than others and, therefore, harder to reach? You see, if we’re not careful, we

can easily make salvation a man-focused event. In other words, we subtly and unknowingly, make it a decision that is completely man's choice. But Paul would see a repetitive pattern take place as he ministered. He would see those who believed in Jesus, and those who stood opposed to the offer of salvation. And he would later write, "So you see, God chooses to show mercy to some, and he chooses to harden the hearts of others so they refuse to listen" (Romans 9:18 NLT). And Paul, anticipating the shocked response of those who question the fairness of this kind of divine, seemingly arbitrary decision making, wrote:

<sup>19</sup> *Well then, you might say, "Why does God blame people for not responding? Haven't they simply done what he makes them do?"*

<sup>20</sup> *No, don't say that. Who are you, a mere human being, to argue with God? Should the thing that was created say to the one who created it, "Why have you made me like this?"* <sup>21</sup> *When a potter makes jars out of clay, doesn't he have a right to use the same lump of clay to make one jar for decoration and another to throw garbage into?* <sup>22</sup> *In the same way, even though God has the right to show his anger and his power, he is very patient with those on whom his anger falls, who are destined for destruction.* <sup>23</sup> *He does this to make the riches of his glory shine even brighter on those to whom he shows mercy, who were prepared in advance for glory.* <sup>24</sup> *And we are among those whom he selected, both from the Jews and from the Gentiles. – Romans 9:19-24 NLT*

The belief of some and the disbelief of others is not due to the communication skills of the messenger or the intelligence or comprehension levels of the hearer. It is all due to the mercy and grace of God. And while it would be easy for us to question God's fairness or wonder about the rightness of His methodology, Paul would remind us that "it is God who decides to show mercy. We can neither choose it nor work for it" (Romans 9:14 NLT). Paul, through his ongoing experience of sharing the gospel in all kinds of locations to all kinds of people, began to see and understand that what was happening was completely the work of God, not men. The fact that anyone came to faith in Christ was not because of Paul's powers of persuasion or oratory skills. It was due to the grace and mercy of God. Those who believed in the message of the gospel did so, not because they were smarter, more spiritual, or somehow more receptive, but because God chose for them to do so. Here is how Paul came to understand what he was seeing happen in the various cities in which he and Barnabas ministered.

<sup>25</sup> *Concerning the Gentiles, God says in the prophecy of Hosea,*

*"Those who were not my people,  
I will now call my people.  
And I will love those  
whom I did not love before."*

<sup>26</sup> *And,*

*“Then, at the place where they were told,  
‘You are not my people,’  
there they will be called  
‘children of the living God.’”*

*<sup>27</sup> And concerning Israel, Isaiah the prophet cried out,*

*“Though the people of Israel are as numerous as the sand of the seashore,  
only a remnant will be saved.” – Romans 9:25-27 NLT*

It was Jesus Himself who said, “no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them to me, and at the last day I will raise them up” (John 6:44 NLT). And later on, in that same conversation with His disciples Jesus had said:

*<sup>64</sup> But some of you do not believe me.” (For Jesus knew from the beginning which ones didn’t believe, and he knew who would betray him.) <sup>65</sup> Then he said, “That is why I said that people can’t come to me unless the Father gives them to me.” – John 6:64-65 NLT*

Salvation is the work of God, not man. Paul and Barnabas were nothing more than tools in the hands of God. They spoke, but it was God who chose to open the ears of those who heard so they could respond. It was God who chose to show His mercy on some and not others. And while we may find this hard to accept, we must rest in the sovereign will of God, trusting that He knows what He is doing. That is exactly what Paul and Barnabas did. When their message met with resistance, they didn’t wring their hands and wonder what they had done wrong. You don’t see any sign of them questioning their tactics or making a concerted effort to make their message more user-friendly and appealing. They trusted that they were doing what Jesus had commanded them to do, and that God was doing what only He could do: draw men to Himself. And Luke records that “the apostles stayed there a long time, preaching boldly about the grace of the Lord. And the Lord proved their message was true by giving them power to do miraculous signs and wonders” (Acts 14:3 NLT). They didn’t worry about the number of converts. They didn’t despair over the ones who refused to hear. They simply did their job and left the results of up to God. And Luke tells us that “the people of the town were divided in their opinion about them. Some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles” (Acts 14:4 NLT).

It wasn’t until Paul and Barnabas learned of a plot on their lives, that they finally departed the city and headed for Lystra and Derby. But when they left the city of Iconium, it was far different than when they had arrived. There were new believers there. A congregation of born-again Jews and Gentiles had been formed, and it had been the work of God. And Luke tells us that the pattern continued as Paul and Barnabas began the process all over again, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with the citizens of Lystra and Derby. They were being led by the Spirit of God. They were obeying the command given to them by the Son of God. And they were watching many come to faith because of the sovereign work of God.



## Worthless Things

Acts 14:8-18

<sup>8</sup> Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. <sup>9</sup> He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, <sup>10</sup> said in a loud voice, "Stand upright on your feet." And he sprang up and began walking. <sup>11</sup> And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!" <sup>12</sup> Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. <sup>13</sup> And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. <sup>14</sup> But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, <sup>15</sup> "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. <sup>16</sup> In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. <sup>17</sup> Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." <sup>18</sup> Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them. – Acts 14:8-18 ESV

After having to leave Iconium due to the Jews stirring up a mob against them, Paul and Barnabas made their way to Lystra, another Roman colony about 20 miles or a day's journey away. Upon their arrival in Lystra, Paul and Barnabas have another one of those "chance" encounters that were becoming an everyday part of their lives. They were speaking somewhere in Lystra to a crowd that had gathered. There is no mention of them attending the synagogue, as had become their custom. So, it may be that there were not enough Jews in Lystra to warrant a synagogue. But, as usual, Paul and Barnabas had no problem attracting attention to themselves. They simply began to speak to any who would listen. And, in the crowd that day, there happened to be a man who had been lame since birth.

Luke makes note of the fact that the man was listening to what Paul was saying, and that Paul, spotting the man in the crowd, could tell that the man "had faith to be made well" (Acts 14:9 ESV). Luke provides no insight into how Paul knew this. Most likely, Paul was given a kind of spiritual intuition from the Holy Spirit. He was somehow able to see into the man's heart and perceive in his eyes that this man had faith that God could heal him. He believed. We are not told what Paul said to the crowd, but whatever it was, it produced in this man a believing faith that the God of whom Paul spoke was powerful enough to restore the use of his limbs. Now, it is important that we consider not only this event is included by Luke, but why this man was in the crowd. By this time in the story, we should be recognizing that nothing that is taking place is happenstance or the result of fate. This man's presence in the crowd was according to the sovereign will of God. The very fact that Paul made eye-contact with this man had not left to chance. God had been the one to orchestrate the entire situation. Either God had directed Paul

and Barnabas to the very spot where this man was sitting, or this man was able to find help in being carried to where the two men were speaking. God had preordained that this encounter would take place. But why? Because Paul and Barnabas were now entering the frontier, the furthest edges of the world as they knew it. They were in uncharted territory, speaking to people who were primarily Gentiles and who had no knowledge of Jesus at all. They most likely had heard nothing about the events that had taken place in Jerusalem back during the Feast of Pentecost. These two men, Paul and Barnabas, were strangers to them and, their message about Jesus as the Messiah and Savior, would have been alien and foreign to them. So, God arranged for a way to validate the message of His two messengers. They had been given sign gifts, just as Peter and the other apostles had received. These gifts allowed them to perform signs and miracles, providing their message with credibility and their claim to be speaking for God with visible, tangible proof. This man's presence was going to prove critical. You can almost sense the building sense of anticipation that precede Luke's description of what happened next. Luke records that Paul, speaking in a very loud voice, cried out, "Stand upright on your feet." The crowd had no idea what was about to happen, but we do. We have seen this kind of thing happen before. All the way back in chapter three, we have the story of Peter saying to the blind beggar, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" (Acts 3:6 ESV). And the man did, leaving the crowds looking on in wonder and amazement. That had happened all the way back in Jerusalem. Now, we find Paul and Barnabas hundreds of miles away, ministering in a far-flung Roman colony, filled with pagans who knew nothing of Yahweh, had no idea who Jesus or any reason to believe that what these two men had to say was true. And that was where the lame man came in.

His healing by God will validate Paul and Barnabas' claims to be speaking for God. And not only that, it will go a long way in establishing Paul as a co-equal with Peter, the recognized spiritual leader of the church at that time. Paul had been a late comer to the party. He had not been one of the original 12 disciples but had come to faith in Jesus long after Jesus' death, burial and resurrection, having had a one-on-one encounter with the risen Christ along the road to Damascus. For the rest of his life, Paul would battle with those who would try to question the validity of his apostleship. They would continually attempt to paint him as a charlatan, questioning his authority and raising doubts regarding his teaching. But here on this occasion, God sovereignly reveals Paul's impeccable credentials as one of His messengers by providing Paul with the very same powers Peter possessed.

And to say that Paul's actions got the attention of the crowd would be an understatement. Luke writes that the people cried out, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!" (Acts 14:11 ESV). They knew no better than to attribute what they had just seen to the work of gods – the gods with which they were familiar. They called Barnabas, Zeus, and Paul, Hermes. The Greeks had a pantheon of gods they worshiped, so we can only speculate why they happened to choose these two particular gods as being the ones standing before them. But whatever their reasoning, these people were strong enough in their convictions that they were dealing with deities, that the priest of the local temple, dedicated to Zeus, showed up with oxen and garlands to make a sacrifice. We are left to imagine what this seen must have looked like. Try and picture the confusion and chaos going on as these people shouted out their praises to Paul

and Barnabas, bowing in reverence before them. And just imagine what was going through the minds of these two men as they found themselves the mistaken, but unmistakable focus of the crowd's worship.

We do know that Paul and Barnabas were appalled at what they witnessed, because Luke tells us they tore their clothes in a outward display of grief and remorse. They wanted no part of what was going on. And Paul spoke up, saying, "Friends, why are you doing this? We are merely human beings—just like you! We have come to bring you the Good News that you should turn from these worthless things and turn to the living God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them" (Acts 14:15 NLT). What Paul said here was dangerous and risky. He was blatantly denying any claim to deity. But more than that, he was attacking their worship of false gods. When he mentions "worthless things", he was speaking of Zeus and Hermes. He compared them to the living God, the one true Creator of heaven and earth. Paul was treading on very thin ice here. He was surrounded by a crowd of very passionate devotees to the Greek gods. They were excited and convinced that their deities had come to visit them. And Paul was not only shattering any notion that Zeus and Hermes had come to earth, he was describing two of their most revered gods as nothing more than worthless things.

And Paul made it perfectly clear that it was Yahweh, the God of the Jews, who was the source of any and all things they enjoyed in life, not the Greek gods. It was He who provided them with food, crops, rain and joyful hearts. This would have been unexpected and unwanted news to the people of Lystra. It would have been seen as a case of slander and blasphemy, treating their gods with disdain and disrespect. But, surprisingly, instead of infuriating the crowd, the words of Paul and Barnabas seemed to have the opposite effect. The people tried to worship them all the more.

What we seem to have here is a clear example of the spiritual hunger of lost mankind. These people were spiritually starving to death. They had plenty of gods, but no real proof that their gods actually existed. Like all false gods, theirs were distant and disconnected from everyday life. They never really knew if their gods were engaged with or even interested in their daily lives. Which might explain why they were so excited when they thought that Paul and Barnabas were gods come to earth. They greatly desired an intimate relationship with their gods, but to date, their experience had been the same as every other people group who has set its desires and affections on "worthless things." Years later, Paul would write to believers living in nearby Galatia, reminding them of their former love affair with false gods: "you were slaves to so-called gods that do not even exist" (Galatians 4:8 NLT). The people in the crowd that day had no idea that their gods were false. They were blind to the fact that their gods were helpless and hopeless to assist them. Their gods could not save or protect them. In fact, the psalmist eloquently and unapologetically described the true nature of false gods when he wrote:

*<sup>4</sup> Their idols are merely things of silver and gold,  
shaped by human hands.*

*<sup>5</sup> They have mouths but cannot speak,  
and eyes but cannot see.*

- <sup>6</sup> *They have ears but cannot hear,  
and noses but cannot smell.*
- <sup>7</sup> *They have hands but cannot feel,  
and feet but cannot walk,  
and throats but cannot make a sound.*
- <sup>8</sup> *And those who make idols are just like them,  
as are all who trust in them. – Psalm 115:4-8 NLT*

Paul and Barnabas had struck a nerve. They had performed a sign among a people who were desperately in search of proof that their religion was relevant, and their gods were real. The world, then as now, was cloaked in deep darkness, and filled with spiritually blind people staggering about looking for any glimmer of hope and help. They were deceived. And Paul would later write to the believers in Corinth, clarifying the source of the world's deception, and the only means of hope.

*<sup>4</sup> Satan, who is the god of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don't believe. They are unable to see the glorious light of the Good News. They don't understand this message about the glory of Christ, who is the exact likeness of God.*

*<sup>5</sup> You see, we don't go around preaching about ourselves. We preach that Jesus Christ is Lord, and we ourselves are your servants for Jesus' sake. <sup>6</sup> For God, who said, "Let there be light in the darkness," has made this light shine in our hearts so we could know the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ. – 2 Corinthians 4:4-6 NLT*

The light was spreading. But as we will see, the darkness was great. The enemy had blinded the spiritual eyes of those living in Lystra, leaving them in a state of perpetual darkness, desperately longing for relief and redemption, but unable to see the truth when it stood right in front of them.

## An Open Door of Faith

Acts 14:19-28

<sup>19</sup> But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. <sup>20</sup> But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. <sup>21</sup> When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, <sup>22</sup> strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. <sup>23</sup> And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

<sup>24</sup> Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. <sup>25</sup> And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia, <sup>26</sup> and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled. <sup>27</sup> And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. <sup>28</sup> And they remained no little time with the disciples. – Acts 14:19-28 ESV

Popularity is a fickle and fleeting thing. Paul and Barnabas had found themselves the unwilling recipients of the worship of the people of Lystra. After having seen Paul and Barnabas restore a lame man's ability to walk, the crowds had mistakenly declared them to be gods come to earth. They even tried to offer sacrifices to them. And, even though Paul and Barnabas vehemently denied any claim to deity and tried to point the people to Yahweh, it did no good. But then, a contingent of Jews from Pisidian Antioch and Iconium, who stood opposed to the teaching of Paul and Barnabas, convinced the crowd that they had been deceived. They pleaded with the people of Lystra to see Paul and Barnabas as what they were: Fraud. These individuals had traveled a long way, just to keep Paul and Barnabas from doing what God had called them to do. They so opposed the message of these two men that they had plotted to stone them when they had been in Iconium, but Paul and Barnabas had left before they could do it. So, these men had followed them all the way to Lystra and now, they turned the crowds against them. We are not told how long it took them to persuade the people of Lystra that Paul and Barnabas were dangerous heretics and not gods, but they must have been convincing. The very same people who had lauded praise and honor on Paul and Barnabas and tried to lay wreaths at their feet, picked up stones and hurled them at Paul. Luke tells us that their efforts were so thorough that they believed Paul to be dead. And yet, Paul miraculously survived. Luke states that "he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe" (Acts 14:20 ESV). Luke's description of this entire scene comes across as so matter-of-fact, almost flippant. It begs for more detail. We want to know more. Did God somehow heal all of his wounds? When Luke says that some of the disciples gathered around Paul's broken body, had they prayed for his healing? Did they lay hands on him? Luke doesn't elaborate. He simply tells us that Paul stood and went back to work. He entered the city, and then he and Barnabas went on to Derby. There's a question that naturally arises out of this story. Why did Stephen have to die as a result

of his stoning, while Paul was allowed to live? Neither Luke nor God provide us with an answer. But we have seen time and time again, that God always has a reason for what takes place. Obviously, God was not done with Paul. He had more for him to do. And Paul would learn a great deal from this experience. In fact, after having ministered in Derby, Paul and Barnabas would make a return trip through Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch, where they gathered all the believers and encouraged them “to continue in the faith, reminding them that we must suffer many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22 NLT). Paul would become a living example of the trials and tribulations that come with faithful service to God. He would even provide a detailed description of his many sufferings on behalf of Christ.

*<sup>23</sup> “I know I sound like a madman, but I have served him far more! I have worked harder, been put in prison more often, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again. <sup>24</sup> Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. <sup>25</sup> Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. <sup>26</sup> I have traveled on many long journeys. I have faced danger from rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be believers but are not. <sup>27</sup> 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 11:23-27 NLT*

And Paul would go on to conclude that all of this, the pain, the suffering, beatings, and deprivations, were valuable because they revealed his own weakness. Which is what led him to say, “I would rather boast about the things that show how weak I am” (2 Corinthians 11:30 NLT). And in the very next chapter of that same letter, Paul would clarify his thought even further:

*<sup>9</sup> “So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. <sup>10</sup> That’s why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” – 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 NLT*

Paul would suffer greatly, but he would also believe strongly. He would find strength in his weaknesses. He would discover the reality that His God was greater than anything he might have to suffer or endure. Paul was not motivated by success or popularity. He didn’t measure his effectiveness by how big the crowds were or how well his message was received. What is really fascinating about this story is that Paul never asks God the “why” question. He doesn’t shake his fist at God and demand an explanation for why he had to be stoned almost to death just for doing what he had been told to do. You don’t hear Paul complaining or whining about his circumstances or wondering why Barnabas escaped without a mark. No, instead, Paul saw his suffering as a privilege. Which is why he could tell the Philippian believers: “For you have been given not only the privilege of trusting in Christ but also the privilege of suffering for him”

(Philippians 1:29 NLT). No doubt, Paul had been told by his fellow apostles about Jesus' sermon on the mount and had heard the words He spoke that day.

*<sup>11</sup> "God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you are my followers. <sup>12</sup> Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven. And remember, the ancient prophets were persecuted in the same way. – Matthew 5:11-12 NLT*

And Paul, who would go on to suffer a great many trials and tribulations on behalf of Christ, would become an expert on the topic, providing him with the right and responsibility to instruct other believers about this vital topic.

*<sup>3</sup> We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. <sup>4</sup> And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. <sup>5</sup> And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love. – Romans 5:3-5 NLT*

When Paul told the disciples in Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch, that "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God", he knew what he was talking about. But what was he teaching? Is he saying a person must undergo suffering before they can become a Christian? Is he teaching that suffering is a necessary part of our salvation? The answer to these questions would be, "No." Paul believed in salvation based on God's grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone. There was nothing we were required to bring to the table. Our salvation is, completely and entirely, the work of God, but between the point at which we come to faith in Christ and when we stand before Him in heaven, there is that period in which we are required to live out our faith in this world. At the point of our conversion, we become citizens of heaven, but we remain inhabitants of this earth. We have an inheritance reserved for us in heaven, but are required to live as aliens, strangers and sojourners in this land. And Jesus Himself told us, "Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world" (John 16:33 NLT).]

Living as a believer in this world is not easy. Paul knew that truth well. And he wanted all those who came to faith in Christ to understand that this world is not our home. We are on loan here by God, with an important task to perform: To share the good news of Jesus Christ with all those who find themselves living in darkness. We are to be ambassadors and witnesses to the resurrection power of Jesus Christ.

*<sup>6</sup> So we are always confident, even though we know that as long as we live in these bodies we are not at home with the Lord. <sup>7</sup> For we live by believing and not by seeing. <sup>8</sup> Yes, we are fully confident, and we would rather be away from these earthly bodies, for then we will be at home with the Lord. <sup>9</sup> So whether we are here in this body or away from this body, our goal is to please him. – 2 Corinthians 5:6-9 NLT*

Our goal is to please Him, not ourselves. Our ambition should be to do His will, not our own. Paul saw clearly that God “had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27 ESV). And he realized that God had chosen to use Barnabas and himself to lead countless Gentiles to that open door. If they had to suffer in the course of doing their part, so be it. If it meant they had to endure some pain and rejection along the way, it was worth it. Paul had a long-term perspective. He was in it for the long-haul and realized that his reward would come in the future, not the present. He didn’t seek or expect accolades and rewards in this life, but in the one to come. He wasn’t surprised by trials and tribulations, but fully expected them. In fact, he actually rejoiced in them. They became proof that his efforts were not in vain. He had the enemy’s full attention. He had smacked the beehive and upset the order of things. And he would gladly do it again.

## The 800-Pound Gorilla in the Room

Acts 15:1-11

<sup>1</sup> 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.” <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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.”

<sup>6</sup> The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, <sup>9</sup> and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. <sup>10</sup> 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? <sup>11</sup> 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 save 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 time 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.

*<sup>7</sup> “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. <sup>8</sup> And God, who knows the heart, has testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, <sup>9</sup> 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.

*<sup>8</sup>For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup>not 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

<sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> After they finished speaking, James replied, “Brothers, listen to me. <sup>14</sup> Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. <sup>15</sup> And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written,

<sup>16</sup> “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,  
<sup>17</sup> 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 <sup>18</sup> known from of old.’

<sup>19</sup> Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God,  
<sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> 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:

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

<sup>14</sup> *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? <sup>15</sup> 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!”*

<sup>16</sup> *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:

<sup>5</sup> *“I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. <sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> *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. <sup>4</sup> But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, <sup>5</sup> **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,** <sup>6</sup> whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, <sup>7</sup> 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.

*<sup>10</sup> these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. <sup>11</sup> 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.

*<sup>16</sup> “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,  
<sup>17</sup> 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 <sup>18</sup> 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.

*<sup>20</sup> 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.*

*<sup>21</sup> 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

<sup>22</sup> 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, <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> 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, <sup>25</sup> 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, <sup>26</sup> men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>27</sup> We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. <sup>28</sup> For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: <sup>29</sup> 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.”

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

<sup>36</sup> 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.” <sup>37</sup> Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. <sup>38</sup> 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. <sup>39</sup> And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, <sup>40</sup> but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. <sup>41</sup> 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:

<sup>20</sup> “I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. <sup>21</sup> 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.

*<sup>1</sup> What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Don’t they come from the evil desires at war within you? <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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.

*<sup>4</sup> 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...<sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.

<sup>6</sup> And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. <sup>7</sup> And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. <sup>8</sup> So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. <sup>9</sup> 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." <sup>10</sup> 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.

*<sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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.

*<sup>5</sup> 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.

*<sup>20</sup> 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.*

*<sup>21</sup> 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."*

*<sup>22</sup> 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

*<sup>11</sup> So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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.*

*<sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> She followed Paul and us, crying out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." <sup>18</sup> 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.*

*<sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, "These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. <sup>21</sup> They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice." <sup>22</sup> The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. <sup>23</sup> And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. <sup>24</sup> 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

*<sup>25</sup> About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, <sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." <sup>29</sup> And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. <sup>30</sup> Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" <sup>31</sup> And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." <sup>32</sup> And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. <sup>33</sup> 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. <sup>34</sup> 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.*

*<sup>35</sup> But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying, "Let those men go." <sup>36</sup> 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." <sup>37</sup> 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." <sup>38</sup> The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens. <sup>39</sup> So they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. <sup>40</sup> 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.

*<sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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.*

*<sup>9</sup> 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.

*<sup>25</sup> Gently instruct those who oppose the truth. Perhaps God will change those people’s hearts, and they will learn the truth. <sup>26</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, <sup>3</sup> 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.” <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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, <sup>7</sup> and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” <sup>8</sup> And the people and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things. <sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> I “robbed” other churches by accepting their contributions so I could serve you at no cost. <sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>27</sup> 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.

*<sup>11</sup> ...for I have learned how to be content with whatever I have. <sup>12</sup> 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.

*<sup>7</sup> For you know that you ought to imitate us. We were not idle when we were with you. <sup>8</sup> 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.

*<sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> As the Scriptures say,*

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

*<sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> It is foolish to the Jews, who ask for signs from heaven. And it is foolish to the Greeks, who seek human wisdom. <sup>23</sup> 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

*<sup>10</sup> The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> Then the brothers immediately sent Paul off on his way to the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. <sup>15</sup> 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.*

*<sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? <sup>20</sup> For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean." <sup>21</sup> 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

<sup>22</sup> So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, <sup>25</sup> nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. <sup>26</sup> 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, <sup>27</sup> 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, <sup>28</sup> 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.’

<sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, <sup>31</sup> 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.”

<sup>32</sup> Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this.” <sup>33</sup> So Paul went out from their midst. <sup>34</sup> 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.

*<sup>20</sup> 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.

*<sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools. <sup>23</sup> 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:

<sup>2</sup> *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.*

<sup>3</sup> *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

<sup>15</sup> *Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.*

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

<sup>16</sup> *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

<sup>1</sup> After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. <sup>2</sup> 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, <sup>3</sup> and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. <sup>4</sup> And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks.

<sup>5</sup> When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. <sup>6</sup> 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." <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, <sup>10</sup> 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." <sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Give my greetings to Priscilla and Aquila, my co-workers in the ministry of Christ Jesus.  
<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> For I decided that while I was with you I would forget everything except Jesus Christ, the one who was crucified. <sup>3</sup> I came to you in weakness—timid and trembling. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>1</sup> With Christ as my witness, I speak with utter truthfulness. My conscience and the Holy Spirit confirm it. <sup>2</sup> My heart is filled with bitter sorrow and unending grief <sup>3</sup> 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.

*<sup>2</sup> “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. <sup>3</sup> When the watchman sees the enemy coming, he sounds the alarm to warn the people. <sup>4</sup> Then if those who hear the alarm refuse to take action, it is their own fault if they die. <sup>5</sup> 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.

*<sup>9</sup> “Don’t be afraid! Speak out! Don’t be silent! <sup>10</sup> 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.

*<sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> 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

<sup>12</sup> But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal, <sup>13</sup> saying, "This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law." <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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." <sup>16</sup> And he drove them from the tribunal. <sup>17</sup> 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.

<sup>18</sup> 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.

*<sup>4</sup> I always thank my God for you and for the gracious gifts he has given you, now that you belong to Christ Jesus. <sup>5</sup> Through him, God has enriched your church in every way—with all of your eloquent words and all of your knowledge. <sup>6</sup> This confirms that what I told you about Christ is true. <sup>7</sup> Now you have every spiritual gift you need as you eagerly wait for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> 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.

## Another Weapon in the Arsenal

Acts 18:18-28

*<sup>18</sup> At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow. <sup>19</sup> And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. <sup>20</sup> When they asked him to stay for a longer period, he declined. <sup>21</sup> But on taking leave of them he said, "I will return to you if God wills," and he set sail from Ephesus.*

*<sup>22</sup> When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and then went down to Antioch. <sup>23</sup> After spending some time there, he departed and went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.*

*<sup>24</sup> Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. <sup>25</sup> He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. <sup>26</sup> He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. <sup>27</sup> And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, <sup>28</sup> for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus. – Acts 18:18-28 ESV*

When Paul left Corinth, he had Priscilla and Aquila with him. They made a stop in Cenchreae, just south of Corinth, and Luke indicates that, while they were there, Paul had cut his hair. This seems like a strangely personal note for Luke to add to his document, but the reason for it is found in the phrase, "for he was under a vow." Evidently, Paul had made a vow to God. We are not given the context or content of the vow, but simply informed that one had been made. The fact that Paul was cutting his hair was indication that the vow had ended. It was more than likely some sort of Nazarite vow. The details surrounding this kind of vow are found in the Book of Numbers.

*<sup>2</sup> "Speak to the Israelites, and tell them, 'When either a man or a woman takes a special vow, to take a vow as a Nazirite, to separate himself to the Lord, <sup>3</sup> he must separate himself from wine and strong drink, he must drink neither vinegar made from wine nor vinegar made from strong drink, nor may he drink any juice of grapes, nor eat fresh grapes or raisins. <sup>4</sup> All the days of his separation he must not eat anything that is produced by the grapevine, from seed to skin.*

*<sup>5</sup> "All the days of the vow of his separation no razor may be used on his head until the time is fulfilled for which he separated himself to the Lord. He will be holy, and he must let the locks of hair on his head grow long. – Numbers 6:2-5 NLT*

It was at the end of the vow, once it had been fulfilled, that the individual was required to cut their hair. But according to the Book of Numbers, there was more involved. Paul would have been required to return to Jerusalem, where he would go to the temple and “take the hair from his consecrated head and put it on the fire where the peace offering is burning” (Numbers 6:18 NLT). Again, Luke does not tell us whether the vow Paul made was a Nazarite vow or not. But he had made a promise to God, setting himself apart for God’s use and had determined to seal that promise with a binding vow. It could have been that Paul, finding himself traveling on his own for the first time once Silas and Timothy remained behind, felt the need to make a vow, asking for His divine favor. As Paul prepared to leave Greece, he must have felt his vow had been fulfilled.

Paul sailed to Ephesus, where he went to the local synagogue, but without Priscilla and Aquila. They were Gentiles who had become Christians, but not Jewish proselytes, so they would not have been welcome at the synagogue. The Jews with whom Paul reasoned begged him to stay and he told them he would, if it was in God’s will. This provides a telling insight into Paul’s growing dependence upon God. He knew that any agenda he had would have to take a backseat to the will of God. There were many times in Paul’s life when he wished to go somewhere or do something but was prevented from doing so by God.

Paul left Ephesus, sailing all the way to Caesarea. This would have been a long and dangerous journey, and because of the time of the year, Paul would have been sailing on very rough seas. But he made it safely to Caesarea, and then on to Jerusalem, where he greeted the church there. It was probably in Jerusalem that Paul offered the sacrifice that fully fulfilled his vow. But from there he made his way to Antioch in Syria and then on to the regions of Galatia and Phrygia, where, as Luke indicates, he strengthened and encouraged all the disciples that had been made there. Paul was circling back, revisiting those places where he had originally shared the gospel and seen people come to faith in Christ. We tend to think of Paul as an evangelist, but these verses give us a glimpse into his passion for discipleship. He was determined to see those who came to faith in Christ, grow up in their salvation. The apostle Peter shared this same passion.

*Like newborn babies, you must crave pure spiritual milk so that you will grow into a full experience of salvation. Cry out for this nourishment, – 1 Peter 2:2 NLT*

Paul would later write to the believers in Ephesus, reminding them that he expected them to grow spiritually.

*<sup>14</sup> Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won’t be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. <sup>15</sup> Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. – Ephesians 4:14-15 NLT*

While Paul spent a great deal of his time traveling and preaching the gospel to those who were lost, he also dedicated much of his life to writing letters to those places he had been, encouraging the spiritually immature to grow up in their faith. And, at times, Paul could be very blunt and harsh, as he was when he wrote to the church in Corinth.

*<sup>1</sup> Dear brothers and sisters, when I was with you I couldn't talk to you as I would to spiritual people. I had to talk as though you belonged to this world or as though you were infants in Christ. <sup>2</sup> I had to feed you with milk, not with solid food, because you weren't ready for anything stronger. And you still aren't ready... – 1 Corinthians 3:1-2 NLT*

As Paul was making the rounds, revisiting all the places he had been before, the narrative takes us back to Ephesus, where he had left Priscilla and Aquila. They meet a man names Apollos, a Jew from Alexandria in Egypt. Luke describes him “an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures” (Acts 18:24 ESV). But more importantly, he was a believer who “had been instructed in the way of the Lord” (Acts 18:25 ESV). This man, driven by his knowledge of the Old Testament and his newfound zeal for Jesus, was passionately speaking in the synagogue, sharing all he knew. But there were evidently deficiencies in his content, because Priscilla and Aquila pulled him aside and “explained to him the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26 ESV). One of the things that seems to have been missing from Apollos’ teaching was any knowledge regarding the need for the baptism of the Spirit. Luke indicates that all he knew was the baptism of John, which was a baptism of repentance. John the Baptist had been unable to offer the baptism of the Spirit because Jesus had not yet begun His ministry and, therefore, had not yet died and been resurrected. The Spirit had not come yet. But now, things were different. The baptism of John was not enough. Even John had told those who had come to him for baptism, “I baptize with water those who repent of their sins and turn to God. But someone is coming soon who is greater than I am--so much greater that I'm not worthy even to be his slave and carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Matthew 3:11 NLT).

Apollos was a gifted man, who had been chosen by God, not only for salvation, but for the ministry of the gospel. Greatly aided by the input of Priscilla and Aquila, he departed with their blessing and headed into the region of Achaia. Once there, “he greatly helped those who through grace had believed” and “powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus” (Acts 18:27-29 ESV). God had just added another weapon to His growing arsenal, and He did so by selecting an Egyptian who had first become a convert to Judaism and then a follower of Christ. This reveals God’s incredible creativity and the growing diversity of the church. Paul and Apollos could not have been any different. And yet, God had chosen both of them for His service. And each would bring a different set of gifts and abilities, making them uniquely qualified to do what God had called them to do.



## True Repentance Made Possible

Acts 19:1-7

<sup>1</sup> And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. <sup>2</sup> And he said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." <sup>3</sup> And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They said, "Into John's baptism." <sup>4</sup> And Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus." <sup>5</sup> On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup> And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. <sup>7</sup> There were about twelve men in all. – Acts 19:1-7 ESV

At the close of the last chapter, Luke had Apollos headed to Achaia, while Paul was beginning the first leg of his third missionary journey. Paul would circle back through the regions of Galatia and Phrygia, eventually arriving back in the city of Ephesus. Apollos, meanwhile, was still in Corinth, having not yet left for Achaia. For time being, these two men would pass as ships in the night, but their paths would eventually cross.

If you recall, Apollos had been in Ephesus. That is where he had met Priscilla and Aquila. They had found him there, teaching in the synagogue, where "he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John" (Acts 18:25 ESV). That last point is important because, as we will see, upon his arrival in Ephesus, Paul will meet additional individuals, referred to as disciples, who knew only the baptism of John. This is important. Were these people believers or not? They are referred to as disciples, but that does not necessarily mean they were disciples of Jesus. In fact, in this context, Luke seems to infer that they were disciples of John the Baptist. They had been baptized with his baptism. But what is the difference between the baptism of John and that of the Holy Spirit? All the way back in Acts chapter one, we have recorded Jesus' command, given to the eleven just before He ascended back into heaven.

<sup>4</sup> While he was with them, he declared, "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait there for what my Father promised, which you heard about from me. <sup>5</sup> **For John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.**" – Acts 1:4-5 NLT

Jesus mentioned the baptism of John, and he referred to it as a baptism with water. Why did he bring this up at that particular time? He appears to be contrasting John's baptism with the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which the disciples were soon to receive. But what is the difference? To understand that, we have to go back to the gospels and see how John himself described his baptism.

*“I baptize you with water **for repentance**, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” – Matthew 3:11 ESV*

His was a baptism of repentance. He was unable to offer the baptism of the Spirit because Jesus had not yet begun His ministry, and most certainly had not yet died, been resurrected or ascended. Therefore, the Spirit had not yet come. So, John’s baptism was limited in its scope.

John made the difference between their two baptisms clear.

*<sup>8</sup> I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” – Mark 1:8 ESV*

John’s baptism was reserved for those who repented. But what does that mean? To repent literally meant to change one’s mind, to change your way of thinking. John was demanding that they turn away from their sin and back to God. He was requiring people to prepare their hearts for the coming Messiah by changing the way they thought about their own sin. And John was also demanding that they change their behavior.

*<sup>8</sup> “Bear fruits in keeping with repentance....*

But listen to how he answers the questions of those who wanted to know what kind of fruit he was expecting.

*<sup>10</sup> And the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do?” <sup>11</sup> And he answered them, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” <sup>12</sup> Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” <sup>13</sup> And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” <sup>14</sup> Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.” – Luke 3:8,10-14 ESV*

John was demanding lifestyle change. He was requiring behavior modification. In other words, he was providing them with a list of works to perform to prove that they were truly repentant and turning from their sins and back to God. But how long could that kind of self-manufactured change last? Would any of those people be able to pull off what John was demanding, over the long-haul? No. But why? Because they lacked the very thing they needed to do it: The Holy Spirit. And John knew that what he was doing was temporary in nature, designed to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus.

*<sup>30</sup> “This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.’ <sup>31</sup> I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.” – John 1:30-31 ESV*

He also knew that his water baptism was not going to be enough. What the people really needed was the baptism Jesus would make possible: That of the Holy Spirit.

*<sup>33</sup> “I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’” – John 1:33 ESV*

So, Paul arrived in Ephesus and met some disciples. They obviously knew about Jesus, but when Paul asked them if they had received the Holy Spirit when they had believed, they had answered, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit” (Acts 19:2 ESV). When Paul asked them what kind of baptism they had received, they told him, “The baptism of John” (Acts 19:3 NLT). They had been baptized because they had repented of their sins. And Paul pointed out the difference.

*“John’s baptism called for repentance from sin. But John himself told the people to believe in the one who would come later, meaning Jesus.” – Acts 19:4 NLT*

John’s baptism had been symbolic in nature. It was done to signify that the one being baptized had repented and agreed to change their behavior, to live a different lifestyle, all in preparation for the arrival of the Kingdom of God. These disciples anticipated the coming of the Messiah and the Kingdom of God but had not understood that Jesus had been the fulfillment of those expectations. And they had no idea that there was a baptism of the Spirit of God awaiting all those who truly believed that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. And Luke records that, as soon as these individuals heard the truth that Paul shared, they believed.

*<sup>5</sup> As soon as they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. <sup>6</sup> Then when Paul laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in other tongues and prophesied. – Acts 19:5-6 NLT*

Their belief in Jesus resulted in the same outpouring of the Spirit that the disciples had experienced in the upper room on the day of Pentecost. These men exhibited the same miraculous manifestations of the Spirit’s indwelling power. Again, it is important that we understand that the events recorded in the Book of Acts are not meant to be prescriptive in nature, but descriptive. What happens here in Ephesus is not intended to be a hard-and-fast example of how the Holy Spirit comes. We have already seen that Cornelius and all those in his home who believed, immediately received the Spirit without the laying on of hands by Peter. Each of these events represent a specific circumstance with unique characteristics surrounding it. Paul was in Ephesus, a hotbed of demonic activity and idolatry. Apollos had been there before Paul, and Luke made it clear in chapter 18, that Apollos had also been baptized in water for having repented of his sins. But he had not yet received the baptism of the Spirit. He most likely propagated among the people what he knew and had experienced. It was Priscilla and Aquila who had come along and opened the eyes of Apollos to the truth. It seems that Paul’s laying on of hands and the subsequent pouring out of the Spirit was a way in which God confirmed the difference between mere repentance and true redemption, available only

through belief in the finished work of Jesus on the cross. The arrival of the Holy Spirit by the laying on his hands also validated Paul's apostleship and authority among the people in Ephesus. Paul would later write to the believers in Ephesus, telling them:

*<sup>13</sup> And when you heard the word of truth (the gospel of your salvation)—when you believed in Christ—you were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit, <sup>14</sup> who is the down payment of our inheritance, until the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of his glory. – Ephesians 1:13-14 NLT*

The Holy Spirit came with belief in the name of Jesus. In the case of those in Ephesus, He came with a slight delay and by the laying on of hands. But that was not to be the norm or the required means by which the Spirit was received. It was only in this instance and under circumstances unique to those in Ephesus at that time.

The real issue is that, with the arrival of the Spirit and His indwelling of the believers in Ephesus, they received the very power that was going to make true repentance possible. Up until that time, they could only *hope* to live repentant lives. They could try, eagerly and sincerely, but they would ultimately fail, because they lacked the power to keep their promise to repent and live differently. And Paul would later write to these same believers, reminding them that their salvation and subsequent sanctification, was the work of God.

*<sup>8</sup> For by grace you are saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God; <sup>9</sup> it is not from works, so that no one can boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are his workmanship, having been created in Christ Jesus for good works that God prepared beforehand so we may do them. – Ephesians 2:8-10 NLT*

Now, for the very first time in their lives, they had the capacity to live truly repentant lives, marked by holiness and righteousness. And they could accomplish the will of God because they possessed the power of God in the form of the Spirit of God. Their lives would be radically different, but not based on anything they had done or would do. It was all the work of God.

## New Life in Christ

Acts 19:8-20

<sup>8</sup> And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. <sup>9</sup> But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. <sup>10</sup> This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

<sup>11</sup> And God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, <sup>12</sup> so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them. <sup>13</sup> Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims." <sup>14</sup> Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. <sup>15</sup> But the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?" <sup>16</sup> And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. <sup>17</sup> And this became known to all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks. And fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled. <sup>18</sup> Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. <sup>19</sup> And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. <sup>20</sup> So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily. – Acts 19:8-20 ESV

In Ephesus, Paul would have one of his longest and most spiritually prolific periods of ministry. He would remain in the city, ministering among its people for two years. And Luke tells us that, during that time, "God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul" (Acts 19:11 ESV), and he proceeds to describe just how extraordinary they were.

*...even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them. – Acts 19:12 ESV*

This is unlike anything we have seen up to this point in Luke's story. While both Peter and Paul had performed miracles of all kinds, including the healing of the lame, the exorcising of demons and, in Peter's case, the raising of someone from the dead, we have no previous mention of anyone being healed by handkerchiefs or aprons. But we do have a precedent established in Luke's gospel, when a woman was healed simply by touching the garment of Jesus.

<sup>42</sup> As Jesus went with him, he was surrounded by the crowds. <sup>43</sup> A woman in the crowd had suffered for twelve years with constant bleeding, and she could find no cure.

<sup>44</sup> Coming up behind Jesus, she touched the fringe of his robe. Immediately, the bleeding stopped.

<sup>45</sup> *“Who touched me?” Jesus asked.*

*Everyone denied it, and Peter said, “Master, this whole crowd is pressing up against you.”*

<sup>46</sup> *But Jesus said, “Someone deliberately touched me, for I felt healing power go out from me.”* <sup>47</sup> *When the woman realized that she could not stay hidden, she began to tremble and fell to her knees in front of him. The whole crowd heard her explain why she had touched him and that she had been immediately healed.* <sup>48</sup> *“Daughter,” he said to her, “your faith has made you well. Go in peace.”* – Luke 8:42-48 NLT

The key to this woman’s healing was her faith. She believed that Jesus had the power to heal her but was only doubtful that she might be able to get His attention. So, she simply touched His robe and was completely healed, and Jesus commended her for her faith.

It would seem that the very same thing was taking place in Ephesus. We are not told why this particular form of healing seemed to be prevalent there, but it most likely had to do with the fact that Ephesus was a hotbed of demonic activity due to the large percentage of sorcerers and magicians who practiced their trade there. The people of Ephesus were used to seeing strange and inexplicable things take place. Some, no doubt, was the result of demonic activity, while much was the work of charlatans and religious fakes. So, it would seem that God was confirming Paul’s ministry and message through these out-of-the-ordinary signs and wonders. Luke even indicates that Paul’s reputation in the city had grown to such a degree that a group of traveling Jewish exorcists tried to improve their success rate at casting out demons by saying, “I command you in the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, to come out!” (Acts 19:13 NLT). Here were Jews, who didn’t believe in Jesus trying to use His name to further their own ends. And as Luke indicated earlier in this chapter, Paul had found the Jews in Ephesus resistant to his message, forcing him to abandon his efforts to reach them. He had spent three months ministering in the synagogue but had been met with met with unbelief on the part of some, who had publicly ridiculed Paul’s message regarding Jesus. As a result of the stubborn resistance of the Jews, Paul had moved his daily discussions into a public hall owned by a man named, Tyrannus. And, for two years, Paul would continue to use this facility to hold meetings with all who were interested in hearing His messages about Jesus. Luke indicates “that people throughout the province of Asia—both Jews and Greeks—heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:10 NLT).

Paul’s presence was having an impact. His preaching, teaching, and miracles, all done in the power of the Spirit of God, were setting him apart and drawing crowds to hear him, in much the same way as the messages and miracles of Jesus had done. But some were drawn to Paul’s power, not his message of salvation. They were attracted to his miraculous ability to perform signs and wonders, not his offer of eternal life through Jesus Christ. And Luke describes the seven sons of Sceva, whose father was a leading Jewish priest. These men were attempting to cast out demons in the name of Jesus but had no relationship with Jesus. And it would appear that their efforts had been successful, until one particular occasion, when they met resistance

from the demon there attempting to exorcise. Now, their previous exorcisms were most likely nothing more than shams. They were simply utilizing the name of Jesus in their fake exorcisms in order to attract the attention of the people and prove that they had the same power Paul had. Since these men were not believers in Jesus, they had no power to cast out demons. And if their efforts were demonic in nature, it would have made no sense for them to cast out a demon. Jesus made this point clear when He had been accused of casting out demons in the power of Satan.

*<sup>24</sup> But when the Pharisees heard about the miracle, they said, "No wonder he can cast out demons. He gets his power from Satan, the prince of demons."*

*<sup>25</sup> Jesus knew their thoughts and replied, "Any kingdom divided by civil war is doomed. A town or family splintered by feuding will fall apart. <sup>26</sup> And if Satan is casting out Satan, he is divided and fighting against himself. His own kingdom will not survive. <sup>27</sup> And if I am empowered by Satan, what about your own exorcists? They cast out demons, too, so they will condemn you for what you have said. <sup>28</sup> But if I am casting out demons by the Spirit of God, then the Kingdom of God has arrived among you." – Matthew 12:24-28*  
NLT

These men had no power to cast out demons. Satan would not have empowered them to cast out one of his own. That would have made no sense. And, as unbelievers, they had no access to the Spirit of God, so they had no ability to cast out demons by the power of God. And when they eventually ran across a real demon, they were in for a real surprise. When they had tried to cast out the demon in the name of Jesus, it had responded, "I know Jesus, and I know Paul, but who are you?" (Acts 19:15 NLT), and then, Luke records that the demon-possessed man attacked them. They ended up running for their lives, beaten and stripped of all their clothes. They discovered the true nature of spiritual warfare. It is not a show or a game to be played. And Paul would later write to the believers in Ephesus, warning them:

*<sup>10</sup> Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. <sup>11</sup> Put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil. <sup>12</sup> For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places. – Ephesians 6:10-12* NLT

Demonic activity must have been high in Ephesus. And with the increase in the number of believers, the resistance on the part of Satan grew in strength and intensity. The encounter of the seven sons of Sceva with the demon had made an impact. It left the people in even greater awe of Jesus. It attracted more people to the teaching of Paul. And Luke indicates that many of those who had placed their faith in Christ confessed their sinful practices, most likely a reference to their participation in sorcery and the occult. No doubt, some of those who had been involved in exorcisms, witchcraft and demonic activity, had a change of heart when they saw what had happened to Sceva's seven sons. And as these individuals came to faith in Christ,

they were moved by the Spirit of God to change their behavior. And Luke reports that their life change was tangible and costly.

*<sup>19</sup> A number of them who had been practicing sorcery brought their incantation books and burned them at a public bonfire. The value of the books was several million dollars. – Acts 19:19 NLT*

They were giving up their old ways. They were turning from darkness to the light. And Luke tells us that their visible signs of repentance and rejection of their former lifestyles caught the attention of others in the city. As a result, “the message about the Lord spread widely and had a powerful effect” (Acts 19:20 NLT). The message of the gospel was leaving its mark. Not only were people coming to faith in Jesus, they were experiencing remarkable transformations in the way they lived they lived their lives. It was not going to business as usual. The indwelling presence of the Spirit of God was empowering these people to experience new life in Christ. And Paul would later write about this life-transforming power.

*<sup>17</sup> ...anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun! <sup>18</sup> And all of this is a gift from God, who brought us back to himself through Christ. – 2 Corinthians 5:17-18 NLT*

New life. New nature. New hope. New power. The old life is gone; a new life has begun. That is the message of the gospel.

## Exposed by the Light

Acts 19:21-41

<sup>21</sup> Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome." <sup>22</sup> And having sent into Macedonia two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while.

<sup>23</sup> About that time there arose no little disturbance concerning the Way. <sup>24</sup> For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen. <sup>25</sup> These he gathered together, with the workmen in similar trades, and said, "Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth. <sup>26</sup> And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods. <sup>27</sup> And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship."

<sup>28</sup> When they heard this they were enraged and were crying out, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" <sup>29</sup> So the city was filled with the confusion, and they rushed together into the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's companions in travel. <sup>30</sup> But when Paul wished to go in among the crowd, the disciples would not let him.

<sup>31</sup> And even some of the Asiarchs, who were friends of his, sent to him and were urging him not to venture into the theater. <sup>32</sup> Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together. <sup>33</sup> Some of the crowd prompted Alexander, whom the Jews had put forward. And Alexander, motioning with his hand, wanted to make a defense to the crowd. <sup>34</sup> But when they recognized that he was a Jew, for about two hours they all cried out with one voice, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

<sup>35</sup> And when the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, "Men of Ephesus, who is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is temple keeper of the great Artemis, and of the sacred stone that fell from the sky? <sup>36</sup> Seeing then that these things cannot be denied, you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. <sup>37</sup> For you have brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess. <sup>38</sup> If therefore Demetrius and the craftsmen with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another. <sup>39</sup> But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly. <sup>40</sup> For we really are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion." <sup>41</sup> And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly. – Acts 19:21-41 ESV

Paul had a burning desire to go to Rome. He expressed it many times in his letters and it remained a driving focus throughout his life. As we begin this final section of Luke's book, he confirms that Paul was desirous of making Rome one of his destinations, and Luke indicates that it was a desire given to Paul by the Holy Spirit. This urge to visit the capital of the Roman

empire was driven by the Spirit of God. Repeatedly, Paul had felt the compulsion to take His ministry to the great capital city of the Roman, but the timing had not yet been right. Paul expressed his intentions to visit Rome in the letter he wrote to the believers living there.

*<sup>13</sup> I want you to know, dear brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to visit you, but I was prevented until now. I want to work among you and see spiritual fruit, just as I have seen among other Gentiles. <sup>14</sup> For I have a great sense of obligation to people in both the civilized world and the rest of the world, to the educated and uneducated alike. <sup>15</sup> So I am eager to come to you in Rome, too, to preach the Good News. – Romans 1:13-15 NLT*

Paul was not interested in seeing the sights of Rome, but in spreading the good news about Jesus Christ, and building up the church. And Rome was not the only place Paul desired to visit. He took seriously Christ's commission to take the gospel to the ends of the earth, confessing to the believers in Rome that he saw their city as a stepping stone on his way to yet another distant land: Spain.

*<sup>23</sup> But now I have finished my work in these regions, and after all these long years of waiting, I am eager to visit you. <sup>24</sup> I am planning to go to Spain, and when I do, I will stop off in Rome. And after I have enjoyed your fellowship for a little while, you can provide for my journey. – Romans 15:23-24 NLT*

But while Paul had his heart set on visiting Rome, he did not neglect his responsibility to continue spreading the gospel throughout Asia. He sent Timothy and Erastus to Macedonia, while he remained in Asia. Luke picks up the story in Ephesus, where Paul had been "reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus" (Acts 19:9 ESV). It is obvious that the church was growing and the gospel was making an impact on the city, because Luke indicates that "there arose no little disturbance concerning the Way" (Acts 19:23 ESV). The transformed lives of the believers in Ephesus had made an impact on the city and its economy. If you recall, Luke made note of the fact that the new converts to Christianity had been led to give up their pagan practices.

*<sup>19</sup> And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. <sup>20</sup> So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily. – Acts 19:19-20 ESV*

It seems that the evangelistic efforts of Paul were making a real difference, not only in the lives of those who were saved, but in the community in which they lived. A local craftsman named Demetrius, who manufactured idols made of silver, had seen his business suffer greatly due to the increasing number of believers in Jesus. He contended that his business losses were directly attributable to Paul's assertions that idols were not really gods at all. Paul had no doubt shared his views on idols and had likely used passages like those found in Psalm 115.

<sup>4</sup> *Their idols are merely things of silver and gold,  
shaped by human hands.*

<sup>5</sup> *They have mouths but cannot speak,  
and eyes but cannot see.*

<sup>6</sup> *They have ears but cannot hear,  
and noses but cannot smell.*

<sup>7</sup> *They have hands but cannot feel,  
and feet but cannot walk,  
and throats but cannot make a sound.*

<sup>8</sup> *And those who make idols are just like them,  
as are all who trust in them. – Psalm 115:4-8 NLT*

When Paul had addressed the believers in Corinth regarding the debate they were having about eating meat sacrificed to idols, he agreed with the assessment of some, saying “we know that ‘an idol has no real existence,’ and that ‘there is no God but one’” (1 Corinthians 8:4 ESV). There were those in Corinth who saw no problem eating meat sacrificed to idols, because idols were not really gods at all, and Paul had agreed with them. But he took it a step further.

<sup>5</sup> *For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—<sup>6</sup> yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. –1 Corinthians 8:5-7 ESV*

This was likely the sentiment he had shared in Ephesus, and it had made an impact on the people there. So much so, that the sale of silver statues of Artemis, their god, had plummeted. Demetrius, driven by his anger over the loss of revenue he suffered, tried to couch his words in spiritual rhetoric, accusing Paul of doing harm to their great god. And there is a subtle irony in this, because he implies that “the temple of the great goddess Artemis may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, she whom all Asia and the world worship.” (Acts 19:27 ESV). His statement begs the question: Is she a great goddess? If so, what do they have to fear? Can’t she defend herself? If not, why do they worship a goddess who can be so easily deposed, and due to nothing more than the words of an itinerant Jewish missionary?

But the words of Demetrius accomplished what he intended. The crowd, filled with other local craftsmen who also benefited from the notoriety of Artemis, were whipped into a frenzy by Demetrius’ little speech. They turned into a mob and grabbed the first Christians they could get their hands on, two men named Gaius and Aristarchus. We are not told where Paul was when all of this happened, but he must have been elsewhere in the city at the time all of this took place. Luke tells us that, when Paul heard what had happened, he wanted to rush to the aid of his fellow believers but was restrained from doing so. Even some of the local political leaders, referred to as Asiarchs, who had developed relationships with Paul, urged him to stay away.

The scene in the local theater, where the mob had grabbed the two men, had devolved chaos and confusion. Many in the crowd had no idea why they were even there. When Alexander, one of the local believers tried to address the crowd, he was drowned out by the voices of the crowd as they shouted, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

But cooler heads prevailed. A local official finally calmed the crowd and warned them that they must have just cause for their actions. As far as he could tell, the charges against Gaius and Aristarchus were unfounded. He said, "you have brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess" (Acts 19:37 ESV). They had not destroyed any idols themselves. They had not said anything worthy of the charge of blasphemy. He warned them that they were close to violating Romans laws against rioting, which could warrant stiff penalties. If Demetrius had a legitimate legal case against Paul or anyone else, he would need to bring it to the local assembly. With that, he dismissed the crowd and Gaius and Aristarchus were released.

Why did Luke include this story? What was his point? Paul was not even directly involved in the affairs described in this passage. It seems that Luke was providing a glimpse into the lives of those who had placed their faith in Jesus. Their joy was real, but so were the dangers they faced. This story is a reminder that Christianity, in its purist form, is life-changing, and changed lives tend to make an impact on their environment. Christianity is not a threat to the government. It is not a movement designed to radically alter the status quo or disrupt the religious plurality of a community. Any influence it may have will come from the radical nature of the transformation of the lives of its proponents. Believers, indwelt and empowered by the Spirit of God, are to exhibit the characteristics of their new natures and live in such a way that their lives impact those around them. The believers in Ephesus had not started a campaign to get rid of Artemis. They had simply shared the good news about Jesus. They didn't need to attack the false gods of the Ephesians, but simply share the truth about the one true God. And their lives had become the best testimony of what faith in Jesus can do. The light was dispelling the darkness, simply by its presence.

## The Seven Sons of Saul

Acts 20:1-6

<sup>1</sup> After the uproar ceased, Paul sent for the disciples, and after encouraging them, he said farewell and departed for Macedonia. <sup>2</sup> When he had gone through those regions and had given them much encouragement, he came to Greece. <sup>3</sup> There he spent three months, and when a plot was made against him by the Jews as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia. <sup>4</sup> Sopater the Berean, son of Pyrrhus, accompanied him; and of the Thessalonians, Aristarchus and Secundus; and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy; and the Asians, Tychicus and Trophimus. <sup>5</sup> These went on ahead and were waiting for us at Troas, <sup>6</sup> but we sailed away from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread, and in five days we came to them at Troas, where we stayed for seven days. – Acts 20:1-6 ESV

After the highly tense episode at the theater in Ephesus, when things had finally cooled down, Paul left the city and made his way north to Troas. We know that he stopped there from a comment he made in one of his letters to the believers in Corinth. He told them, “When I came to the city of Troas to preach the Good News of Christ, the Lord opened a door of opportunity for me. But I had no peace of mind because my dear brother Titus hadn’t yet arrived with a report from you. So I said good-bye and went on to Macedonia to find him” (2 Corinthians 2:12-13 NLT).

Paul crossed the Aegean Sea and arrived back in Macedonia where he revisited many of the cities he had been to on his second missionary journey. We know from that same Letter to the Corinthians, that Paul was reunited with Timothy while in Macedonia.

<sup>5</sup> When we arrived in Macedonia, there was no rest for us. We faced conflict from every direction, with battles on the outside and fear on the inside. <sup>6</sup> But God, who encourages those who are discouraged, encouraged us by the arrival of Titus. – 2 Corinthians 7:5-6 NLT

Luke indicates that Paul eventually made his way from Macedonia into Greece, which refers to the area then known as Achaia. During his three months of ministry there, Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, informing them of his desire to some day visit them on his way to Spain.

*I am planning to go to Spain, and when I do, I will stop off in Rome. And after I have enjoyed your fellowship for a little while, you can provide for my journey. – Romans 15:24 NLT*

But Paul’s immediate plans had been to sail from Greece to Syria, where he would make his way to Jerusalem. But he was informed of a plot by the local Jewish leadership to do him harm, so he altered his plans, deciding instead to return through Macedonia. But Paul did not make the journey alone. We know that Titus had rejoined him in Macedonia, but when he made his return trip back through that region, he had another six men as his traveling companions. Luke

lists them as Sopater the Berean, Aristarchus and Secundus, who were Thessalonians; Gaius of Derbe, Timothy; and Tychicus and Trophimus from the region of Asia. The only name in this list that is familiar to us is that of Timothy, the young man who had become a regular on many of Paul's previous journeys. Along with Titus, they are the best-known disciples or young proteges of Paul. He ended up writing two letters to Timothy and one to Titus, that each bear their names. But the other men on this list are relatively unknown to most of us. Together with Timothy, they make up a team of seven men, who accompanied Paul on his trip through Macedonia. It seems likely that these men represented the various congregations throughout Achaia and Macedonia who had contributed money for the needs of the saints back in Jerusalem. The various nationalities of these men reveal the cross-cultural nature of the gospel and how Paul's ministry had mirrored his belief in its inclusiveness. In his letter to the church in Colossae, he wrote: "In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us" (Colossians 3:11 NLT). There's a Macedonian, two Thessalonians, two Asians, and two Galatians. Quite an eclectic group. But they all had one thing in common: Their indebtedness to Paul for his ministry in their lives which had resulted in their saving faith in Jesus Christ. He was a mentor to them, and his dedication and determination to take the gospel to the Gentiles had resulted in their lives being radically changed forever. He had been a difference-maker in their lives. And I can't help but think about the seven sons of Sceva, whom Luke introduced us to in chapter 19. These itinerant Jewish exorcists, all sons of a high-ranking Jewish priest, had attempted to mimic the supernatural work of Paul by trying to cast out demons in the *name* of Jesus, but without having a *relationship* with Jesus. They failed. No doubt, these men had been mentored by their father. Perhaps they had learned to exorcise demons from him. But their attempt to use the name of Jesus for their own personal use and career advancement, left them beaten and stripped naked by the very demon they had tried to cast out.

What a stark difference between these seven sons and the seven spiritual sons of Saul, or Paul. He had poured truth into these men and it had taken root, manifesting itself in fruitful ministry. Paul had been confident enough in these men to send them on ahead to the city of Troas, without him. Paul was constantly expanding his ministry by exposing others to leadership opportunities. But not before he had trained and equipped them for the tasks they would face. Paul had taken Jesus' command to make disciples quite seriously. And he wasn't content to simply make converts. He wanted to raise up men who were mature in their faith and bold in their witness. We don't know the ages of the seven men listed in this passage, but for Paul, age would not have mattered. The words he wrote to Timothy would have applied to them all, regardless of their age.

*<sup>11</sup> Teach these things and insist that everyone learn them. <sup>12</sup> Don't let anyone think less of you because you are young. Be an example to all believers in what you say, in the way you live, in your love, your faith, and your purity.*

*<sup>16</sup> Keep a close watch on how you live and on your teaching. Stay true to what is right for the sake of your own salvation and the salvation of those who hear you.— 1 Timothy 4:11-12, 16 NLT*

Each generation should be about the spiritual training and preparation of the next generation. The psalmist wrote:

<sup>4</sup> *We will not hide these truths from our children;  
we will tell the next generation  
about the glorious deeds of the Lord,  
about his power and his mighty wonders.*  
<sup>5</sup> *For he issued his laws to Jacob;  
he gave his instructions to Israel.  
He commanded our ancestors  
to teach them to their children,  
<sup>6</sup> so the next generation might know them—  
even the children not yet born—  
and they in turn will teach their own children.*  
<sup>7</sup> *So each generation should set its hope anew on God,  
not forgetting his glorious miracles  
and obeying his commands. – Psalm 78:4-7 NLT*

God warned the people of Israel:

<sup>18</sup> *“So commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these words of mine. Tie them to your hands  
and wear them on your forehead as reminders. <sup>19</sup> Teach them to your children. Talk  
about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to  
bed and when you are getting up. <sup>20</sup> Write them on the doorposts of your house and on  
your gates, <sup>21</sup> so that as long as the sky remains above the earth, you and your children  
may flourish in the land the Lord swore to give your ancestors. – Deuteronomy 11:18-21  
NLT*

And yet, one of the saddest passages in all of Scripture is found in the book of Judges, where we read what happens when these commands of God to prepare the next generation are ignored.

*After that generation died, another generation grew up who did not acknowledge the  
LORD or remember the mighty things he had done for Israel. – Judges 2:10 NLT*

Disciple making is not just about increasing the number of believers and growing the size of the church. Seeing people come to faith in Christ is wonderful, but it is only part of the process. Spiritual maturity is to be an equal and non-negotiable aspect of making disciples. The seven men who accompanied Paul were not just believers, they were maturing, Spirit-empowered ministers of the gospel who were equipped to do the work of the Lord. In his letter to the church in Colossae, Paul wrote:

<sup>28</sup> *So we tell others about Christ, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all the  
wisdom God has given us. We want to present them to God, perfect in their relationship*

*to Christ. <sup>29</sup> That's why I work and struggle so hard, depending on Christ's mighty power that works within me. – Colossians 1:28-29 NLT*

Paul wrote similar words to the believers in Ephesus, once again revealing his passion to see believers grow up in their salvation.

*<sup>11</sup> Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. <sup>12</sup> Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. <sup>13</sup> This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.*

*<sup>14</sup> Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. <sup>15</sup> Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. – Ephesians 4:11-15 NLT*

Christ-likeness was the goal for Paul, not just coming to faith in Christ. Raising up workers to send into the harvest was his life's mission, not just signing up future residents of heaven. For Paul, it all began with the perspective of a father to his children. He referred to Timothy as "my true son in the faith" (1 Timothy 1:2 NLT). He called the Galatians believers his dear children, informing them, "I feel as if I'm going through labor pains for you again, and they will continue until Christ is fully developed in your lives" (Galatians 4:19 NLT). He was suffering because they were not growing as he knew they should. He opened his letter to them with the following words of disappointment and admonition:

*<sup>6</sup> I am shocked that you are turning away so soon from God, who called you to himself through the loving mercy of Christ. You are following a different way that pretends to be the Good News <sup>7</sup> but is not the Good News at all. You are being fooled by those who deliberately twist the truth concerning Christ. – Galatians 1:6-7 NLT*

Paul wanted mature sons and daughters in the faith. He would not accept mediocrity or settle for anything less than visible and tangible signs of increasing maturity. Paul had poured his life into Titus and Timothy. Now he had added another list of names to his ever-growing list of sons in the faith. How many spiritual sons and daughters will you leave behind? Who are you raising up to take your place when you're gone?

## Expecting the Unexpected

Acts 20:7-12

*<sup>7</sup> On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech until midnight. <sup>8</sup> There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered. <sup>9</sup> And a young man named Eutychus, sitting at the window, sank into a deep sleep as Paul talked still longer. And being overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead. <sup>10</sup> But Paul went down and bent over him, and taking him in his arms, said, "Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him." <sup>11</sup> And when Paul had gone up and had broken bread and eaten, he conversed with them a long while, until daybreak, and so departed. <sup>12</sup> And they took the youth away alive, and were not a little comforted. – Acts 20:7-12 ESV*

Paul had sent his seven sons in the faith on to Troas, while he traveled back through the region of Macedonia. When and Luke arrived in Philippi, they set sail for Troas where they reconnected with Timothy, Sopater, Aristarchus, Secundus, Gaius, Tychicus and Trophimus.

In this small section of Luke's eye-witness account, he reveals something of great significance that can easily be missed due to the remarkable nature of the day's events. He records that they had gathered with other believers in Troas "on the first day of the week." This is first time in Scripture where we find a reference to the early church meeting on Sunday, the first day of the week, rather than on the traditional Jewish sabbath. The change in worship days was related to the believers' desire to honor Sunday, the day on which Jesus rose from the dead. It also helped separate and distinguish the Christian faith from its Hebrew roots. In the early days of Christianity, it was commonly viewed by those outside of Judaism as little more than a sub-sect of that religious tradition. But with its rapidly diversifying ethnic makeup and teaching that the traditional rite of circumcision and strict adherence to the Mosaic law were not required for its adherents, Christianity was becoming a distinct religious practice and belief system.

One of the distinctives of the early church worship service was its practice of what the New Testament author, Jude, referred to as the "love feast." It seems that the church made a habit of sharing a meal together as part of their worship experience and, with that meal, the Lord's Supper was also celebrated. When Luke records that the believers in Troas had gathered to "break bread", he is not referring simply to the celebration of communion or the Lord's Table as we might call it, but with their sharing of common meal, part of which would include their taking of the Lord's Supper. Paul describes just such a gather in his letter to the believers in Corinth.

*<sup>20</sup> When you meet together, you are not really interested in the Lord's Supper. <sup>21</sup> For some of you hurry to eat your own meal without sharing with others. As a result, some go hungry while others get drunk. <sup>22</sup> What? Don't you have your own homes for eating and drinking? Or do you really want to disgrace God's church and shame the poor? What*

*am I supposed to say? Do you want me to praise you? Well, I certainly will not praise you for this!* – 1 Corinthians 11:20-22 NLT

In their case, they were destroying the nature of their communal gathering through acts of selfishness and insensitivity to the needs of their fellow members in the congregation. Jude refers to this meal as a love feast because it was to be an expression of their love for Christ and for one another. Paul was upset with the Corinthians because they denigrated the whole point of the Lord's Supper, a celebration of Christ's selfless sacrifice on behalf of man, by focusing all their attention on themselves and their own self-centered needs.

Along with the meal, the worship service of the early church included singing, prayer and instruction in the Word. Paul describes this in his letter to the Corinthians.

*When you meet together, one will sing, another will teach, another will tell some special revelation God has given...* – 1 Corinthians 14:26 NLT

It was in just such a setting that Paul addressed the believers gathered together in Troas. And while Paul had plans to leave the next morning, his sermon extended well into the night. No doubt, he addressed many issues with the believers there, recounting his missionary travels and all that he had seen God accomplish. But there was probably a fair share of biblical instruction, with Paul unpacking Old Testament passages and prophecies regarding Jesus. Much of what Paul wrote in his letters to the congregations he had helped start in Corinth, Galatia, Philippi, and Ephesus reveal the kinds of things Paul might have shared with the believers in Troas. As we have seen, Paul was a disciple maker. He was out to see the people in Troas grow in their faith and in their knowledge of God and His Son. He was seeking to make mature believers, not simply converts.

It was in Paul's lengthy address to his audience that something very unfortunate and unbelievable happened. A young man named Eutychus, sitting on the sill of an open window, fell asleep and plunged three stories to his death. Most likely, the combination of the late hour, Paul's lengthy talk, and the aftereffects of a large meal contributed to this tragic scene. It is important to note that Luke, a physician and an eyewitness to this event, pronounced the young man as being dead. The truly remarkable part of this story is not so much that the young man died and was raised back to life, but that it is all treated with a kind of faith-filled flippancy by Luke. He treats this incredible scene with a surprising calm and sparsity of words. He simply says, "Paul went down, bent over him, and took him into his arms. 'Don't worry,' he said, 'he's alive!'" (Acts 20:10 NLT). There is no description of the shock, sorrow and chaos that must have accompanied this tragic accident. Luke gives us no insight into how the crowd responded and he provides no sense of urgency. Paul simply went down, bent over the young man and then announced him as being alive. And then Luke matter-of-factly records, "Then they all went back upstairs, shared in the Lord's Supper, and ate together. Paul continued talking to them until dawn, and then he left" (Acts 20:11 NLT). No rejoicing, celebrating, praising of God or description of shock, wonder or awe on the part of the people. This has led many to conclude that Eutychus had not been dead but had just swooned and had been misdiagnosed as dead by

those who first examined him. But again, Luke the physician seems to indicate that the prognosis was clear – Eutychus had died as a result of his fall.

Why else would Luke have included this story? What benefit is there in describing a young man who fell asleep, plunged out of a third-story window and was mistakenly pronounced to be dead? Why does Luke describe Paul bending over the young man and holding him in his arms? He described another, very similar scene, in his gospel. It involved Jesus and His miraculous raising of a young girl from death.

*<sup>51</sup> When they arrived at the house, Jesus wouldn't let anyone go in with him except Peter, John, James, and the little girl's father and mother. <sup>52</sup> The house was filled with people weeping and wailing, but he said, "Stop the weeping! She isn't dead; she's only asleep."*

*<sup>53</sup> But the crowd laughed at him because they all knew she had died. <sup>54</sup> Then Jesus took her by the hand and said in a loud voice, "My child, get up!" <sup>55</sup> And at that moment her life returned, and she immediately stood up! Then Jesus told them to give her something to eat. – Luke 8:51-55 NLT*

In this account, it is clear that the crowd knew that the girl was dead. They had already begun to mourn her death. But Jesus described her as being asleep. Was He contradicting their prognosis? Was He claiming that they had been wrong in pronouncing her dead? No. He was revealing that the power of death was nothing to Him. It was no dangerous than sleep. He would revive her from death as easy as one awakens someone from a deep sleep. Jesus took her hand and she revived. Paul took Eutychus in his arms and he was restored to life.

Luke's rather blasé description of this scene reveals his growing sense of expectancy and the lack of surprise he felt at witnessing these kinds of remarkable miracles. He was becoming used to such scenarios and tended to describe them as if they were simply a part of doing business as a follower of Christ. In his travels with Paul, he had seen some incredible things take place. He was no longer shocked or surprised at what he saw God going through Paul. The raising of Eutychus from the dead, while spectacular in nature, was not unexpected. And the fact that the entire congregation returned to the third floor and continued their time of worship, listening to Paul teach, reveals that, even they were growing to expect the unexpected.



## The Incredible Non-Shrinking Man

Acts 20:13-27

<sup>13</sup> But going ahead to the ship, we set sail for Assos, intending to take Paul aboard there, for so he had arranged, intending himself to go by land. <sup>14</sup> And when he met us at Assos, we took him on board and went to Mitylene. <sup>15</sup> And sailing from there we came the following day opposite Chios; the next day we touched at Samos; and the day after that we went to Miletus. <sup>16</sup> For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he might not have to spend time in Asia, for he was hastening to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost.

<sup>17</sup> Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.

<sup>18</sup> And when they came to him, he said to them:

*“You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, <sup>19</sup> serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; <sup>20</sup> how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, <sup>21</sup> testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>22</sup> And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, <sup>23</sup> except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. <sup>24</sup> But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. <sup>25</sup> And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. <sup>26</sup> Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, <sup>27</sup> for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. – Acts 20:13-27 ESV*

After Paul miraculously raised Eutychus back to life, he and his traveling companions left Troas. Luke indicates that he, Timothy and the other six men who were accompanying Paul back to Jerusalem, took a ship from Troas and headed for Assos, while Paul determined to go by land. Traveling by ship required that you sail around Cape Lectum, which added considerable time to the journey. It was only 20 miles by land from Troas to Assos, so Paul’s decision to take the overland route allowed him to extend his stay in Troas. But eventually, he and the others met up in Assos, where he joined them aboard their ship and continued the journey, arriving some days later in Miletus. For whatever reason, Paul made the determination to sail past Ephesus, perhaps worrying that it would present too lengthy of a delay in his travel plans and prevent him from reaching Jerusalem in time for the Feast of Pentecost.

Paul still had a concern for the well-being of the church in Ephesus, so he came up with an alternative plan, sending for the elders of the church and inviting them to join him in Miletus. It had been in Ephesus that the gospel had made a huge impact, transforming the lives of many who once worshiped false gods and dabbled in the occult. Luke records:

<sup>19</sup> *A number of them who had been practicing sorcery brought their incantation books and burned them at a public bonfire. The value of the books was several million dollars.*

<sup>20</sup> *So the message about the Lord spread widely and had a powerful effect. – Acts 19:19-20 NLT*

These changes had not set well with all those living in Ephesus. The local tradesmen, who made their living selling statues of the god, Artemis, had whipped the people into a frenzy, inciting a riot and causing “no little disturbance concerning the Way” (Acts 19:23 ESV). The situation for the believers in Ephesus had become intense and potentially dangerous. So, Paul had invited the elders to come and meet with him so that he might encourage them. But Paul used an interesting tactic to accomplish his goal. He most likely knew that those in Ephesus might have viewed his leaving of them as a form of abandonment. Just when things had gotten not, he had bailed on them. So, Paul reminded the elders that he had spent a great deal of time in Ephesus, ministering to them, even in the face of the hostile threats of the Jews, who opposed his teaching.

<sup>19</sup> *I have done the Lord’s work humbly and with many tears. I have endured the trials that came to me from the plots of the Jews.* <sup>20</sup> *I never shrank back from telling you what you needed to hear, either publicly or in your homes. – Acts 20:19-20 NLT*

It’s important to remember that, at this point in his ministry, Paul had already been stoned and left for dead. He had faced tremendous opposition and intense hatred. But he had refused to shrink back. Even in the face of adversity, Paul had stood his ground and remained faithful to his calling by Jesus.

<sup>21</sup> *I have had one message for Jews and Greeks alike—the necessity of repenting from sin and turning to God, and of having faith in our Lord Jesus. – Acts 20:21 NLT*

That had been Paul’s persistent passion and he had pursued it with an unwavering commitment. And his departure from them had not been driven by fear or self-preservation, but by the Spirit of God. He was convinced that Jerusalem was the next stop on his itinerary, and he was going there, even though he had no idea what awaited him when he arrived. He knew that the Judaizers, those Jewish Christians who had been demanding that all Gentiles be circumcised and adhere to the Mosaic Law, would be there. He was well aware that they would still be questioning his ministry and accusing him of violating both the law and the religious heritage they held so sacred. Paul informed these men that “the Holy Spirit tells me in city after city that jail and suffering lie ahead” (Acts 20:23 NLT). If you recall, when Jesus had instructed Ananias to go to Paul, then known as Saul, and minister to him immediately after his conversion, He had said:

<sup>15</sup> *“Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel.* <sup>16</sup> *And I will show him how much he must suffer for my name’s sake.” – Acts 9:15-16 NLT*

Paul was well aware that his ministry was to include suffering. He had experienced it. And he knew that every trip he took could be his last. He had been an eyewitness to the stoning death of Stephen. He had been stoned himself. And, on more than one occasion, he had been forced to flee for his life, sneaking out of a city in the dark of night, like a common criminal. And in the very next chapter, we will see Paul received numerous warnings from others, prompted by the Holy Spirit. When he met with the disciples in Tyre, Luke records that “through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem” (Acts 21:4 ESV). While in Caesarea, a prophet from Judea named Agabus, came to visit Paul and warn him. Luke writes that he “took Paul’s belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, ‘Thus says the Holy Spirit, “This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles”’” (Acts 21:11 NLT). The disciples who witnessed this event begged Paul not to go to Jerusalem, but he responded: “I am ready not only to be jailed at Jerusalem but even to die for the sake of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 21:13 NLT).

Paul told the elders from Ephesus, “my life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus—the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God” (Acts 20:24 NLT). Paul was more than willing to suffer for the cause of Christ, and he already had. He was also willing to die, if necessary. He would later write to the believers in Philippi:

*<sup>16</sup> Hold firmly to the word of life; then, on the day of Christ’s return, I will be proud that I did not run the race in vain and that my work was not useless. <sup>17</sup> But I will rejoice even if I lose my life, pouring it out like a liquid offering to God... – Philippians 2:16-17 NLT*

And Paul would encourage the Philippian believers to have the same attitude, seeing their relationship with Christ as of more value than life itself.

*<sup>8</sup> Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and become one with him. – Philippians 3:8-9 NLT*

*<sup>10</sup> I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, <sup>11</sup> so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead! – Philippians 3:10-11 NLT*

Paul had no regrets. He felt no compulsion to apologize for his efforts or to excuse his actions. He had been faithful.

*<sup>26</sup> I declare today that I have been faithful. If anyone suffers eternal death, it’s not my fault, <sup>27</sup> for I didn’t shrink from declaring all that God wants you to know. – Acts 20:26-27 NLT*

If someone died without knowing Christ, it was not Paul’s fault. He had done his job. He had faithfully declared the gospel and clearly articulated God’s plan of salvation. He had preached

the Word of God unapologetically and fearlessly. And now, he was going to be heading to Jerusalem knowing that he might never see these brothers in Christ again. He had no idea what the future held. He lived with a sense of dependency upon the Spirit of God, that let him take one day at a time. He took nothing for granted. He savored every moment and made the most out of every minute given to him by God. Paul's views regarding his ministry can best be summed up in the words he wrote to the believers in Philippi.

*<sup>20</sup> as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. <sup>21</sup> For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.* – Philippians 1:20-21 ESV

Paul was encouraging these men by sharing with them his personal outlook on life. He knew that their ministry would be difficult, just as his had been. He realized that they would face times of uncertainty and fear. He had as well. He was well aware that they would be going back to Ephesus where they would face opposition of all kinds, both inside and outside of the church. But he was well acquainted with these things. These men were the God-appointed leaders of their local congregation. They had a huge responsibility and Paul wanted them to take it seriously. And his words would echo those of the apostle Peter, who also delivered strong words of encouragement and exhortation to elders of the churches to whom he had ministered.

*<sup>1</sup> And now, a word to you who are elders in the churches. I, too, am an elder and a witness to the sufferings of Christ. And I, too, will share in his glory when he is revealed to the whole world. As a fellow elder, I appeal to you: <sup>2</sup> Care for the flock that God has entrusted to you. Watch over it willingly, not grudgingly—not for what you will get out of it, but because you are eager to serve God. <sup>3</sup> Don't lord it over the people assigned to your care, but lead them by your own good example. <sup>4</sup> And when the Great Shepherd appears, you will receive a crown of never-ending glory and honor.* – 1 Peter 5:1-4 NLT

## Godly Leadership

Acts 20:28-38

<sup>28</sup> Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. <sup>29</sup> I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; <sup>30</sup> and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. <sup>31</sup> Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. <sup>32</sup> And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. <sup>33</sup> I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. <sup>34</sup> You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. <sup>35</sup> In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

<sup>36</sup> And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. <sup>37</sup> And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, <sup>38</sup> being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship. – Acts 20:28--38 ESV

Paul had stopped in Miletus on his way to Jerusalem and, while there, he had invited the elders for the congregation in Ephesus to come visit him, so that he could impart some words of encouragement to them. Paul was well aware that he might never get to see these men again and wanted to challenge them to take seriously their role as the spiritual shepherds of the flock over which God had placed them. Paul used his own life as an example of selfless service, declaring "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27 ESV). He was confident and content with his efforts on their behalf, having served "the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials" (Acts 20:19 ESV). Now, he was passing the baton on to them, and challenging them to "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood" (Acts 20:28 ESV). Notice that he began with a warning for these men to pay careful attention to themselves. Their personal lives were to be closely monitored and the state of their own spiritual health was to be constantly assessed. In one of his letters to his young protégé, Timothy, Paul described the qualifications for an elder.

<sup>2</sup> So a church leader must be a man whose life is above reproach. He must be faithful to his wife. He must exercise self-control, live wisely, and have a good reputation. He must enjoy having guests in his home, and he must be able to teach. <sup>3</sup> He must not be a heavy drinker or be violent. He must be gentle, not quarrelsome, and not love money. <sup>4</sup> He must manage his own family well, having children who respect and obey him. <sup>5</sup> For if a man cannot manage his own household, how can he take care of God's church? – 1 Timothy 3:2-5 NLT

These men had a grave responsibility, and they would one day answer to God for the manner in which they cared for His sheep. They needed to see themselves as overseers, or guardians over those under their care. The Greek word Luke used is *episkopos* and carries the idea of someone who cares for and watches over the well-being of others. But Paul knew that it would be difficult for them to properly provide for and protect those under their care if they themselves were not adequately fit for duty. Spiritual deficient leaders will always result in spiritual anemic followers. Men who were unfaithful to their own wives, lacking in self-control, unable to manage their own households, quick-tempered, quarrelsome, greedy, and unable to teach the Word of God, would make lousy shepherds and do more harm than good to the flock of God. And Paul made it clear why they had to be spiritually prepared and properly equipped for their roles as shepherds.

*<sup>29</sup> I know that false teachers, like vicious wolves, will come in among you after I leave, not sparing the flock. <sup>30</sup> Even some men from your own group will rise up and distort the truth in order to draw a following. <sup>31</sup> Watch out! – Acts 20:29-31 NLT*

The dangers were real. Paul would have fully concurred with the statement made by Peter: “Stay alert! Watch out for your great enemy, the devil. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8 NLT). For Paul, the thought of false teachers slyly infiltrating the ranks of God’s people and leading them astray with clever-sounding words, was more than he could stand. The subtle, yet sinister reality of false doctrine was going to be a constant threat to the spiritually well-being of the church. It remains so today. Half-truths and watered-down doctrine are always more dangerous than outright lies. Frontal assaults, while always a possibility in spiritual warfare, are rare. The enemy tends to inflict his damage in more subtle and deceptive ways. But elders must understand that distortion of the truth can be just as dangerous and deadly as the denial of it. But to be able to recognize the lies of the enemy, God’s leaders must know the truth of His Word. That is why Paul told Timothy:

*<sup>16</sup> All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. <sup>17</sup> God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work. – 2 Timothy 3:16-17 NLT*

Those who remain ignorant of God’s Word will be unable to live or lead well. They will find themselves living like “infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming” (Ephesians 4:14 NIV). Leaders can be appointed, but their ability to lead is God-given and a byproduct of their time in the Word and the degree of their dependence upon God. Which is why Paul stated, “I entrust you to God and the message of his grace that is able to build you up and give you an inheritance with all those he has set apart for himself” (Acts 20:32 NLT). Their capacity to lead was going to be directly tied to their reliance upon God. They would need to daily lean on the grace of God and recognize that He alone could provide them with the strength and wisdom required for their role as shepherds of His flock.

Paul closes out his discourse with these men by using himself as an example. He was not speaking pridefully but was confident that his own life could be used as a model for godly leadership. Paul had never been in it for the glory. He didn't serve for any kind of recognition or financial remuneration. He plainly states:

*<sup>33</sup> "I have never coveted anyone's silver or gold or fine clothes. <sup>34</sup> You know that these hands of mine have worked to supply my own needs and even the needs of those who were with me. <sup>35</sup> And I have been a constant example of how you can help those in need by working hard. – Acts 20:33-35 NLT*

And Paul's life fully reflected the teaching of Peter concerning godly leadership.

*<sup>2</sup> Care for the flock that God has entrusted to you. Watch over it willingly, not grudgingly—not for what you will get out of it, but because you are eager to serve God. <sup>3</sup> Don't lord it over the people assigned to your care, but lead them by your own good example. <sup>4</sup> And when the Great Shepherd appears, you will receive a crown of never-ending glory and honor. – 1 Peter 5:2-4 NLT*

Godly leadership is not about power, position, or prominence. It has little to do with matters of superiority or control. Being a leader in the context of the church of God is all about service, not authority and power. In fact, Jesus provided His disciples with some fairly stunning words about this very matter. He spoke them immediately after James and John had made their rather arrogant and self-centered request to be given positions of power when Jesus established His Kingdom. Jesus simply said:

*<sup>25</sup> "You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. <sup>26</sup> But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, <sup>27</sup> and whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave. <sup>28</sup> For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many." – Matthew 20:25-28 NLT*

And Paul added his own little twist, reminding the elders in his audience of some other words spoken by Jesus: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35 NLT). Paul was expecting these men to lead like Jesus. He wanted them to lead by putting themselves last and others first. They were to lead by selflessly sacrificing their lives for the sake of the flock. All of this recalls the words of Jesus, spoken to the apostle Peter in the days immediately after His resurrection. Three times Jesus questioned Peter's love for Him. And three times Peter assured Jesus of his love. And each of those times, Jesus responded with three simple, yet profound statements.

*"Then feed my lambs." – John 21:15 NLT*

*"Then take care of my sheep." – John 21:16 NLT*

*“Then feed my sheep.”* – John 21:17 NLT

The greatest way a leader can prove his love for Jesus is to love those for whom Jesus died and for whom the leader has been called to serve.

When Paul had finished his meeting with the elders, they prayed together, then parted ways. There were many tears and much sorrow because, of all the things Paul had said to them, the one thing that had stood out the most was his announcement that he might never see them again. It is obvious that they loved Paul dearly. They clearly saw him as a loving and godly leader. He had been for them what he was asking them to be for those under their care: A selfless, sacrificial shepherd who had always been willing to lay down his life for the sheep. Now, they were to return to Ephesus and do the same.

## Let the Will of the Lord Be Done

Acts 21:1-16

<sup>1</sup> And when we had parted from them and set sail, we came by a straight course to Cos, and the next day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara. <sup>2</sup> And having found a ship crossing to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. <sup>3</sup> When we had come in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left we sailed to Syria and landed at Tyre, for there the ship was to unload its cargo. <sup>4</sup> And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. <sup>5</sup> When our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey, and they all, with wives and children, accompanied us until we were outside the city. And kneeling down on the beach, we prayed <sup>6</sup> and said farewell to one another. Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home.

<sup>7</sup> When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day. <sup>8</sup> On the next day we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. <sup>9</sup> He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied. <sup>10</sup> While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. <sup>11</sup> And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" <sup>12</sup> When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. <sup>13</sup> Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." <sup>14</sup> And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done."

<sup>15</sup> After these days we got ready and went up to Jerusalem. <sup>16</sup> And some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us, bringing us to the house of Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we should lodge. – Acts 21:1-16 ESV

In his gospel account, Luke records the following statement regarding Jesus: "Now when the days drew near for him to be taken up, Jesus set out resolutely to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51 NLT). Jesus had begun to reveal to His disciples the fate that awaited Him in Jerusalem. He told them, "Take these words to heart, for the Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men" (Luke 9:44 NLT). As time went on and the day of His betrayal and death drew closer, He became more specific regarding the details surrounding what awaited Him in Jerusalem.

<sup>31</sup> Then Jesus took the twelve aside and said to them, "Look, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. <sup>32</sup> For he will be handed over to the Gentiles; he will be mocked, mistreated, and spat on. <sup>33</sup> They will flog him severely and kill him. Yet on the third day he will rise again." <sup>34</sup> But the twelve understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what Jesus meant. – Luke 18:31-33 NLT

Jesus had been resolute and steadfast in His commitment to carry out the assignment given to Him by God the Father. He knew why He had come to earth and His work would not be complete until He had finished what He had been sent to do. And, at one point, He spoke the following statement in the hearing of His disciples and to those who had claimed to be His followers, but who had been distracted by worldly concerns: “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62 NLT).

Here in Luke’s retelling of the history of the church, he seems to be comparing the determination and dedication of Jesus to that of Paul. We see in this passage, some striking similarities between the two men, as Paul, making his way to Jerusalem, displays a strong sense of calling and commitment to complete the journey, even in spite of the warnings of those who loved him. Paul had no idea what awaited him in Jerusalem, but he knew from experience that the potential for death was a reality everywhere he went.

*22 And now, behold, I, not knowing what will happen to me there, 23 except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. 24 But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. – Acts 20:22-24 ESV*

Paul wanted to finish well. He wanted to be faithful to the assignment given to him by Jesus. And his attitude was that, as long as the Lord allowed him to live, he would share the gospel faithfully and boldly. His goal in life was to please the Lord, whether in life or in death.

*6 So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, 7 for we walk by faith, not by sight. 8 Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. 9 So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. – 2 Corinthians 5:6-9 ESV*

And Luke, using geographic locations as a sort of measurement device, tells of Paul’s unwavering commitment to return to Jerusalem as the Spirit had directed him. Luke describes their journey from Miletus to Cos, then to Rhodes, and from there to Patara. Their next stop was Phoenicia and from there they sailed to Tyre, passing by the island of Rhodes on the way. There are no stops mentioned. At no point does he describe Paul taking time to minister along the way. This was not normal behavior for Paul. You can sense in Luke’s description of this leg of their journey that there was a certain determination on the part of Paul. Like Jesus, he had set out resolutely to go to Jerusalem.

It was only when he had arrived in Tyre that Paul took time to meet with the disciples there. He stayed for seven days, but this was only because he was forced to wait for this ship’s cargo to be unloaded. During the delay, Paul was once again bombarded with dire warnings from those who cared deeply for him. Luke records that the brothers and sisters, under the influence of the Spirit of God, “were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem” (Acts 21:4 ESV). This begs a

question: If these believers, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, warned Paul not to go to Jerusalem, why did he do so anyway? Was he being disobedient to the Spirit? Does this just display a stubbornness on Paul's part? It is important to remember that Paul had also received word from the Spirit of God. In fact, he had made that plain when he had said, "I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit" (Acts 20:22 ESV). It would seem that some of the disciples in Tyre had been given a divine insight into Paul's fate, provided to them by the Holy Spirit. Upon hearing the news, their natural conclusion had been that the Spirit was telling them these things so they could warn Paul and keep him from going. But it much more likely that the Spirit was simply confirming what He had already told Paul. Out of their love for Paul, they were trying to prevent any harm from coming to him, but what awaited Paul in Jerusalem was the sovereign will of God. What we see happening here is the very same thing that happened when Jesus had informed the disciples about the fate awaiting Him in Jerusalem.

*<sup>21</sup> From that time on Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and experts in the law, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. <sup>22</sup> So Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him: "God forbid, Lord! This must not happen to you!" – Matthew 16:21-22 NLT*

Peter had meant well. He loved Jesus and was simply trying to protect him from what he believed to be an undeserved and unnecessary death. He didn't understand what was going on but was seeing things from his limited human perspective. And what Jesus said to him provides us with a telling and sobering warning.

*<sup>23</sup> But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me, because you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but on man's." – Matthew 16:23 NLT*

The disciples in Tyre were guilty of the same thing. They were setting their minds on their own interests, rather than those of God. They couldn't bear the thought of losing Paul. It made no sense to them that God would allow anything to happen to someone so vital to the well-being of the church. But that kind of attitude was dangerous. Jesus described Peter as acting like Satan, attempting to stand in the way of God's divine will for the redemption of mankind. And the disciples in Tyre, while trying to keep Paul from having to suffer, were unwittingly doing the same thing. They had no idea what God had planned for Paul and what was going to happen as a result. They could not see into the future. All they knew was that something dire was waiting for Paul in Jerusalem and they wanted to prevent it from happening.

But Paul remained determined. He departed from Tyre and made his way to Ptolemais and then on to Caesarea, where he and his traveling companions stayed in the home of Philip the Evangelist. While there, Paul was once again confronted and warned about the fate that awaited him in Jerusalem. This time, it came from the lips of a prophet named Agabus, who had come all the way from Judea. Using a visual illustration, he revealed to Paul that he would be arrested by the Jews, bound up and delivered to the Gentiles. It is obvious that Agabus had also received a word from the Lord. And the text does not indicate that Agabus tried to dissuade

Paul from going to Jerusalem. He simply presented the facts as given to him by God. It was the disciples in Philip's house who heard this news and attempted to persuade Paul to change his plans. And Luke, out of love for his brother, Paul, included himself among those who tried to change Paul's mind. "When **we** heard this, **we** and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem" (Acts 21:12 ESV).

What they failed to realize was that their passionate pleas for Paul to refrain from going to Jerusalem were actually making things more difficult for Paul. He responded: "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 21:13 ESV). What Paul needed were words of encouragement to stay the course, not emotion-filled pleas to disobey the will of God for his life. His friends meant well, but they were operating out of a sense of selfishness. They were not seeing the bigger picture. For Paul, the plans of God far outweighed any personal aspirations he might have. He was much more interested in seeing the sovereign will of God accomplished than doing whatever he could to keep his life as trouble-free as possible.

Luke, along with all the others who had tried to dissuade Paul from his seemingly ill-fated plans to go to Jerusalem, resigned himself to the inevitable. He simply stated, "Let the will of the Lord be done" (Acts 21:14 ESV). There is a certain sense of failure in Luke's words. He doesn't sound convincing. He even admitted that "since he would not be persuaded, we ceased" (Acts 21:14 ESV). They had tried but had failed. So, they were forced to accept what happened as the will of God. But is that the way we should face the future? Does God want us to simply give up hope and face what may happen with a sense of resignation? What a contrast we see between the words of Luke and those of Paul. "I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 21:13 ESV). The will of God didn't intimidate Paul. It didn't depress him. He didn't feel compelled to resign himself to it. He willingly and eagerly embraced it as preferable to any other alternative, because he was fully convinced that God knew best. Paul lived his life in keeping with the words of Peter: "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:6-7 ESV).

## A Delicate Balancing Act

Acts 21:17-26

*<sup>17</sup> When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. <sup>18</sup> On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. <sup>19</sup> After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. <sup>20</sup> And when they heard it, they glorified God. And they said to him, “You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, <sup>21</sup> and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. <sup>22</sup> What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. <sup>23</sup> Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; <sup>24</sup> take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law. <sup>25</sup> But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality.” <sup>26</sup> Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them. – Acts 21:17-26*

ESV

In this next section of Luke’s account, he is going to provide a precise record of Paul’s return to Jerusalem and the interactions that took place between Paul and the leadership of the church there. Upon arrival back in Jerusalem, Paul appeared before James and the rest of the leadership of the church, including the other apostles. He reported the details of his latest mission trip among the Gentiles, explaining all that God was doing to bring those outside of Judaism to faith in Christ. His third missionary journey had been similar to the previous two, further confirming that the gospel message was bearing much fruit, in spite of increasing opposition from Jews who were dispersed abroad and from the Gentiles who found Christianity to be a threat to their own pagan religions.

One of the striking features of Paul’s report was the way he gave all the credit to God. Luke reports that Paul “related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry” (Acts 21:19 ESV). Yes, Paul had played a vital and indispensable role, but he knew that nothing worthy would have taken place without the sovereign hand of God. No one would have come to faith in Christ if God had not called them and the Holy Spirit had not regenerated their hearts. Paul knew his place. He was no more than a messenger, a herald of the truth, communicating the good news concerning Jesus Christ to those who had never heard it. Any converts produced were the result of God’s handiwork, not Paul’s. In fact, he admitted as much in his first letter to the believers in Corinth.

*<sup>3</sup> I came to you in weakness—timid and trembling. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> I did this so you would trust not in human wisdom but in the power of God.* – 1 Corinthians 2:3-5 NLT

And in that same letter, Paul made it clear that his role had been simple and somewhat one-dimensional.

*<sup>17</sup> For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.* – 1 Corinthians 1:17  
ESV

Because Paul had been quick to give all the credit to God, the apostles were able to direct their praise to God and not to Paul. At no point did Paul attempt to rob God of glory by allowing himself to receive unwarranted praise. He was more than content in the knowledge that his efforts on behalf of God, done in the power of God, had accomplished the will of God.

But James and the other apostles, while grateful for all that God had done, were forced to bring up a potential conflict that loomed as a result of Paul's report. While Paul had been away, the Spirit of God had been at work in Jerusalem as well, resulting in the conversions of thousands of faithful, law-abiding Jews. These individuals, while having put their faith in Jesus Christ as their Messiah and Savior, still held tenaciously to their Hebrew heritage and the ways of their ancestors. They maintained their allegiance to the Mosaic law and the religious rites and rituals of Judaism. Obedience to the law of Moses was still a non-negotiable, non-optional requirement for them. Earlier in his book, Luke had recorded the findings of the Jerusalem council, when they had been forced to deal with the demands of certain Jewish believers that all Gentile converts be required to live according to the law of Moses just as they did. James and the apostles had determined that this was unnecessary because it was not a requirement that God had placed on the Gentile believers. That dispute had been settled. But now, James was bringing up a different issue altogether. It seems that the latest rumor circulating among the Jewish believers in Jerusalem was that Paul had been trying to convince Jews living among the Gentiles where he ministered, to abandon their allegiance to the Mosaic law. They were falsely reporting that Paul was teaching Jews not to circumcise their children or follow other Jewish customs and laws.

Part of what was going here was a misunderstanding of Paul's outlook on the law. He outlines his perspective regarding the Mosaic law in his first letter to the church in Corinth.

*<sup>20</sup> 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.*

*<sup>21</sup> 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

When living among his fellow Jews, Paul chose to keep the law, just as they did. But when he found himself living among Gentiles, he chose not to follow the Jewish law, because he did not want it to be a stumbling block for them. It was important to him that they not see him living in obedience to the law and wrongly assume that this represented an added requirement for coming to faith in Christ. In no way did Paul ever diminish or demean the law of Moses. But he made it clear that he saw himself and all other Jews, as no longer subject to the law. The law had served its God-appointed purpose. In his letter to the Galatian believers, Paul had clearly stated that the law had been given by God “to show people their sins. But the law was designed to last only until the coming of the child who was promised” (Galatians 3:19 NLT). The child had come. Jesus had been born, had lived a sinless life, having kept the law perfectly, and had died on behalf of sinners as the sinless sacrifice. “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).

In his letter to the believers in Rome, Paul explained that the Jewish nation had failed to understand that the law could not make anyone righteous. Attempting to live up to God's holy standard in their own strength, striving to seek a righteousness of their own making, had left them weary and defeated. But when had appeared and offered Himself as the only means of being made right with God, the Jews had rejected Him.

*<sup>3</sup> For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. <sup>4</sup> For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. – Romans 10:3-4 ESV*

And while Paul was proud of his Jewish heritage and understood the value of the law, he also understood that the law had never been intended to make anyone right with God. It could only reveal man's sinfulness, not produce righteousness. And nowhere does Paul make that point clearer than in his letter to the Galatian believers.

*<sup>15</sup> “You and I are Jews by birth, not ‘sinners’ like the Gentiles. <sup>16</sup> Yet we know that a person is made right with God by faith in Jesus Christ, not by obeying the law. And we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we might be made right with God because of our faith in Christ, not because we have obeyed the law. For no one will ever be made right with God by obeying the law.”*

*<sup>17</sup> But suppose we seek to be made right with God through faith in Christ and then we are found guilty because we have abandoned the law. Would that mean Christ has led us into sin? Absolutely not! <sup>18</sup> Rather, I am a sinner if I rebuild the old system of law I already tore down. <sup>19</sup> For when I tried to keep the law, it condemned me. So I died to the law—I stopped trying to meet all its requirements—so that I might live for God. – Galatians 2:15-19 NLT*

And yet, Paul had been misunderstood by the Jews. They saw him as anti-law. But Paul himself said, “the law itself is holy, and its commands are holy and right and good” (Romans 7:12 NLT).

The problem was not with the law, but with man's failure to understand that adherence to the law could never save anyone, because man's sin nature made it impossible.

But the problem was real. James knew that when those Jews who were "zealous for the law" got wind that Paul was in town, they were going to be upset. And the rumors would fly. So, James suggested a plan to alleviate any potential and unnecessary tension. He recommended that Paul join four other men who had recently made vows to God and were preparing to conclude the completion of their vows by having themselves ceremonially cleansed at the temple. Paul was encouraged to join them and to underwrite any costs associated with the sacrifices they would need to make. In doing so, Paul would show that he had not abandoned the rites and rituals of Judaism. His actions would go a long way in convincing others that he was still a faithful Jew and not anti-law.

James made it clear that nothing had changed regarding their previous decision to place no undue or unnecessary burden on the Gentiles. The Jerusalem council had already determined that Gentile converts were not required to be circumcised or to keep the Mosaic law. It was enough that they "abstain from eating food offered to idols, from consuming blood or the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality", out of deference for their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ.

The early church was equal parts melting pot and powder keg. The unique and unlikely blending of so many ethnic, social and religious perspectives had created a potentially toxic cocktail. Part of the responsibility of the leadership was to manage this sensitive and volatile environment with wisdom and diplomacy. The church was growing rapidly, and each day brought with it new issues and potential conflicts that required careful and prayerful administration. The diverse constituency of the church demanded that the elders, apostles and other leaders manage all the competing expectations and conflicting perspectives with godly grace and brotherly love. It is no wonder that one of Jesus' primary requests in His high priestly prayer on the night He was betrayed, was for unity among those who could be His followers. Paul could have easily rejected the suggestion of James, demanding that it was well within his rights to do so. But he cared more about the gospel than he did about his rights. He was always willing to sacrifice his rights for the cause of Christ. He was ready, willing and able to die to self in order that others might discover what it means to live for Christ. He summed up his outlook quite succinctly in his first letter to the Corinthian church.

*<sup>31</sup> So if you eat or drink or whatever you do, do everything to honor God. <sup>32</sup> Do nothing that would make trouble for a Greek or for a Jew or for the church of God. <sup>33</sup> I want to please everyone in all that I do. I am not thinking of myself. I want to do what is best for them so they may be saved from the punishment of sin. – 1 Corinthians 10:31-33 NT*

## Disorder in the Court

Acts 21:27-36

*<sup>27</sup> When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, <sup>28</sup> crying out, “Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.” <sup>29</sup> For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. <sup>30</sup> Then all the city was stirred up, and the people ran together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut. <sup>31</sup> And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. <sup>32</sup> He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. <sup>33</sup> Then the tribune came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. He inquired who he was and what he had done. <sup>34</sup> Some in the crowd were shouting one thing, some another. And as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. <sup>35</sup> And when he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd, <sup>36</sup> for the mob of the people followed, crying out, “Away with him!” – Acts 21:27-36 ESV*

Rumors had spread among the predominantly Jewish believers in Jerusalem that Paul, while on his missionary journeys, had been attempting to get Jews to walk away from Judaism. They had heard that he was teaching against the Mosaic law, demanding that parents no longer circumcise their children or keep the customs associated with Judaism. Of course, none of it was true, but rumors have a way of becoming fact, not fiction, when told often and eagerly enough. So, Paul had agreed with the suggestion of James, to join four other men who were completing their vows to God. Paul would underwrite the costs of their ceremonial cleansing and join them in their rites of purification, signaling to the Jewish Christians that he was still very much a faithful adherent to Judaism. And it was while Paul and the four other men were in the middle of completing their seven days of purification that a riot ensued. It seems that the Jews had never forgiven Paul for deserting the faith and becoming a follower of the Way. At one time, he had been an up-and-coming Pharisee and fervent opponent of the sect of the rabbi from Nazareth. He had done everything in his power to eradicate the movement and its followers. Then suddenly, without warning, he had switched sides, becoming one of movements most powerful proponents and propagators of the teachings of Jesus. As Paul was completing his purification rites in the Temple courtyard, some Jews from Asia saw him and became upset that he was on their sacred grounds. These men were Jews who had traveled all the way to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost. They were devout and completely dedicated to the Hebrew faith. Having come from Asia, they were very familiar with the work of Paul and his efforts among the Gentiles. It may be that these men were from Ephesus, because “they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city” (Acts 21:29 ESV). They obviously recognized Trophimus and knew him to be a non-Jew. Upon seeing Paul in the temple courtyard, they immediately assumed that he had brought his Gentile friends with him. Now, if Paul had brought them into the Court of the Gentiles, that would have been acceptable, but as

part of his purification rite, Paul would have been in the Israelite's Courtyard. These men viewed Paul as an enemy of Judaism. He had spent two years in Ephesus, preaching the gospel and spreading the good news regarding Jesus, "so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10 ESV).

Now, here were these Jews from Asia, seeing Paul in the courtyard of their sacred temple, and they lost it. They immediately sounded the alarm, calling attention to Paul's presence and accusing him of desecrating the temple by bringing Gentiles into the restricted areas. Perhaps they thought that the four men who were undergoing purification with Paul were Gentiles. Whatever the case, they shouted, "Men of Israel, help us! This is the man who preaches against our people everywhere and tells everybody to disobey the Jewish laws. He speaks against the Temple—and even defiles this holy place by bringing in Gentiles." (Acts 21:28 NLT). Luke makes it clear that they had wrongly assumed that Paul had brought Trophimus into the sacred area of the temple. According to the Mosaic Law, that would have been a capital offense. According to the 1st-Century Jewish historian, Josephus, there were notices placed in the court of the Gentiles, written in both Greek and Latin, warning that any Gentiles who ventured into the inner courts would be responsible for their own deaths. Paul, while a Jew by birth, was little more than a Gentile to these men because they were convinced that he had abandoned his Jewish faith for Christianity. In their minds, Paul was a lover of Gentiles, and he deserved to die. The Jews from Asia whipped the crowd into a frenzy, and "Paul was grabbed and dragged out of the Temple, and immediately the gates were closed behind him" (Acts 21:30 NLT). It seems likely that Paul was removed by force from the Israelite Courtyard and dragged into the Court of the Gentiles. The gates between the two were closed and locked, in an effort to prevent any other potential desecration of the holy grounds.

Things escalated quickly, because Luke indicates that they were trying to kill Paul. News spread of the riot taking place on the temple grounds, and the commander of the Roman forces stationed at the Fortress of Antonio, gathered his troops and entered into the crowd in an attempt to restore order. It didn't take the Roman Tribune long to get there, because the Fortress of Antonio was directly outside the northern portico of the temple. It was only when the crowd saw the Roman troops, that they stopped beating Paul. But the chaos continued, with the irate Jews shouting accusations and spewing hate-filled demands calling for Paul's death. The commander, placing Paul in chains and having his troops carry him above their heads in an effort to protect him from the mob, ordered that he be taken to the fortress. And as they made their way through the throng crowded into the Court of the Gentiles, Paul could hear the shouts of "Kill him, kill him!"

This scene conjures up images of another, very similar occasion, when Jesus had been dragged before Pilate, the Roman governor, having been arrested by the Jewish council and accused of blasphemy. Pilate had examined Jesus and found Him guilty of nothing worthy of death. And Pilate, confused as to what he should do with Jesus, turned to the Jewish crowd and asked them for their opinion in the matter.

<sup>12</sup> Pilate asked them, "Then what should I do with this man you call the king of the Jews?"

<sup>13</sup> They shouted back, "Crucify him!"

<sup>14</sup> "Why?" Pilate demanded. "What crime has he committed?"

But the mob roared even louder, "Crucify him!"

<sup>15</sup> So to pacify the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He ordered Jesus flogged with a lead-tipped whip, then turned him over to the Roman soldiers to be crucified. – Mark 15:12-15 NLT

Their answer had been perfectly and painfully clear. And, in the case of Paul, the Jews were equally adamant in their demand that he be put to death. Paul was a perceived threat to their way of life. He was disrupting the status quo and, apparently, guilty of causing many of their fellow Jews to abandon their Jewish faith. He was a troublemaker and a heretic who needed to be exterminated. But, in reality, all Paul was guilty of, was teaching men and women how they might be made right with God. He had been teaching justification by faith, not by the law. He had not been discounting Judaism or diminishing the importance of the Mosaic law but had simply been clarifying the true intentions of the law. If Paul had taught anything, it was that the law "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" (Galatians 3:19 NLT). It had been the apostle John who wrote in his gospel, "For the law was given through Moses, but God's unflinching love and faithfulness came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17 NLT). Later on, in the same gospel, John records the words of Jesus, spoken to the Jews: "Moses gave you the law, but none of you obeys it! In fact, you are trying to kill me" (John 7:19 NLT).

Jesus had come to fulfill the requirements of the law. He made that fact known when He addressed the crowds during His sermon on the mount.

<sup>17</sup> "Don't misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose. <sup>18</sup> I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not even the smallest detail of God's law will disappear until its purpose is achieved. – Matthew 5:17-18 NLT

Jesus had been the consummate law-keeper, not lawbreaker. He was obedient to His heavenly Father in every way, having kept every single commandment perfectly. And Paul had been spreading the truth regarding Jesus and His association with the law of Moses.

<sup>21</sup> But now God has shown us a way to be made right with him without keeping the requirements of the law, as was promised in the writings of Moses and the prophets long ago. <sup>22</sup> We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are. – Romans 3:21-22 NLT

<sup>3</sup> *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.* <sup>4</sup> *He did this so that the just requirement of the law would be fully satisfied for us, who no longer follow our sinful nature but instead follow the Spirit.* – Romans 8:3-4 NLT

Paul was not against the law of Moses. He was against the idea of anyone being able to keep the law and make themselves righteous in the eyes of God. He had been a law-abiding Pharisee but knew that all his efforts to keep the law had failed. In spite his best intentions, he had been a lawbreaker, not a law-keeper. And Paul provides us with a vivid description of his view of life lived in an attempt to keep the holy and righteous law of God in the flesh.

<sup>14</sup> *So the trouble is not with the law, for it is spiritual and good. The trouble is with me, for I am all too human, a slave to sin.* <sup>15</sup> *I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate.* <sup>16</sup> *But if I know that what I am doing is wrong, this shows that I agree that the law is good.* <sup>17</sup> *So I am not the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it.*

<sup>18</sup> *And I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can't.* <sup>19</sup> *I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway.* <sup>20</sup> *But if I do what I don't want to do, I am not really the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it.*

<sup>21</sup> *I have discovered this principle of life—that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong.* <sup>22</sup> *I love God's law with all my heart.* <sup>23</sup> *But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me.* <sup>24</sup> *Oh, what a miserable person I am!* – Romans 7:14-24 NLT

Paul was in chains. He had been beaten and falsely accused. But he knew that he was guilty of nothing more than preaching and teaching the truth about Jesus. He firmly believed what he wrote to the church in Rome, answering his own question, “Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?” with the powerful and life-altering words, “Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 7:24-25 NLT)

## Misdirected Zeal

Acts 21:37-22:5

<sup>37</sup> As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, “May I say something to you?” And he said, “Do you know Greek?” <sup>38</sup> Are you not the Egyptian, then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?” <sup>39</sup> Paul replied, “I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city. I beg you, permit me to speak to the people.” <sup>40</sup> And when he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the steps, motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great hush, he addressed them in the Hebrew language, saying:

<sup>1</sup> “Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you.”

<sup>2</sup> And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet. And he said:

<sup>3</sup> “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. <sup>4</sup> I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, <sup>5</sup> as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.” – Acts 21:37-22:5 ESV

At the close of chapter seven and the beginning of chapter eight, Luke introduced us to Saul for the very first time. Luke indicated that Saul “was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison” (Acts 8:3 NLT). He was a man on a mission. He was obsessed. And he honestly thought he was doing God a huge favor by ridding the world of any and all Christians he could get his hands on. In fact, in today’s chapter, he explains the mindset behind his passionate persecution of the church.

<sup>3</sup> I became very **zealous to honor God in everything I did**, just like all of you today. <sup>4</sup> And I persecuted the followers of the Way, hounding some to death, arresting both men and women and throwing them in prison. – Acts 22:3-4 NLT

He was highly motivated and demonstrated extreme eagerness to please and honor God through his actions. We know that when he stood by and watched the stoning of Stephen, he not only held the coats of those who threw the stones, he “agreed completely with the killing of Stephen” (Acts 8:1 NLT). He was convinced that the killing of Christians was a good thing. He saw them as dangerous heretics and criminals who opposed the Mosaic law and the Jewish religion. But something had happened to Saul. He had a personal encounter with the resurrected Jesus and his life had been dramatically transformed and the trajectory of his life had been radically altered. He was no longer the same man.

And as he stood in the Court of the Gentiles, having been rescued by the Roman cohort, from a beating at the hands of the Jews, he recounted to the crowd just what had happened to change his life. He asked the captain of the Roman soldiers if he could be given a chance to address the crowd, the very ones who had been attempting to end his life. Paul saw this as a unique and unavoidable opportunity to share his story. And when the captain, having learned that Paul was not the radical Egyptian revolutionary he supposed him to be, allowed him to speak. And Paul addressed the crowd of Jews in their own language.

Not only did Paul address the crowd in their own language of Aramaic, he let them know that he was one of them, a Jew born in Tarsus of Cilicia. He was a Hellenistic Jew, born in the Roman-controlled region of Cilicia. Tarsus was a major city, located in what is today southern Turkey. Paul wanted the Jews in his audience to know that he was a Jew, not some upstart Greek-speaking troublemaker. And he proceeded to give them his curriculum vitae, explaining that he had a significant Hebrew heritage and a formal education that was more than a little bit impressive. Paul wasn't bragging, but he was attempting to get his audience's attention by highlighting his religious and educational resumes.

*"I am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, and I was brought up and educated here in Jerusalem under Gamaliel." – Acts 22:3 NLT*

He wasn't a newcomer to Jerusalem or some kind of country bumpkin from the sticks. He had been raised in the capital city and trained under one of the most revered of all the Jewish rabbis and teachers of the day. He was well-educated and more than familiar with the religion of his forefathers. Paul had been a Pharisee. and he would later describe himself as having been one of the best of all the Pharisees.

*<sup>5</sup> I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin—a real Hebrew if there ever was one! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. <sup>6</sup> I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault. – Philippians 3:5-6 NLT*

Paul had been a law-keeping, card-carrying Pharisee who had an impeccable record of human-based righteousness. He had Hebrew blood coursing through his veins and a no-holds-barred obsession for the Hebrew faith. If you looked up the word, "zealous" in the dictionary, you would have found Paul's picture out beside it. In fact, Paul referred to himself as "being zealous for God." The Greek word he used is *zēlōtēs*, and it refers to someone who burns with zeal for something, but also someone who defends and upholds something, vehemently contending for it with all his power. Paul had seen his pre-conversion mission as somehow God-ordained. But he had really appointed himself, having determined that he was doing the will of God, without having ever received his assignment from God. Paul was a self-appointed vigilante for God. He was kicking tail and taking names. His mission in life was to eliminate any and all Christians from the face of the earth – one at a time, if necessary. And Paul openly confessed, "I persecuted the

followers of the Way, hounding some to death, arresting both men and women and throwing them in prison” (Acts 22:4 NLT). He had taken his job very seriously. And he had not been content to restrict his efforts to the city of Jerusalem. He had gone to the high priest and solicited formal documents that would allow him to take his little show on the road, seeking out Christians wherever he could find them.

Back in chapter eight, Luke recorded that “A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem; and all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria. (Some devout men came and buried Stephen with great mourning.) **But Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church.** He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison” (Acts 8:1-4 NLT). And he had received official papers giving him permission and power to search and destroy all Christians found in the city of Damascus.

*I received letters from them to our Jewish brothers in Damascus, authorizing me to bring the followers of the Way from there to Jerusalem, in chains, to be punished. – Acts 22:5 NLT*

And he challenged his listeners to fact-check his claim by talking to the high priest himself. He would corroborate the authenticity of his story.

But this is where his story will take a dramatic turn. He had set them up. They were on pins and needles, having heard him share some insights to his life story that none of them would have never guessed in a million years. Here was a former Pharisee and student of the famous Gamaliel, and he had been accused of teaching against the law of Moses and of desecrating the temple by bringing uncircumcised Gentiles into the area reserved only for Jews. How could he have done such a thing? What had forced this Pharisee to abandon his Jewish faith and turn his back on his own people? At this point, the crowd is far less interested in beating Paul, as they are in hearing what he has to say. They were mesmerized and intrigued. And Paul was going to take advantage of their rapt attention to share the most dramatic and unexpected part of his story. He had been one of them. He had grown up in the same culture and under the same conditions as they had. He had been circumcised, taught in the synagogue, attended the various feasts and festivals, trained as a Pharisee, and emersed in the rights, rituals and religious rules of Judaism. So, what had happened? And that’s where Paul will pick up his story:

*“As I was on the road, approaching Damascus...” – Acts 22:6 NLT*

Remember. He had been on a mission. He thought he was acting on behalf of God. He had truly believed he was doing God a favor. He was zealous and energetic in his efforts. He had been determined and disciplined in carrying out his actions. And, like the people standing in the crowd, listening to his words, Paul had been convinced that he was right. He had fully believed that his agenda had been God’s agenda. But he was in for a big surprise and so were they.



## Appointed by God

Acts 22:6-21

<sup>6</sup> “As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. <sup>7</sup> And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ <sup>8</sup> And I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.’ <sup>9</sup> Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me. <sup>10</sup> And I said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.’ <sup>11</sup> And since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and came into Damascus.

<sup>12</sup> “And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, <sup>13</sup> came to me, and standing by me said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight.’ And at that very hour I received my sight and saw him. <sup>14</sup> And he said, ‘The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; <sup>15</sup> for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. <sup>16</sup> And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.’

<sup>17</sup> “When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance <sup>18</sup> and saw him saying to me, ‘Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.’ <sup>19</sup> And I said, ‘Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. <sup>20</sup> And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.’ <sup>21</sup> And he said to me, ‘Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’” – Acts 22:6-21 ESV

Paul had been on his way to Damascus, on a self-appointed mission to seek and destroy Christians.

<sup>3</sup> I became very zealous to honor God in everything I did, just like all of you today. <sup>4</sup> And I persecuted the followers of the Way, hounding some to death, arresting both men and women and throwing them in prison. <sup>5</sup> The high priest and the whole council of elders can testify that this is so. For I received letters from them to our Jewish brothers in Damascus, authorizing me to bring the followers of the Way from there to Jerusalem, in chains, to be punished. – Acts 22:3-5 NLT

He clearly believed he had been doing God a favor by eliminating this radical religious sect called The Way from the face of the planet. He saw his efforts as God-honoring, but the problem was that they were not God-appointed. God had not asked him to do what he was doing. He had not been commissioned by God to persecute, arrest and murder Christians. That had all been Paul's idea. Yes, God had been sovereignly orchestrating the events surrounding

Paul's life and, according to Paul's own testimony, God had chosen him for salvation and for his role as an apostle, long before Paul was even born.

*<sup>13</sup> You know what I was like when I followed the Jewish religion—how I violently persecuted God's church. I did my best to destroy it. <sup>14</sup> I was far ahead of my fellow Jews in my zeal for the traditions of my ancestors.*

*<sup>15</sup> But even before I was born, God chose me and called me by his marvelous grace. Then it pleased him <sup>16</sup> to reveal his Son to me so that I would proclaim the Good News about Jesus to the Gentiles. – Galatians 1:13-15 NLT*

But God had not made Paul, then known as Saul, persecute the church. He had not forced Saul to do the things he did. God does not entice anyone to commit acts of evil. James, the half-brother of Jesus reminds of this very important fact: "And remember, when you are being tempted, do not say, 'God is tempting me.' God is never tempted to do wrong, and he never tempts anyone else" (James 1:13 NLT). And John echoes those same sentiments: "Remember that those who do good prove that they are God's children, and those who do evil prove that they do not know God" (3 John 1:11 NLT). What Paul had been doing had been his idea, not God's. But unbeknownst to Paul, God had been using his ungodly actions to accomplish the divine plan of redemption. Paul's efforts to destroy the church had actually resulted in the scattering and dispersion of the believers and to the spread of the gospel message.

*<sup>3</sup> But Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison.*

*<sup>4</sup> But the believers who were scattered preached the Good News about Jesus wherever they went. – Acts 8:3-4 NLT*

And Paul had been heading to Damascus to carry out his self-appointed mission as a bounty-hunter for God, when his will ran head-on into God's. He testified, "As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me" (Acts 22:6 ESV). Paul had his eyes set on Damascus, but he had an unexpected and unplanned encounter with the risen Lord. This had not been on his agenda for the day. He had not scheduled this meeting in his appointment book that morning. When he had set out that day on his seek-and-destroy mission, he had not planned on meeting the crucified and resurrected Jesus. In fact, he didn't believe such a person existed. Oh, he believed there *had been* a Jesus, but He had been put to death. And yet, Paul was in for the shock of his life. Jesus was alive and well and knew him by name. He saw a blinding light and heard a voice calling out to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Whoever this was knew him. but Paul wasn't able to put two and two together. He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" and Jesus responded, "I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting." Can you imagine what went through Paul's mind as he heard those words? He was hearing the voice of a dead man. The martyred leader of The Way was speaking to him from the grave. The recognized leader of the sect Paul had been trying to destroy was somehow communicating with him and accusing Paul of persecuting Him.

Now, what happens next is fascinating. Just think of all the questions that must have been swirling through Paul's mind at that moment. Imagine how his thoughts would have been reeling as he stood there, unable to see, but clearly hearing the voice of a man he had never met before and who was supposed to be dead. And yet, the only thing Paul could say was, "What shall I do, Lord?" Paul was a religious man. He was a devout Jew and a well-educated Pharisee, so he knew this was a divine encounter of some kind. It is doubtful that he fully understood what was going on or that he realized that the voice he heard truly was that of the resurrected Jesus. But he knew he had been physically accosted by a power greater than his own, that had left him blind and totally incapacitated. So, he asked for directions. He wanted to know what he was supposed to do next. And Jesus accommodated Paul's desire for next steps by providing him with specific instructions: "Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do."

The word "appointed" is important. The Greek word Luke used is *tassō*, and it means "to ordain, order or appoint; to assign to a certain position or lot." Paul was about to find out what he was really supposed to be doing. He had been on a mission, but it had not been the one God had in store for him. And while Paul had been zealous to honor God in all that he did, he was not doing any of it according to God's will. He had been well-intended, but well off the mark when it came to his true life's calling.

Paul was led by the hand into Damascus, and later received a visitor, sent to him by God. Ananias was a believing Jew who had received a vision from God, commanding him to go to Paul, restore his sight and deliver to him a message. But Ananias had been somewhat reluctant to follow God's orders. He had felt compelled to remind God just who this man Saul was and why it was probably not a good idea for him to go and meet with him.

*<sup>13</sup> "I've heard many people talk about the terrible things this man has done to the believers in Jerusalem! <sup>14</sup> And he is authorized by the leading priests to arrest everyone who calls upon your name." – Acts 9:13-14 NLT*

Paul's reputation had preceded him. And Ananias was justifiably reluctant to have a one-on-one encounter with a known and renowned persecutor of the church. But God calmed Ananias' spirit by providing him with insight into what was going on. God had a plan for Paul's life. "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:15-16 ESV). God had hand-picked Paul for a special assignment and had preordained the purpose for and outcome of his life.

And when Ananias had arrived on the scene and restored Paul's sight, he delivered a personal message from the Lord. "The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard" (Acts 22:14-15 ESV). There's that word again: Appointed. But this time, Ananias uses the Greek word, *procheirizō*, which carries the meaning, "to appoint for one's use" or "to choose." In this case, Ananias was letting Paul know that God

had made a decision to reveal His divine will to him, by allowing him to have a personal encounter with Jesus, the Righteous one, and to receive a message directly from the lips of the resurrected, living Messiah. And now, Paul was going to have a new life assignment: Telling anyone and everyone what he had seen and heard.

And Paul indicates that the very next thing that happened to him was his own baptism. He received water baptism as a result of his faith in Christ. Nowhere in the text does Paul indicate exactly when he came to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, but it was long before he was baptized, because the water baptism does not wash away sins. It is a post-conversion act of obedience, signifying that one has believed on the Lord Jesus Christ and received the gift of salvation, including forgiveness and cleansing from sin. Ananias had rather abruptly asked Paul, "What are you waiting for? Get up and be baptized. Have your sins washed away by calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16 NLT). The text makes it sound like Ananias was associating water baptism with the washing away of sins, but in the original text, the phrase, "calling on" is actually an aorist participle meaning "having called on." Paul's baptism was following his conversion. It was symbolic of the spiritual cleansing that had already taken place in Paul's life.

Paul ultimately returned to Jerusalem, where he received a vision from Jesus, warning him to flee the city because they were not going to accept his testimony. Jesus had other plans for Paul. Because of his prior mission as a persecutor of the church, Paul thought his chances at having a successful ministry were shot out of the water. He was damaged goods. But Jesus let him know that his ministry was going to be to the Gentiles, telling him, "Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles!" And that is exactly what Paul had been doing, up until the point that he had been nearly beaten to death in the temple courtyard. He had been faithfully carrying out the ministry appointed to him by Jesus, and just as Jesus has told Ananias, Paul had discovered what it meant to suffer for the name of Jesus.

## Between Two Worlds

Acts 22:22-30

*<sup>22</sup> Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live." <sup>23</sup> And as they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, <sup>24</sup> the tribune ordered him to be brought into the barracks, saying that he should be examined by flogging, to find out why they were shouting against him like this. <sup>25</sup> But when they had stretched him out for the whips, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, "Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?" <sup>26</sup> When the centurion heard this, he went to the tribune and said to him, "What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman citizen." <sup>27</sup> So the tribune came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" And he said, "Yes." <sup>28</sup> The tribune answered, "I bought this citizenship for a large sum." Paul said, "But I am a citizen by birth." <sup>29</sup> So those who were about to examine him withdrew from him immediately, and the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him.*

*<sup>30</sup> But on the next day, desiring to know the real reason why he was being accused by the Jews, he unbound him and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet, and he brought Paul down and set him before them. – Acts 22:22-30 ESV*

Paul, having been saved by Roman soldiers from being beaten to death by the Jewish mob, had been given an opportunity to address his accusers. And as Paul had shared his conversion story with them, they had given him their undivided attention, until he relayed the words spoken to Him by Jesus: "Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles" (Acts 22:21 ESV). It was at that very moment that the crowd lost their composure yet again. As soon as they heard speak those words, they responded, "Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live" (Acts 22:22 ESV). But was it that caused this extreme reaction? Why had they listened so quietly and intently up until this particular moment? There were probably a number of factors involved. First of all, Paul was claiming to have heard directly from Jesus Himself, the very one the Jews had plotted to have put to death by the Romans. Paul referred to him as "Lord", a designation most often reserved for God Himself. On top of that, Paul infers that Jesus told him to take the message of salvation to the Gentiles. This would have angered the believing Jews in the audience, who were already upset with Paul because he had been converting Gentiles without requiring them to submit to the rite of circumcision and obey the Mosaic law. It is important to remember that part of what had gotten Paul in trouble in the first place was the accusation that he had brought Gentiles into the Court of Israel. This would have been a crime punishable by death. When Paul had showed up at the Temple to complete his ceremonial cleansing, some Jews from Asia had seen him and riled up the crowds against him.

*"This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place." – Acts 21:28 ESV*

So, when Paul mentioned that Jesus had spoken to him and had commanded him to take the gospel concerning the Messiah to the Gentiles, the Jews became enraged. Those were unbelieving Jews were upset that Paul spoke of Jesus as the Messiah and Lord. Those in the crowd who were believing Jews were angry because they believed that Gentiles must first become law-abiding Jews before they could receive salvation in Christ. Both groups were angry with Paul. So much so, that Luke describes them as “shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air” (Acts 22:23 ESV). What a scene. Complete confusion and chaos, mixed with uncontrollable rage. And the Roman tribune ordered Paul to be taken to the barracks inside the Fortress of Antonio, which was immediately outside the temple grounds. His plan was to flog Paul until he got to the truth of what was really going on.

It's interesting to note that Paul allowed the soldiers to go so far as to have him stretched out, ready to be flogged, before he spoke up and revealed his status as a Roman citizen. It is as if Paul was going to let them get right up to the point of no return before he stopped them from committing a crime. This would certainly get their attention. And Luke proves that this little, last-minute revelation by Paul had its desired impact.

*The soldiers who were about to interrogate Paul quickly withdrew when they heard he was a Roman citizen, and the commander was frightened because he had ordered him bound and whipped. – Acts 29 NLT*

They had been stopped in the nick of time. As a Roman citizen, Paul was legally protected from scourging. It was against the law for any Roman to undergo this kind of punishment without access to due process. Paul had been accused, but nothing had been proven. He had been arrested, but there had been no trial. And the very fact that the Roman tribune had commanded Paul to be bound by chains, was a violation of Paul's rights as a Roman citizen.

The Roman commander was surprised that Paul had Roman citizenship, because he had seen in him in the temple and had heard his testimony. “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers” (Acts 22:3 ESV). And because Paul was a Jew, the Roman tribune had just assumed that he was not a Roman citizen. He even hinted that Paul must have purchased his citizenship somewhere along the way. But Paul assured him that he had been born a Roman citizen, with all the rights and privileges that designation brings.

While the Roman tribune had learned of Paul's Roman citizenship, he was still in the dark as to why Paul was being accused by the Jews and what had prompted them to try and kill him in the first place. So, the next day, he arranged a meeting with the religious leadership.

*<sup>30</sup> But on the next day, desiring to know the real reason why he was being accused by the Jews, he unbound him and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet, and he brought Paul down and set him before them. – Acts 22:30 ESV*

This was going to set up a unique situation, in which Paul, a Jew and Christ-follower, would find himself standing before the Jewish chief priests and religious leaders, as well as a representative of the Roman government. He would have his feet firmly planted in two different worlds, both of which would prove integral to his entire life and ministry. Paul was a devout Jew and proud of his Hebrew heritage. He was a Pharisee and a former student of one of the leading rabbis of the day. He was knowledgeable of the Hebrew Scriptures and highly intelligent. And yet, Paul was comfortable in the pagan world as well, easily able to mix and mingle with people from all walks of life and from every imaginable ethnic background. Paul was comfortable within the context of Jerusalem, but he would one day find himself living in Rome, under house arrest, and sharing the gospel with all those he had a chance to meet, including his Roman guards.

In this scene, we get a glimpse of God's sovereign hand as He orchestrated all the details of Paul's life, from his birth into a Jewish home to his inheritance of a Roman citizenship. What if that had not been the case? What if Paul had not been a Roman citizen? He would have been flogged severely, a punishment that left its victim disfigured for life and, at time, dead. God had preordained Paul's entire life story, from beginning to end. His training in the school of Gamaliel had equipped him with a tremendous understanding of Judaism and the Hebrew Scriptures. His status as a Pharisee gave him an unparalleled understanding of the Mosaic law. His childhood spent in Tarsus, the capital city of the Roman province of Cilicia, would have provided Paul first-hand experience with the Roman way of life. He was a man adept at living in two different worlds. And yet, Paul would live his life with the attitude that his real citizenship was elsewhere. He reminded the believers in Philippi, "we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives. And we are eagerly waiting for him to return as our Savior" (Philippians 3:20 NLT). Paul was comfortable living in two worlds, while keeping his mind set on the Kingdom to come. He had been specially prepared by God for his life and ministry, having been born and raised a Jew, inherited his Roman citizenship, and having received a theological education that was second to none. He was God's man for this moment in time.



## According to Plan

Acts 23:1-11

<sup>1</sup> And looking intently at the council, Paul said, "Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day." <sup>2</sup> And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. <sup>3</sup> Then Paul said to him, "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?" <sup>4</sup> Those who stood by said, "Would you revile God's high priest?" <sup>5</sup> And Paul said, "I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'"

<sup>6</sup> Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial." <sup>7</sup> And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. <sup>8</sup> For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. <sup>9</sup> Then a great clamor arose, and some of the scribes of the Pharisees' party stood up and contended sharply, "We find nothing wrong in this man. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him?" <sup>10</sup> And when the dissension became violent, the tribune, afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him away from among them by force and bring him into the barracks.

<sup>11</sup> The following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome." – Acts 23:1-11 ESV

Paul had caused a riot in the temple. Actually, it would more accurate to say that it was his *presence* had led to a riot in the temple. The riot was the result of a contingent of Jews from Asia who, upon seeing Paul in the temple, had wrongly assumed that he had been accompanied by one of his Gentile companions, a violation of the Mosaic law. Their accusation has caused the Jews in the temple grounds to react vehemently and violently to Paul, nearly beating him to death before the Roman guards stepped in. Paul was given a chance to address the crowd, but when it went south, he was taken to the Roman barracks in chains, where the Romans made plans to flog the truth out of him. When Paul announced to them that he was a Roman citizen, he was immediately released and apologized profusely. But the Roman tribune still had a problem: He needed to know the nature of the crime for which Paul was guilty. When he had rescued Paul from the mob in the temple courtyard, he had been unable to discern what it was that Paul had done to make the Jews so angry. Luke recorded: "He inquired who he [Paul] was and what he had done. Some in the crowd were shouting one thing, some another. And as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar" (Acts 21:33-34 ESV).

So, the Roman tribune had determined to bring in the big guns: the Jewish high council or Sanhedrin. He assumed that these religious rulers could help him get to the truth of what was going on. The following day, Paul was brought before the high priest and the council and given

an opportunity to speak. But this would prove to be a less-than-receptive audience. No sooner had Paul begun his address, he was slapped in the face by order of the high priest. All Paul had said was, “Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day” (Acts 23:1 ESV). This simple opening statement had incensed the high priest so much that he had commanded Paul to be publicly humiliated. Luke does not provide us with any details as to why Paul’s words were so upsetting to the high priest. It could have been a number of things. Perhaps he was offended that Paul addressed them as his brothers. Paul had at one time been a Pharisee and, according to his own testimony, had been given letters of authority by the high priest to pursue and arrest Christians in Damascus (Acts 9:2). So, at one time, he had enjoyed a close relationship with the high priest. But it is likely that the high priest was well aware of the radical change that had come over Paul and how he had switched sides and become a follower of the Way. He would no longer have considered Paul a brother.

There is also the likelihood that Paul’s claim of having a clear conscience before God also raised the ire of the high priest. Paul was claiming moral and ethical innocence as it pertained to his actions. As far as he was concerned, there was nothing he had done that was outside of the will of God or in violation of the Hebrew Scriptures. He had done nothing to deserve being beaten or arrested. The high priest most likely sensed that Paul was trying to seize the moral high ground and was not going to allow him to proceed.

Finally, there is a strong chance that the high priest was well aware that Paul was getting ready to launch into the story of his conversion and of his ministry among the Gentiles. He would have remembered what had happened when Stephen was on trial before them and how he had lectured them on their own history and accused them of killing Jesus. The slap might have been an attempt to put Paul in his place and to prevent him from using this forum as an opportunity to spout his heresy. Whatever the case, the indignity of the high priest’s reaction angered Paul and he responded accordingly.

*“God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?” – Acts 23:3 ESV*

Paul’s words seem uncharacteristically angry. It almost appears that he lost his cool and allowed the tension of the last 24 hours to get to him. His words are harsh and vindictive, accusing the high priest of being a whitewashed wall. This statement is very similar to that of Jesus when He had referred to the scribes and Pharisees as whitewashed tombs.

*“What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs--beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people's bones and all sorts of impurity.” – Matthew 23:27 NLT*

Paul was accusing the high priest of hypocrisy. He was supposed to be the keeper of the law, but in ordering Paul to be struck, he was in direct violation of the law. Now, this is where it gets a bit interesting. Immediately after his verbal tongue lashing, Paul was informed that he had been addressing the high priest. This appears to have come as a shock to Paul, because he

immediately claims ignorance, stating, “I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest” (Acts 23:5 ESV). And Paul makes it clear that, had he known, he would not have said what he said, because to do so would have been in violation of God’s law as well. He even quotes from Exodus 22:8: “You must not dishonor God or curse any of your rulers.” So, it would appear that Paul had been unaware that his words, spoken in anger, had been addressed to the high priest. But that begs the question: But would it have mattered? According to Exodus 22:8, Paul would have been guilty no matter which one of the men had ordered him to be slapped. As members of the high council, they were all considered leaders over the people of Israel. So, there is a likelihood that Paul was being a bit sarcastic. In saying that he didn’t know it was the high priest, he may have really been inferring that the high priest had not been acting like a high priest when he had ordered Paul to be slapped. So, how was Paul to know he was addressing a leader of the people of Israel. He hadn’t acted like one, so Paul had addressed him appropriately.

We’ll never know exactly what went on at that moment. But we do know that the tensions were high, and Paul sensed an opportunity to take advantage of what he knew to be the divisive nature of the council’s makeup. The members of the high council were made up of Pharisees and Sadducees. Paul, as a former Pharisee, knew well the differences between the two groups. The Sadducees denied the very idea of the resurrection. This was a major point of division between themselves and the Pharisees and, as a former Pharisee, Paul would have been well aware of this fact. So, he exploits it by saying, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial” (Acts 23:6 ESV). Once again, he addressed them as brothers, but this time he directs his attention to the Pharisees in the room. He was dividing his audience and setting up a confrontation. And, for the benefit of the Roman tribune, Paul cuts to the chase and established the true reason for his so-called trial: The resurrection of the dead. Specifically, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But he purposefully doesn’t mention Jesus. He simply raises the controversial issue of bodily resurrection and the room explodes. Luke records that, “when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided” (Acts 23:7 ESV). Paul just sat back and watched the fireworks. And the Roman tribune got a first-hand glimpse of Jewish religious politics in action. Paul’s little ploy worked to perfection. Luke states that “a great clamor arose” and at one point, some of the scribes who were Pharisees, shouted that they saw no reason for Paul to be on trial – he was innocent. Then things began to get violent – so much so, that the Roman tribune had to rescue Paul once again and return him to the barracks, so he wouldn’t be torn to pieces by the religious leaders.

Paul was not out of the woods. He was still under arrest and had no idea what was going to happen to him. But the following night he was given words of assurance from Jesus Himself.

*The following night the Lord stood by him and said, “Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.” – Acts 23:11 ESV*

Paul was on his way to Rome. He had longed to go to Rome for some time. He had even written to the believers in Rome, telling them, “I am eager to come to you in Rome, too, to preach the Good News” (Romans 1:15 NLT). And now, after a lengthy delay, he was going to get his opportunity. But while Paul had long harbored a desire to go to Rome, he had not let that sway him from doing his job. He told the believers in Rome:

*<sup>20</sup> 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.*

*<sup>21</sup> 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.”*

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

But there would be no more delay. God was sending Paul to Rome. It would not be quite the way Paul had probably envisioned it, but it was the will of God. The timing was perfect, because it was God’s timing. The means by which Paul would make his way to Rome might appear less-than-ideal, but it was the sovereign plan of God. Paul’s very presence in Jerusalem had been the will of God. His presence in the temple had been part of God’s divine plan. His beating and arrest were as well. And all that had taken place in his trial before the Sanhedrin was just another example of God’s providential plan for his life. Paul was going to enjoy the opportunity of a lifetime: To testify about Jesus in the capital of the Roman empire.

## Dead Man Walking

Acts 23:12-24

<sup>12</sup> When it was day, the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. <sup>13</sup> There were more than forty who made this conspiracy. <sup>14</sup> They went to the chief priests and elders and said, "We have strictly bound ourselves by an oath to taste no food till we have killed Paul. <sup>15</sup> Now therefore you, along with the council, give notice to the tribune to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case more exactly. And we are ready to kill him before he comes near."

<sup>16</sup> Now the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, so he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. <sup>17</sup> Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Take this young man to the tribune, for he has something to tell him." <sup>18</sup> So he took him and brought him to the tribune and said, "Paul the prisoner called me and asked me to bring this young man to you, as he has something to say to you." <sup>19</sup> The tribune took him by the hand, and going aside asked him privately, "What is it that you have to tell me?" <sup>20</sup> And he said, "The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more closely about him. <sup>21</sup> But do not be persuaded by them, for more than forty of their men are lying in ambush for him, who have bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they have killed him. And now they are ready, waiting for your consent." <sup>22</sup> So the tribune dismissed the young man, charging him, "Tell no one that you have informed me of these things."

<sup>23</sup> Then he called two of the centurions and said, "Get ready two hundred soldiers, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go as far as Caesarea at the third hour of the night.

<sup>24</sup> Also provide mounts for Paul to ride and bring him safely to Felix the governor." – Acts 23:12-24 ESV

Paul was in protective custody. The Roman tribune in charge of his care was at a loss as to what to do with Paul. He was still searching for a reason to keep Paul in custody because there appeared to be no valid charge against him or cause to keep him. But the Jews were still in an uproar and the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, had ended up in a violent debate over Paul and his guilt or innocence. Paul was most likely being kept somewhere within the Fortress of Antonio, just outside the walls of the temple compound.

Back in chapter 21, Luke recorded the arrival of Paul in the city of Caesarea, where he stayed in the home of Philip the Evangelist. While there, Paul received a visit from a man from Judea named Agabus, who had the gift of prophecy. This man had received a message from the Holy Spirit and delivered it to Paul.

<sup>11</sup> He came over, took Paul's belt, and bound his own feet and hands with it. Then he said, "The Holy Spirit declares, 'So shall the owner of this belt be bound by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and turned over to the Gentiles.'" <sup>12</sup> When we heard this, we and the local believers all begged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. – Acts 21:11-12 NLT

This man's prophecy had come true. Paul had been bound by the Jewish leaders and now he was being kept under lock and key by the Roman authorities. Yet, all of this was part of God's divine plan for Paul's life, and he knew it. In fact, when those in Philip's house had tried to convince Paul not to go to Jerusalem, he had replied: "Why all this weeping? You are breaking my heart! I am ready not only to be jailed at Jerusalem but even to die for the sake of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 21:13 NLT). And Paul, while sincere in his statement, had no idea just how prophetic his words had been.

While Paul was in the custody of the Romans, the Jewish leadership had been approached by a group of forty Jewish zealots who had developed a plan to take Paul's life. They were so serious that they had made a pact with one another, sealed by an oath and a mutual commitment to fast from food or drink until Paul was dead. But their plot would require the assistance of the high priest and the Sanhedrin. With Paul safely sequestered within the walls of the Fortress of Antonio, where he was surrounded by Roman guards, the only hope these men had was to somehow force the Romans to bring him out in the open. So, they appealed to the Sanhedrin, saying, "ask the commander to bring Paul back to the council again. Pretend you want to examine his case more fully. We will kill him on the way" (Acts 23:15 NLT).

Now, the text does not say whether the Jewish religious leaders agreed to this request. But Luke seems to take it quite seriously, because he records the fact that Paul's nephew somehow got wind of what these men were planning and delivered the news to Paul. And Paul immediately sent his nephew to inform the Roman tribune. Which raises an interesting side note. Notice how Paul reacted to the information his nephew delivered to him. He didn't smile and say, "Thanks for the warning, but I'm going to trust God." He didn't send his nephew away with a pat on the head and an assurance that God had this all under control. No, Paul seems to have viewed this news as having come from God and he took it seriously. Paul was not afraid to die, but he was in no rush to have his life taken by men who were driven by nothing more than hatred and motivated by Satan himself. Paul knew that there was a spiritual battle going on. He lived with a constant awareness that dark forces were gathered against the Kingdom of God and stood opposed to all that he was doing. Which is why he had written to the believers in Ephesus:

*For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places. – Ephesians 6:12 NLT*

Paul felt a strong compulsion to go to Rome. Earlier, as Paul was making his way to Jerusalem, Luke records: "Paul felt compelled by the Spirit to go over to Macedonia and Achaia before going to Jerusalem. 'And after that,' he said, 'I must go on to Rome!'" (Acts 19:21 NLT). He somehow knew that a visit to Rome was in his future. He had even written to the believers in Rome, expressing his strong desire to be with them.

*<sup>13</sup> I want you to know, dear brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to visit you, but I was prevented until now. I want to work among you and see spiritual fruit, just as I*

*have seen among other Gentiles. <sup>14</sup> For I have a great sense of obligation to people in both the civilized world and the rest of the world, to the educated and uneducated alike. <sup>15</sup> So I am eager to come to you in Rome, too, to preach the Good News. – Romans 1:13-15 NLT*

So, it would appear that Paul knew the plot against his life was not part of God's will for his life. He was not to die in Jerusalem at the hands of religious zealots. God had other plans for Paul and he knew it. As a result, Paul sent his nephew to inform the Roman tribune about the plot on his life. As we have seen all throughout the Book of Acts, this whole scene has God's sovereign hands all over it. Nothing escapes the divine will of God. He knew all about the plot and the names of every one of the forty men who had conspired to carry it out. And God had arranged for Paul's nephew to discover their plans so he could inform Paul. This whole sequence of events was actually God working behind the scenes to bring about His will that Paul arrive in Rome. In the eyes of the Jewish leadership, Paul was a dead man. It was only a matter of time before his life would be snuffed out, just like Jesus' had been. But Paul was going to walk out of that Roman barracks, under armed Roman guards, and with his entire trip to Rome paid for by the Roman government. And, as we will see in tomorrow's blog, Paul was going to be given opportunities to appear before powerful men and share the good news of the gospel, just as Jesus had told Ananias.

*"Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings..."*  
– Acts 9:15 NLT

It is always amazing to see how God accomplishes His will. The sad thing is that we don't always recognize or appreciate it when it is happening. We tend to look at the circumstances of life and see nothing but the apparent negatives that stare us in the face. Take this story as an example. Paul had been mobbed by a crowd, falsely accused and nearly beaten to death. He had been arrested by the Romans and barely escaped a violent flogging. Then, when he had appeared before the Sanhedrin, instead of getting an opportunity to defend himself, he had gotten his face slapped, and ended back in Roman custody. Now, he was facing a conspiracy to take his life. Oh, and Luke describes Paul having to depart Jerusalem in the middle of the night, surrounded by 200 Roman soldiers, 200 spearmen and 70 mounted troops. Could it get any worse?

But if we look at this same scene from a God-focused perspective, we see this seemingly insignificant Jewish evangelist, getting an all-expenses paid trip to Rome, complete with an armed escort made up of nearly 500 Roman soldiers. Paul was on his way to Caesarea where he would get a one-on-one, divinely ordained appointment with the Roman governor, Felix. In his wildest dreams, Paul could have never imagined something like this happening to him. And he would view it all as positive, not negative. He knew that God was in control and he was willing to rest in the knowledge that God was all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-loving. He was living out the very words he wrote to the believers in Philippi.

*<sup>6</sup> Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. <sup>7</sup> Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus. – Philippians 4:6-7 NLT*

## My Chosen Instrument

Acts 23:25-24:1

<sup>25</sup> *And he wrote a letter to this effect:*

<sup>26</sup> *“Claudius Lysias, to his Excellency the governor Felix, greetings. <sup>27</sup> This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them when I came upon them with the soldiers and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman citizen. <sup>28</sup> And desiring to know the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their council. <sup>29</sup> I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment. <sup>30</sup> And when it was disclosed to me that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, ordering his accusers also to state before you what they have against him.”*

<sup>31</sup> *So the soldiers, according to their instructions, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris. <sup>32</sup> And on the next day they returned to the barracks, letting the horsemen go on with him. <sup>33</sup> When they had come to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they presented Paul also before him. <sup>34</sup> On reading the letter, he asked what province he was from. And when he learned that he was from Cilicia, <sup>35</sup> he said, “I will give you a hearing when your accusers arrive.” And he commanded him to be guarded in Herod’s praetorium.*

<sup>1</sup> *And after five days the high priest Ananias came down with some elders and a spokesman, one Tertullus. – Acts 23:25-24:1 ESV*

Paul’s dream of going to Rome is finally taking place, but not the way he had most likely envisioned it. He is being accompanied by nearly 500 Roman soldiers, whose sole responsibility is to protect Paul from a plot on his life and ensure that he arrives safely in Caesarea. The Roman tribune was sending Paul to Caesarea in order for him to be tried before Felix, the Roman governor of the Roman province of Syria, which included Judea. In the letter he sent to Felix, the Roman tribune, who had been anonymous up to this point in the story, reveals his name: Claudius Lysius. We know, by his own confession, that this man had bought his Roman citizenship, so Lysius was likely his Greek name, and he had added the name of the emperor, Claudius, in recognition of his newly acquired and costly citizenship.

Claudius Lysius’ letter bears the marks of a man who is addressing his more powerful superior. He seems to know that his sending of Paul to Felix could easily be seen as shirking his duty, as if he is passing the buck to the governor. In a sense, he is handing the governor more work and what could be a potential time bomb. He knew how incensed the Jews were over this man name Paul, and he had failed to arrive at a solution. So, in his letter, Claudius Lysius paints himself in the most positive of lights. He falsely claims to have rescued Paul from his beating at the hands of the Jews because he knew him to be a Roman citizen. But the truth was that he had been prepared to have Paul severely flogged, until Paul informed him of his Roman

citizenship. That would have been a political disaster and an oversight that could have ended in his own death. So, he conveniently leaves that part out of his letter.

The only real facts he could provide the governor were in regard to the so-called charges against Paul. He really didn't have any. There had been a lot of accusations hurled against Paul by the Jews, but they had contradicted themselves, and there had been some in the Jewish council, the Pharisees, who had claimed that Paul was innocent. The tribune's conclusion had been that Paul was guilty of nothing that concerned the Roman government. This was a simply another internal dispute among the Jews. But because Paul was a Roman citizen, Claudius Lysius had determined to send him to Felix for fair hearing.

*I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment. – Acts 23:29 ESV*

This was not the first time Paul had been accused by the Jews and found himself standing before Roman authorities. Back in chapter 18, Luke records an incident that had occurred in Corinth. Paul had been drug before the Roman governor of the province of Achaia. The accused Paul of "persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to our law" (Acts 18:13 NLT). But before Paul had even had a chance to speak a word in his own defense, the governor, Gallio, stopped him, and delivered the following bombshell to the Jews.

*<sup>14</sup> "Listen, you Jews, if this were a case involving some wrongdoing or a serious crime, I would have a reason to accept your case. <sup>15</sup> 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." <sup>16</sup> And he threw them out of the courtroom. – Acts 18:14-16 NLT*

It would appear that Claudius Lysius had reached the same conclusion, but he did not have the same level of authority as a Roman governor, so he had chosen to let Felix decide the matter. In his letter, he also informed the governor that the Jews would be sending a contingent to Caesarea in order to state their case against Paul. In essence, the tribune had effectively passed this hot potato of an issue off to Felix. He could get back to managing affairs in Jerusalem, free from the distraction of Paul's incendiary presence.

Paul made it all the way to Antipatris, without incident, so a portion of the Roman soldiers returned to Jerusalem and Paul was escorted the rest of the way to Caesarea by a smaller, yet heavily armed force. When he finally arrived in Caesarea, Paul was presented to the governor, along with the letter from Claudius Lysius. Here was Paul, standing before one of the most powerful men in the Roman empire. Once again, we can't afford to overlook the words Jesus spoke to Ananias, commanding him to meet the newly converted Saul in Damascus: "Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings..." (Acts 9:15 NLT). The Greek word for king is *basileus*, and it refers to "the leader of the people, prince, commander, lord of the land, king." Felix most certainly fit that description. The words of Jesus concerning Paul were being fulfilled in an amazing and unexpected way. Paul's presence before Felix was not the result of chance or bad luck. It had been meant to be. It was all part of God's

divine plan for Paul's life and, more importantly, for the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth. Paul was about to go further than any of the apostles had been before. His trial before Felix was just the beginning of an incredible journey that would end up in the capital city of Rome, the political and social epicenter of the Gentile world at that time.

After having established Paul's citizenship and provincial birthplace, Felix informed Paul that he would hear his case as soon as his accusers arrived. In the meantime, Paul was placed in Herod's praetorium for safe keeping. He would remain there for five days, waiting for the representatives of the Jewish council to show up. During that time, Paul would have been under house arrest. As a Roman citizen, he probably enjoyed relative freedom during his stay, and the Romans were prohibited from placing him in chains or treating him poorly. Later on, in chapter 24, Luke confirms that Paul was treated with respect and afforded the right to have visitors while he remained in custody.

*<sup>23</sup> Then he [Felix] gave orders to the centurion that he should be kept in custody but have some liberty, and that none of his friends should be prevented from attending to his needs. – Acts 24:23 ESV*

The Jews that arrived from Jerusalem had come fully prepared to do Paul in. They were loaded for bear. They saw this as their opportunity to rid themselves of yet another menace to their way of life and threat to their authority. To them, Paul was another thorn in their side, much as Jesus had been. They had successfully convinced the Romans to kill Jesus, and they saw no reason why they could not accomplish the same objective with Paul. As they saw it, they had been able to convince Pilate, the governor at the time, to put Jesus to death, so why shouldn't they be able to do the same with Felix? It is likely that they believed they had God on their side. But their efforts, while done in the name of God and, from their perspective, with the full blessing of God, would fail to accomplish their goal.



## When “The Way” Seems Wrong

Acts 24:2-21

<sup>2</sup> And when he had been summoned, Tertullus began to accuse him, saying:

*“Since through you we enjoy much peace, and since by your foresight, most excellent Felix, reforms are being made for this nation, <sup>3</sup> in every way and everywhere we accept this with all gratitude. <sup>4</sup> But, to detain you no further, I beg you in your kindness to hear us briefly. <sup>5</sup> For we have found this man a plague, one who stirs up riots among all the Jews throughout the world and is a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. <sup>6</sup> He even tried to profane the temple, but we seized him. <sup>8</sup> By examining him yourself you will be able to find out from him about everything of which we accuse him.”*

<sup>9</sup> The Jews also joined in the charge, affirming that all these things were so.

<sup>10</sup> And when the governor had nodded to him to speak, Paul replied:

*“Knowing that for many years you have been a judge over this nation, I cheerfully make my defense. <sup>11</sup> You can verify that it is not more than twelve days since I went up to worship in Jerusalem, <sup>12</sup> and they did not find me disputing with anyone or stirring up a crowd, either in the temple or in the synagogues or in the city. <sup>13</sup> Neither can they prove to you what they now bring up against me. <sup>14</sup> But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, <sup>15</sup> having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. <sup>16</sup> So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man. <sup>17</sup> Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings. <sup>18</sup> While I was doing this, they found me purified in the temple, without any crowd or tumult. But some Jews from Asia— <sup>19</sup> they ought to be here before you and to make an accusation, should they have anything against me. <sup>20</sup> Or else let these men themselves say what wrongdoing they found when I stood before the council, <sup>21</sup> other than this one thing that I cried out while standing among them: ‘It is with respect to the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you this day.’” – Acts 24:2-21 ESV*

The day for Paul’s trial before Governor Felix had arrived. A contingent of Jews, including the high priest, Ananias, as well as a hired attorney named Tertullus, had finally made their way to Caesarea and the governor called them all to appear before him. The primary spokesman for the Jewish leadership was Tertullus, who is described by Luke as an attorney, but the Greek word he used is *rhētōr*, from which we get the English word, rhetoric. A *rhētōr* was an orator or forensic advocate. To put it in more modern terms, he was a prosecuting attorney, skilled in public debate and the intricacies of legal disputation and argumentation. In other words, the Jews had brought a professional. They saw this as their chance to not only get rid of Paul, but to do heavy damage to the cause of Christ, as we will see in Tertullus’ line of prosecution.

Tertullus started out his speech by showing proper respect for the governor, addressing him “most excellent Felix.” Then he proceeded to flatter the governor by expressing their collective gratitude for his many years of wise and proactive leadership.

<sup>2</sup> *“You have provided a long period of peace for us Jews and with foresight have enacted reforms for us. <sup>3</sup> For all of this, Your Excellency, we are very grateful to you.”* – Acts 24:3-4 NLT

The facts were that Felix was anything but a good governor. The historian Tacitus describes him as cruel, licentious, and base. He was a former slave who had moved up the ranks and had been appointed governor by the emperor Claudius himself. He enjoyed his position and all the power and wealth it afforded him and would do anything to protect and preserve it. Any “reforms” he had brought about would have been for purely selfish motives and accomplished through less-than-legal means. So, the words of Tertullus were nothing more than flattering lies designed to win the governor over and make him receptive to their charges against Paul.

The charges Tertullus leveled against Paul had been well-chosen and carefully worded. First, he accused Paul of stirring up riots among the Jews all throughout the Roman empire. He wanted the governor to know that had taken place in Jerusalem had not been an isolated incident. Paul was creating this kind of chaos and confusion everywhere he went. This charge was designed to strike fear into the heart of Felix. He reported directly to the emperor, and should news get back to Claudius that a renegade Jew from one of the provinces under Felix’s control was disrupting the peace of the empire, Felix would have to answer for it. The second charge brought against Paul was that of being a ringleader in what Tertullus called “the sect of the Nazarenes’ (Acts 24:5 ESV). The words Tertullus used were very carefully chosen and meant to strike fear into the heart of Felix. He refers to Paul as being a leader in a “sect” – using the Greek word, *haireisis*, from which we get the word “heresy.” Now, this word could be used in a positive manner, referring to groups such as the Pharisees and Saducees, who happened to have opposed views. But Tertullus was going out of his way to paint Paul as a leader in a dangerous and insidious group of radicals from the region around Nazareth. In essence, Tertullus was attempting to link Paul to Jesus of Nazareth, without using the name of Jesus. One of the things the Roman government feared were Messianic-like movements among the Jews. It was not uncommon for splinter groups to form based on a belief that they were being led by the long-awaited Messiah. The Romans were well aware of the long-held belief of the Jews in a future savior or Messiah who would restore them to power by setting them free from the oppression of Rome. By labeling Paul as a member and leader of one of these insurrectionist groups, Tertullus was attempting to paint Paul as a dangerous threat to Rome and to Felix’s power. Finally, Tertullus brought the charge against Paul that was more directly an affront to the Jews. He accused Paul of attempting to desecrate the temple. He provided no details and presented no evidence. While this final charge would have meant little to Felix, it was an attempt on the part of Tertullus to eventually make an appeal for Paul’s death. According to Roman law, the Jews could request the right to execute anyone who desecrated the temple. With that, Tertullus rested his case and invited the governor to examine Paul himself in order to corroborate their charges.

But Felix simply provided Paul with an opportunity to defend himself against the charges. It's interesting to note that Paul, while addressing the governor in respectful terms, said nothing could be construed as flattery. He made no attempt to heap false praise on Felix. He simply referred to the fact that Felix had been governor over the Jews for a long time, and that he was happy to have the opportunity to present his case before such a long-standing judge over Israel.

In Paul's response, we get an insightful look into his keen intelligence and thorough grasp of the circumstances surrounding his situation. As a former Pharisee, he was well acquainted with the inner workings of the Sanhedrin or high Jewish council. He knew exactly what Tertullus was trying to do. So, Paul started with the last accusation first. He addressed the charge that he had desecrated the temple by claiming that he had done nothing wrong. In spite of all Tertullus' lofty rhetoric, Paul flatly stated:

*<sup>12</sup> My accusers never found me arguing with anyone in the Temple, nor stirring up a riot in any synagogue or on the streets of the city. <sup>13</sup> These men cannot prove the things they accuse me of doing. – Acts 24:12-13 NLT*

He demanded proof. And his clear inference was that no proof existed or they would have presented it. Next, Paul addresses the second charge accusing him of being a ringleader in the sect of the Nazarenes.

*<sup>14</sup> "But I admit that I follow the Way, which they call a cult. I worship the God of our ancestors, and I firmly believe the Jewish law and everything written in the prophets." – Acts 24:14 NLT*

But Paul made it clear that he was not part of some new and radical anti-Semitic group. He was a Jew himself and a worshiper of Yahweh, the God of the Jews. He was a faithful adherent to the Mosaic law and believed all that was written in the Hebrew Scriptures by the prophets. Now, this is where Paul made his move. He placed himself on the same level as his accusers, claiming to worship the same God, keep the same law and believe in the same Scriptures. And those Scriptures clearly taught that there would be a resurrection of the dead. Why is Paul bringing up resurrection at this point in his speech? What is he attempting to do? If you recall, when he was first arrested by the Roman tribune and forced to appear before the Sanhedrin, he had also brought up the issue of resurrection. That's because he knew that the Sanhedrin was divided between Sadducees, who rejected the idea of the resurrection of the body, and Pharisee, who embraced it. When Paul had broached the subject in that context it had resulted in a virtual brawl between the members of the Sanhedrin. So, here we have Paul raising this touchy subject yet again. Paul described himself as "having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust" (Acts 24:15 ESV). Ananias, the high priest, was a Sadducee, and he most certainly had no hope that there would be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. He didn't believe in resurrection at all. Paul was goading his accusers. You can imagine the frustration the high priest and the other members of the council felt as they listened to Paul speak. They most likely wanted to disagree with him, but there knew they couldn't without revealing that his was all nothing more than a

theological disagreement between themselves and Paul. If they spoke up, they ran the risk of getting their case thrown out by Felix.

Next, Paul gave his recollection of the events that had taken place in the temple and had led to his appearance before Felix. He described his presence in the temple to offer sacrifices and make purification. And he firmly denies any wrongdoing, even questioning why the Asian Jews, the very ones who had accused him, were not present at the trial. He even demanded that the members of the Sanhedrin present clear and compelling evidence as to why he had appeared before them in the first place. The truth is, at the point of Paul's arrest, no one had been able to agree on what it was he had done wrong. There was no evidence presented or clear and compelling charge brought against him. And it was at this point that Paul brought back up the resurrection of the dead. He recalled that the only thing he had said at the time of his arrest that seemed to have caused a stir was, "It is with respect to the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you this day" (Acts 24:21 ESV).

Paul's whole point in bringing up the matter of the resurrection was that, when he had done so at his trial before the Sanhedrin, there were those on the council who had declared, "We find nothing wrong in this man. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him?" (Acts 23:9 ESV). Even the council had been divided over his guilt or innocence. Paul knew if he could expose the fact that all of this was nothing more than a theological debate, Felix would be prone to dismiss the trial as unnecessary and irrelevant to Roman concerns. The whole reason Paul was standing in front of the Roman governor was because the Jewish religious leadership refused to accept that Jesus, the one they had crucified, had actually been the Messiah and had risen from the dead. Even the Pharisees, who believed in resurrection, refused to accept Jesus as the Messiah. None of this was about desecration of the temple, insurrection, or crimes against the state. It was all about the Way, the gospel of Jesus Christ and His offer of justification before God through faith in His sacrificial death on the cross. Paul was preaching hope. But the enemies of the gospel will always see it as a threat to be exterminated, not a life-changing gift to be embrace.

## Sin, Righteousness, and Judgment

Acts 24:22-27

<sup>22</sup> But Felix, having a rather accurate knowledge of the Way, put them off, saying, "When Lysias the tribune comes down, I will decide your case." <sup>23</sup> Then he gave orders to the centurion that he should be kept in custody but have some liberty, and that none of his friends should be prevented from attending to his needs.

<sup>24</sup> After some days Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, and he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>25</sup> And as he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, "Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity I will summon you." <sup>26</sup> At the same time he hoped that money would be given him by Paul. So he sent for him often and conversed with him. <sup>27</sup> When two years had elapsed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. And desiring to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison. – Acts 24:22-27 ESV

Having listened to the impassioned pleas of Tertullus, describing Paul as a radical and dangerous heretic; and the reasoned defense of Paul, expressing his innocence of any and all charges against him, Felix forestalled judgment. He sent the Jews away and left Paul in protective custody, providing him with certain freedoms, including visitations from his friends. It appears that Felix was reluctant to pass judgment, not wanting to infuriate the Jews by siding with Paul. But at the same time, Luke leaves the impression that Felix was anticipating some kind of a bribe or payoff from Paul. This appears to be the motivation behind the frequent discussions he had with Paul over the next two-year period. "He also hoped that Paul would bribe him, so he sent for him quite often and talked with him" (Acts 24:26 NLT).

So, for the next two years, Paul was held in Rome, permitted certain freedoms, but provided no judgment as to his guilt of innocence. It is important to note that Paul was nowhere near Rome yet. He was being held in the city of Caesarea and would remain there for two long years. And during that time, he was given repeated opportunities to meet with Felix and his wife, Drusilla. One of the things this royal couple asked Paul about was faith in Christ. Luke doesn't tell us the reason behind their curiosity. He provides no insights into what may have motivated their desire to discuss these matters with Paul. He does insinuate that Felix was hoping that some form of cash payment might be a byproduct of their conversations, but it would seem that the curiosity of these two individuals became increasingly greater. They were intrigued by what Paul was telling them. And Luke is very specific about the content of Paul's discussions with them.

*...he reasoned with them about righteousness and self-control and the coming day of judgment... – Acts 24:25 NLT*

There is a very strong similarity between these three topics and what Jesus had said the Holy Spirit's role would be when He came. Just prior to His betrayal, arrest, trials and crucifixion, Jesus had given His disciples the following explanation regarding what the Holy Spirit would do when He came:

<sup>8</sup> *And when he comes, he will convict the world of its sin, and of God's righteousness, and of the coming judgment.* <sup>9</sup> *The world's sin is that it refuses to believe in me.*

<sup>10</sup> *Righteousness is available because I go to the Father, and you will see me no more.*

<sup>11</sup> *Judgment will come because the ruler of this world has already been judged.* – John 16:8-11 NLT

Notice that he lists three things: Convicting the world of its sin, convicting the world of God's righteousness, and convicting the world of the coming judgment. The NET Bible translates verse 8 in this way: "he will prove the world wrong concerning sin and righteousness and judgment." It seems that Jesus was saying that the Holy Spirit was going to expose and demand a change in mind regarding three things: Sin, righteousness, and judgment. Every individual who has ever lived has had a viewpoint on these three things. Each of us has a personal perspective on what is right and what is wrong. We may not call it sin, but we inherently know that there are some things that are off limits and unacceptable in terms of behavior. And we know that there are certain things that are deemed by us and the society around us, as acceptable or righteous. For the most part, all men live with a mindset that if you sin (do what is wrong), there will be consequences. If you do what is righteous (or good and acceptable), you will be rewarded. Thus, the judgment. Wired into mankind is the God-created sense of right and wrong, with the accompanying ideas of merit and punishment. But Jesus was teaching that the Holy Spirit was going to prove the world wrong in terms of their view on these important topics. One of the Holy Spirit's primary roles is that of conviction, showing men and women that they are sinners in need of a Savior. He also exposes the futile nature of mankind's attempt to achieve a righteousness on its own. The Bible makes it painfully clear that "No one is righteous--not even one" (Romans 3:10 NLT), and that the penalty or judgment against unrighteousness is severe: "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23 NLT).

These were the very same concepts that Paul discussed with Felix and his young wife. Pretty heavy topics, and they were making an impact on this royal couple. And it's interesting to note that Paul used the term *egkrateia*, when discussing the topic of sin. It is a Greek word that refers to self-control, but particularly in regard to one's sexual appetites or sensual passions. This was very specific topic that Felix and Drusilla needed to here. It is believed that Drusilla was no more than 16 when Felix married her, and this would have been his third marriage. She was the youngest daughter of Herod Agrippa I who had been king over Palestine from A.D. 37-44. So, she was from royal blood. Felix had married each of his wives in an attempt to further his career. He was a man driven by his lusts – for physical pleasure, political power, and financial success. They were a power couple, who struggled with self-control, and who operated under the own definition of what righteousness looked like. As long as something met their own selfish desires, they would have deemed it as right and good.

But as Jesus promised, the Holy Spirit convicts and Luke records that the discussions Paul had with Felix left the governor alarmed and a bit shaken. He reached the point where he told Paul, “Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity I will summon you” (Acts 24:25 ESV). And these impromptu conversations went on for two solid years, and all the while Paul remained in a permanent state of house arrest in the city of Caesarea. We are not provided with much in the way of details concerning Paul’s stay in Caesarea. We know he was able to have visitors and was likely communicating with and through Luke all during his time there. While there are a few scholars who believe that Paul may have penned some of his letters during this time, the majority insist that he wrote Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon at a later date, while a prisoner in Rome.

This lengthy period of relative silence and forced inactivity must have been difficult for Paul. He was a mover and shaker. He was used to teaching, preaching, debating and discussing spiritual matters. He was a missionary but was forced to take a two-year hiatus from the road. But he remained zealous to share what he knew with anyone who would listen. In this case, it happened to be one of the most powerful men in the entire Roman empire. And this ongoing dialogue with Felix provided Paul with a warmup for even more significant encounters that were coming his way in the not-so-distant future. God was at work, even in the seeming setback of a 24-month-long delay. And, in spite of the lengthy delay, the Jews never stopped plotting and planning for ways to get rid of Paul. He may have been out of sight, but he was never out of their minds. So, when Felix was replaced by Festus as governor, the Jews would see it as an opportunity to reinvigorate their vendetta against Paul. But God was still in control.



## To Caesar You Shall Go

Acts 25:1-12

<sup>1</sup> Now three days after Festus had arrived in the province, he went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea. <sup>2</sup> And the chief priests and the principal men of the Jews laid out their case against Paul, and they urged him, <sup>3</sup> asking as a favor against Paul that he summon him to Jerusalem—because they were planning an ambush to kill him on the way. <sup>4</sup> Festus replied that Paul was being kept at Caesarea and that he himself intended to go there shortly. <sup>5</sup> “So,” said he, “let the men of authority among you go down with me, and if there is anything wrong about the man, let them bring charges against him.”

<sup>6</sup> After he stayed among them not more than eight or ten days, he went down to Caesarea. And the next day he took his seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought. <sup>7</sup> When he had arrived, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many and serious charges against him that they could not prove. <sup>8</sup> Paul argued in his defense, “Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense.” <sup>9</sup> But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, “Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem and there be tried on these charges before me?” <sup>10</sup> But Paul said, “I am standing before Caesar’s tribunal, where I ought to be tried. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you yourself know very well. <sup>11</sup> If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death. But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar.” <sup>12</sup> Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, “To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go.” – Acts 25:1-12  
ESV

Paul had been held in what amounts to a state of suspended animation for two years by the governor, Felix. A trial had been held, but no decision made. No clear charges had been brought against Paul worthy of his execution, but, rather than release Paul and face the wrath of the Jewish leadership, and a potential riot by the Jewish people, Felix had chosen to leave Paul in Roman custody. Somewhere around 57 A.D., the emperor Nero recalled Felix and replaced him with Porcius Festus, the former procurator of Palestine. He became the new governor of the province of Syria, which included Judea and, therefore, the city of Jerusalem. Luke indicates that three days after having arrived in Caesarea, Festus made a trip to Jerusalem and met with the chief priest and other religious leaders of the Jews, most likely referring to the Sanhedrin or high council, the very same group who had brought charges against Paul two years earlier. The Jews brought Festus up to speed on their complaints against Paul and even begged him to allow them to conduct a trial on their home turf, which would have required that Paul be transferred from Caesarea to Jerusalem. Once again, they had an ulterior and sinister motive. They intended to have Paul ambushed and murdered along the way. Two years earlier, there had been more than 40 men who had vowed to neither eat nor drink anything until they fulfilled their pact to put Paul to death. Their plot had been exposed and had resulted in Paul being transferred under Roman armed guard to Caesarea. Obviously, these men had been forced to break their fast, but their hatred for Paul had never diminished. It seems that they were more

than willing to renew their vow and recommit themselves to Paul's destruction when given the opportunity.

But Festus refused the Sanhedrin's request, instead demanding that they bring a delegation to Caesarea, where he would conduct yet another trial so that he could hear the specifics of the case for himself. This at least reveals that Festus was going to give Paul a fair hearing, rather than simply turn him over to the Jews to do with as they saw fit. Festus most likely had looked into the case enough to have known that Paul was a Roman citizen and, therefore, according to law, deserving of a fair trial.

About a week later, the Jews arrived in Caesarea, and the trial was begun. Once again, the Jews had come prepared to paint Paul in the worst possible light. In fact, Luke records that "the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many and serious charges against him" (Acts 25:7 ESV), but he also states that they had no proof. These charges were all fabricated and fictitious. And when Paul was given a chance to defend himself, he simply stated, "Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense" (Acts 25:8 ESV). Now, it seems obvious that there was much more to this trial than Luke records. But it was likely a repeat of all that had been said in the trial that had taken place two years earlier before Felix. And there would have been court records from that previous trial to which Festus had access. At this point in his chronicle, Luke doesn't appear interested in providing a word-for-word record of all that was said in the trial, but in showing that nothing had changed. Two years had passed, but the facts remained the same. The Jews were determined to see Paul put to death, and Paul was convinced of his own innocence.

Now, at this point, we see the political nature of the situation. Festus was a new governor, appointed by the emperor, Nero. He wanted to make a good impression. And, as the former procurator of Palestine, Festus was well acquainted with the volatile nature of the Jewish situation. He also knew that Rome preferred peace over rioting and insurrection, so, seeing an opportunity to throw the Jews a bone and give in to their request to have Paul tried in Jerusalem, he broached the idea with Paul. As a Roman citizen, Paul had a say in the matter and it is clear that Paul knew his rights. He responded to the governor's request boldly and clearly:

*<sup>10</sup> "No! This is the official Roman court, so I ought to be tried right here. You know very well I am not guilty of harming the Jews. <sup>11</sup> If I have done something worthy of death, I don't refuse to die. But if I am innocent, no one has a right to turn me over to these men to kill me. I appeal to Caesar!" – Acts 25:10-11 NLT*

There is no indication in the text that Paul had been directed by the Spirit of God to demand a trial before Caesar. It would appear that Paul knew there was still the likelihood of a plot against his life, and he was doubtful that a trial in the city of Jerusalem, where hatred against him was high, would result in a fair and unbiased outcome. Paul was a Roman citizen and knew his rights. He also knew he was innocent and that his hopes of receiving a fair and unprejudiced trial would be under Roman jurisdiction, even if that meant he had to travel all the way to Rome. One of the things that should strike us is that Paul's Roman citizenship plays a huge

factor in this entire portion of Paul's life story. Had he not been a Roman citizen, he would never have made it out of Jerusalem alive. The Roman tribune who had rescued him two years earlier from the Jewish mob who had tried to beat him to death in the temple courtyard, would have flogged Paul and allowed him to undergo trial by the Jews. He would never have sent Paul to Felix for trial. And whether we recognize it or not, Paul's citizenship was part of God's sovereign will over Paul's life. Paul was born in Tarsus, not by chance, but because of the preordained plan of God. Paul would state as much in his letter to the church in Galatia: "But even before I was born, God chose me and called me by his marvelous grace" (Galatians 1:15 NLT). God had chosen Paul. God had determined the time and place of his birth, and the parents to whom he would be born. Paul's Roman citizenship was not a coincidence or some form of blind luck. It was a part of God's plan for Paul's life and, more importantly, for the God's predetermined plan to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. Paul was appealing to go to Caesar, to stand before the most powerful man in the world at that time, and he had the right to do so. Not only that, he had the God-ordained responsibility to do so.

And, after conferring with his counselors, Festus announced to Paul: "To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go" (Acts 25:12 ESV). After a two-year delay, Paul was going to see his dream of going to Rome fulfilled. But it would not be exactly as he had imagined it. Paul had longed to visit Rome for some time. He had a deep desire to minister to the congregation of believers who had formed there. A year or two earlier, Paul had written a letter to the church in Rome, while he was in the city of Corinth, and he had told them:

*<sup>9</sup> God knows how often I pray for you. Day and night I bring you and your needs in prayer to God, whom I serve with all my heart by spreading the Good News about his Son.*

*<sup>10</sup> One of the things I always pray for is the opportunity, God willing, to come at last to see you. <sup>11</sup> For I long to visit you so I can bring you some spiritual gift that will help you grow strong in the Lord. <sup>12</sup> When we get together, I want to encourage you in your faith, but I also want to be encouraged by yours. – Romans 1:9-12 NLT*

Now, Paul was going to get his prayer answered. Not in a way that he would have imagined or even desired, but according to God's sovereign will. He was going to get to minister to the believers in Rome, as a prisoner. And while in Rome, Paul would write four of his other letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. Paul's time in Rome would end up providing him with time to minister and to put his thoughts in writing, ultimately providing the universal church with the vast majority of the content that makes up the New Testament. God had a plan for Paul. He had a purpose for the life of Paul. And that plan included a trip to Rome.



## At a Loss for Words

Acts 25:13-26:1

<sup>13</sup> Now when some days had passed, Agrippa the king and Bernice arrived at Caesarea and greeted Festus. <sup>14</sup> And as they stayed there many days, Festus laid Paul's case before the king, saying, "There is a man left prisoner by Felix, <sup>15</sup> and when I was at Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews laid out their case against him, asking for a sentence of condemnation against him. <sup>16</sup> I answered them that it was not the custom of the Romans to give up anyone before the accused met the accusers face to face and had opportunity to make his defense concerning the charge laid against him. <sup>17</sup> So when they came together here, I made no delay, but on the next day took my seat on the tribunal and ordered the man to be brought. <sup>18</sup> When the accusers stood up, they brought no charge in his case of such evils as I supposed. <sup>19</sup> Rather they had certain points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive. <sup>20</sup> Being at a loss how to investigate these questions, I asked whether he wanted to go to Jerusalem and be tried there regarding them. <sup>21</sup> But when Paul had appealed to be kept in custody for the decision of the emperor, I ordered him to be held until I could send him to Caesar." <sup>22</sup> Then Agrippa said to Festus, "I would like to hear the man myself." "Tomorrow," said he, "you will hear him."

<sup>23</sup> So on the next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp, and they entered the audience hall with the military tribunes and the prominent men of the city. Then, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. <sup>24</sup> And Festus said, "King Agrippa and all who are present with us, you see this man about whom the whole Jewish people petitioned me, both in Jerusalem and here, shouting that he ought not to live any longer. <sup>25</sup> But I found that he had done nothing deserving death. And as he himself appealed to the emperor, I decided to go ahead and send him. <sup>26</sup> But I have nothing definite to write to my lord about him. Therefore I have brought him before you all, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that, after we have examined him, I may have something to write. <sup>27</sup> For it seems to me unreasonable, in sending a prisoner, not to indicate the charges against him."

<sup>1</sup> So Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself." Then Paul stretched out his hand and made his defense: – Acts 25:13-26:1 ESV

Paul had made an appeal to have his case transferred to Rome, so that he might stand trial before Caesar himself. Because Paul was a Roman citizen, Festus, the governor, was obligated to fulfill Paul's wish. But before he could send Paul to the emperor, he was required to include a formal document outlining Paul's crimes. And that was where Festus was at a loss. He had no clue as to what charges he could file against Paul that would warrant a hearing before the emperor. Festus had listened to the accusations leveled against Paul by the Jewish Sanhedrin, but he had heard nothing that would make Paul a threat against the state. Sure, the Jews had accused Paul of inciting riots and desecrating the temple, but they had been unable to prove anything (Acts 25:7). Their rhetoric was unaccompanied by realistic facts that could be backed up by hard-and-fast evidence.

It just so happened that King Agrippa and his sister, Bernice, were visiting Caesarea about that time, so Festus shared his predicament with the king, relating the situation involving Paul and the Jewish religious leadership. Festus explained that it all had to do with “...something about their religion and a dead man named Jesus, who Paul insists is alive” (Acts 25:19 NLT). In other words, it all appeared to be nothing more than an internal, religious dispute among the Jews. He expressed his predicament to King Agrippa in no uncertain terms:

*<sup>25</sup> But in my opinion he has done nothing deserving death. However, since he appealed his case to the emperor, I have decided to send him to Rome.*

*<sup>26</sup> “But what shall I write the emperor? – Acts 25:25-26 NLT*

King Agrippa was intrigued and asked for an opportunity to hear Paul for himself. Now, at this point, a little background is necessary. The Agrippa Luke refers to in this passage is Marcus Julius Agrippa II, the son of Agrippa I (Acts 12:1-25) and great-grandson of Herod the Great (Matthew 2:1-23). His great-grandfather was the Herod who had ordered all the Jewish baby boys under the age of two to be slaughtered – in an attempt to eliminate the “newborn king of the Jews” who the wise men had informed him about (Matthew 2:1-1). So, Agrippa came from wicked stock. And he had not fallen far from the family tree. Luke records that he was accompanied by Bernice. In some translations, she is described as his wife. But she was actually his younger sister. At one point, she had been married to her uncle Herod, the king of Chalcis. But upon his death, she had moved in with her brother and the two of them began an incestuous relationship, a fact that was well-known throughout Palestine and Rome. So, Paul was brought before this notoriously sinful and extremely powerful couple to state his case.

Festus set up the interview by reiterating his belief that Paul was innocent of any crime worthy of his death. The Jews had demanded that Festus condemn Paul (Acts 25:15). In other words, they were looking for a death sentence. They were demanding the right to put Paul to death for desecrating the temple, even though they had provided no definitive proof. But Festus made it perfectly clear that he had heard nothing that warranted the handing down of a death sentence. It was his hope that perhaps, after having heard Paul’s story for himself, Agrippa might be able to shed some light on the matter and help come up with a believable charge against Paul that would make sending him to Caesar worthwhile and not a waste of the emperor’s time.

Now, stop for a moment and consider the gravity of this situation. Paul has been accused of crimes against the state and violations of the Mosaic law that were punishable by death. He has already had to appear before the former governor, Felix, and he had been forced to endure a similar hearing before the new governor, Festus. And now, he was given the opportunity to state his case before King Agrippa. With each one of these encounters, Paul had been given a God-ordained opportunity to speak openly and boldly about the good news concerning Jesus Christ. As Festus had made clear, Paul had spoken to him about the resurrection of Jesus. Now, Paul was going to get the same chance with King Agrippa and sister/mistress. What an incredible occasion. How many people get the opportunity to speak of Jesus before kings? But

this was all in keeping with the promise Jesus had made to Ananias, when He had sent him to visit the newly converted Saul.

*“Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel.” – Acts 9:15 NLT*

Paul had already spoken to a Roman tribune and two Roman governors. Now, he was being provided with a remarkable opportunity to address a king. And, if all went well, he would soon find himself standing before the most powerful man in the world at that time: The emperor of Rome.

Paul’s life was on the line. The accusations against him were serious and the Jew’s hatred for him was intense. They wanted him dead. Consider how you would react if you suddenly found yourself in his sandals. What would you do? How would you feel? What would you say? It is so easy to read these stories and to assume that Paul, Peter, John and all the rest of the early founders of the church were just some special breed of super saints. They were especially brave and supernaturally gifted to endure the trials and tribulations they experience. And they were. But it is essential that we remember what Jesus said to His disciples when He was preparing to send them out on their first ministry excursion on their own. He had warned them:

*<sup>16</sup> “Look, I am sending you out as sheep among wolves. So be as shrewd as snakes and harmless as doves. <sup>17</sup> But beware! For you will be handed over to the courts and will be flogged with whips in the synagogues. <sup>18</sup> You will stand trial before governors and kings because you are my followers. But this will be your opportunity to tell the rulers and other unbelievers about me. <sup>19</sup> **When you are arrested, don’t worry about how to respond or what to say. God will give you the right words at the right time.** <sup>20</sup> For it is not you who will be speaking—it will be the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”*  
– Matthew 10:16-20 NLT

Paul had already experienced the reality of these verses. He had known what it was like to stand before the Roman tribune and two Roman governors. The Spirit of God had given him not only the courage to stand his ground, but the content to speak. And this situation with King Agrippa would prove to be no different. Jesus had told His disciples not to worry.

*<sup>26</sup> “But don’t be afraid of those who threaten you. For the time is coming when everything that is covered will be revealed, and all that is secret will be made known to all. <sup>27</sup> What I tell you now in the darkness, shout abroad when daybreak comes. What I whisper in your ear, shout from the housetops for all to hear!”* – Matthew 10:26-27 NLT

And while Paul had not been present when Jesus spoke those words, they undoubtedly had been communicated to him in some form or fashion. Either from the disciples themselves, or by the Holy Spirit. And Paul inherently knew that his life was in God’s hands, a fact that Jesus had tried to convey to His disciples.

<sup>28</sup> *“Don’t be afraid of those who want to kill your body; they cannot touch your soul. Fear only God, who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”* – Matthew 10:28 NLT

Paul saw the opportunity placed before him as a Godsend. He was going to get to speak to a king, a man who had a reputation for promiscuity and for unbridled ambition. Yes, he was powerful. He had the authority to set Paul free or to seal his death sentence. But Paul seemed to know the reality of the words spoken by Jesus to His disciples some years earlier:

<sup>38</sup> *“If you refuse to take up your cross and follow me, you are not worthy of being mine.”*  
– Matthew 10:38 NLT

As we saw earlier in Luke’s text, Paul had already made his intentions known. “I am ready not only to be jailed at Jerusalem but even to die for the sake of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 21:13 NLT). Now, he was in Caesarea. But his attitude remained the same and he articulated it to the believers in Philippi. “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21 ESV). As long as Paul drew breath, he would speak on behalf of Christ – to kings, governors, tribunes, Gentiles, Jews, and anyone else who would listen. But, in Paul’s mind, death, while always a potential, was never a cause for fear. Which is why he was able to say, “I will continue to be bold for Christ, as I have been in the past. And I trust that my life will bring honor to Christ, whether I live or die” (Philippians 1:20 NLT).

Festus was at a loss for words and incapable of knowing what to write to the emperor. But Paul would prove to be anything but tongue-tied or at a loss for what to say. And what he had to say would have little to do with saving his own skin, and everything to do with seeing others experience the saving grace of God made possible through His Son, Jesus Christ.

## God Raises the Dead!

Acts 26:2-18

<sup>2</sup> *"I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am going to make my defense today against all the accusations of the Jews, <sup>3</sup> especially because you are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews. Therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently.*

<sup>4</sup> *"My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews. <sup>5</sup> They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee. <sup>6</sup> And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, <sup>7</sup> to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king! <sup>8</sup> Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?*

<sup>9</sup> *"I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. <sup>10</sup> And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. <sup>11</sup> And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities.*

<sup>12</sup> *"In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. <sup>13</sup> At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. <sup>14</sup> And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' <sup>15</sup> And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. <sup>16</sup> But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, <sup>17</sup> delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you <sup>18</sup> to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'" – Acts 26:2-18 ESV*

Paul is in Caesarea, where he is about to give his defense before the governor, Festus, and King Agrippa. He has been provided this unique opportunity because the king happened to be in town and the governor was desperate to find some formal charge he could level against Paul before sending him to Rome for trial before the emperor. Festus had high hopes that King Agrippa, after having listened to Paul's story, might be able to determine a crime for which to charge Paul. Up until this point, Festus had found Paul innocent of nothing worthy of death, which is what the Jews had been demanding. So, now Paul, with these two powerful men as his audience, began his defense. But what he will have to say to Festus and Agrippa will have little to do with the actual facts of the case against him. Paul was less interested in giving a defense for his actions than he was in providing a well-reasoned defense of the gospel. He was not out

to prove his innocence and win his freedom. He wanted to win these two pagan political leaders to Christ.

But he started out by honoring the men before him, expressing his gratitude that he was being given the opportunity to speak before Agrippa, because he had knowledge of Jewish affairs. The emperor had assigned Agrippa the principality of Chalcis, and given him authority over the Temple at Jerusalem, including the responsibility to nominate the Jewish high priest. So, Paul was legitimately pleased to share his story with someone who had a working knowledge of Jewish religious affairs and discern the truth of what had happened that day in the temple courtyard when Paul had been beaten and arrested.

The next thing Paul did was provide Agrippa with a bit of background. He informed the king that he was a Jew and a former Pharisee. He was not part of some radical religious sect determined to stir up trouble or bring about insurrection against the Jews or Rome. He was a God-fearing Hebrew who happened to be teaching and preaching about the very hope of Israel.

*<sup>6</sup> Now I am on trial because of my hope in the fulfillment of God's promise made to our ancestors. <sup>7</sup> In fact, that is why the twelve tribes of Israel zealously worship God night and day, and they share the same hope I have. Yet, Your Majesty, they accuse me for having this hope! – Acts 26:6-7 NLT*

Paul wasted no time, but cut right to the point, clearly articulating that his only “crime” was that of claiming that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah of the Hebrew nation. Jesus had been the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Every God-fearing Jew since the time of the Patriarchs had believed in and hoped for the coming of the Messiah, and Paul was simply claiming that his arrest was due to the fact that the Jewish leadership refused to believe his claim that Jesus was the Messiah. And Paul raises the real stumbling block for the Jews: the resurrection of Jesus. They had gone out of their way to see that Jesus was crucified by the Romans. To them, He was nothing more than a dead man, a former rabbi who had propagated heretical teachings, violated the Mosaic law and had constantly ridiculed them before the common people. But Paul and the apostles had been teaching that Jesus was alive. Yes, He had been killed, but God had raised Him from the dead. Which is what led Paul to ask, “Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?” (Acts 26:8 ESV).

The resurrection of Jesus is the linchpin of the Christian faith. Even in Paul’s day, there were those who struggled with the idea of a man being raised back to life. Within the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high council, there were the Sadducees, who rejected the whole idea of a bodily resurrection, and the Pharisees, who embraced it. And within the early church, there were those who wrestled over the concept of Jesus’ resurrection. Paul had to address a group of these individuals who were part of the church in Corinth.

*<sup>12</sup> But tell me this—since we preach that Christ rose from the dead, why are some of you saying there will be no resurrection of the dead? <sup>13</sup> For if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised either. <sup>14</sup> And if Christ has not been raised, then all*

*our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless. <sup>15</sup> And we apostles would all be lying about God—for we have said that God raised Christ from the grave. But that can't be true if there is no resurrection of the dead. <sup>16</sup> And if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised. <sup>17</sup> And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins. <sup>18</sup> In that case, all who have died believing in Christ are lost! <sup>19</sup> And if our hope in Christ is only for this life, we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world. – 1 Corinthians 15:12-19 NLT*

Without the resurrection of Jesus, there is not Christian faith. There is no hope. Forgiveness of sin and any chance of being made right with God evaporates if Jesus was not raised back to life. His payment for mankind's sin, accomplished by His sacrificial death on the cross, was incomplete if it was only a martyr. It was the fact that God restored Him back to life that proved His death had been sufficient and had fully satisfied the holy and just wrath of God against sin. The resurrection of Jesus was meant to provide us with hope of our own future resurrection from death and with the incontrovertible proof that we will be restored to a right relationship with God. Paul makes that point very clear to the church in Corinth:

*<sup>20</sup> But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died.*

*<sup>21</sup> So you see, just as death came into the world through a man, now the resurrection from the dead has begun through another man. <sup>22</sup> Just as everyone dies because we all belong to Adam, everyone who belongs to Christ will be given new life. <sup>23</sup> But there is an order to this resurrection: Christ was raised as the first of the harvest; then all who belong to Christ will be raised when he comes back. – 1 Corinthians 15:20-23 NLT*

So, for Paul, the real heart of the issue surrounding his arrest had been his teaching of a resurrected Messiah. And he provides King Agrippa with his own personal story of how he had become convinced that Jesus was the Messiah. It is at this point in his defense that Paul told of his conversion on the road to Damascus. The point of Paul sharing his testimony was that it revolved around the fact that he had experienced a face-to-face encounter with the resurrected Jesus. The whole reason for his radical transformation from persecutor of the church to proponent of the gospel, was that he had met Jesus, the very one the Jews had coerced the Romans to crucify. Both Festus and Agrippa would have been aware of the events surrounding the death of Jesus. His trials and crucifixion had not happened in a vacuum. They would even have heard the rumors regarding his resurrection. But this would have been the first time they heard such detailed accounts backing up the claim that He had been raised back to life by God.

The next thing Paul did was bring his testimony to a powerful conclusion, focusing his attention on the one point that would resonate most clearly and personally to the two men in his audience: His calling to take the gospel to the Gentiles. He related to Festus and Agrippa the words spoken to him on the road to Damascus by the resurrected Jesus: “Yes, I am sending you to the Gentiles to open their eyes, so they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God. Then they will receive forgiveness for their sins and be given a place among

God's people, who are set apart by faith in me" (Acts 26:17-18 NLT). Look carefully at what Paul was doing. He was boldly sharing the gospel message with two powerful Roman political figures. They were Gentiles and, whether they recognized it or not, they were living in darkness. Agrippa was having an incestuous affair with his own sister, Bernice. But Paul was offering them forgiveness from sin and a place in the family of God, through faith in Jesus Christ. All they had to do was believe that Jesus was the resurrected Messiah, the Savior of the world. The main issue was going to be their own disbelief in the resurrection of Jesus. Which brings up back to Paul's question: "Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?"

Festus and Agrippa, just like every other person who has ever lived, were faced with the choice of believing the good news regarding Jesus' death, burial and resurrection, or rejecting it as farfetched and unnecessary. Paul knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus was alive. His life had been radically transformed by the risen Christ. Now, he was offering the truth of Jesus' resurrection and His offer of forgiveness of sin and eternal life to two men who desperately needed it but would have to make the decision to accept it.

## Become as I Am

Acts 26:19-32

<sup>19</sup> “Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, <sup>20</sup> but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance. <sup>21</sup> For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. <sup>22</sup> To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: <sup>23</sup> that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.”

<sup>24</sup> And as he was saying these things in his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, “Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind.” <sup>25</sup> But Paul said, “I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. <sup>26</sup> For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner. <sup>27</sup> King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.” <sup>28</sup> And Agrippa said to Paul, “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?” <sup>29</sup> And Paul said, “Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains.”

<sup>30</sup> Then the king rose, and the governor and Bernice and those who were sitting with them.

<sup>31</sup> And when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, “This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment.” <sup>32</sup> And Agrippa said to Festus, “This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.” – Acts 26:19-32 ESV

The governor and the king sat in rapt silence, as Paul continued to make his defense. But whether they realized it or not, Paul was on the offensive, with a single goal in mind: To share the truth regarding the resurrection of Jesus Christ with the two powerful men sitting before him. Up until this point, the resurrection had been the central theme of Paul’s entire talk. In fact, he claimed to have seen Jesus alive, having received a “heavenly vision” directly from Jesus Himself. And all that Paul had done since the day he received that vision, had been in obedience to the command of Jesus, the risen, living Messiah. Jesus had provided Paul with an explanation for His appearance to him and a description of his assignment.

<sup>16</sup> “I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, <sup>17</sup> delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you <sup>18</sup> to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.” – Acts 26:16-18 ESV

And Paul claimed to have been obedient to the task given to Him by Jesus. It was the very fact that Paul had done what Jesus had told him to do that he had been arrested and beaten by the Jews. “For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me” (Acts 26:21 ESV). Paul knew full well that the reason for his ill treatment by the Jews had nothing to do with him violating the Mosaic law by bringing Gentiles into the forbidden areas of the temple grounds. That had been a ruse. Their real issue with Paul was the message he had been preaching about Jesus being the Messiah, and the fact that he had been preaching it to Gentiles. Paul’s work had struck a nerve with the Jews because it had struck a chord among the people. Both Jews and Gentiles were coming to faith in Christ. But the real stumbling point for the Jewish leadership was that Paul had been propagating the idea that the Jewish rite of circumcision and adherence to the laws of Moses were not necessary for Gentiles to be made right with God. So, in the end, it was Paul’s message regarding the resurrection and the means of attaining righteousness that was at the root of his problem with the Jews.

Paul had an astute awareness of God’s sovereign power and constant presence in his life. In spite of the fact that the Jews had tried to kill him, he knew that it had been God who had rescued him, keeping him alive because there was a greater purpose for him to accomplish. “To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great” (Acts 26:22 ESV). God had protected and preserved him because He had unfinished business for him. And here he was, standing in front of Festus and Agrippa, sharing that “the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles” (Acts 26:23 ESV). What an incredible opportunity. Even Paul, in his wildest dreams, could not have imagined or envisioned that he would one day stand before a Roman governor and a king, sharing the message of Christ’s resurrection and the hope of salvation that it made possible.

But to Festus, it all sounded like the ravings of a lunatic. He suddenly interrupted Paul and shouted, “Paul, you are insane. Too much study has made you crazy!” (Acts 26:24 NLT). This had not been the first time Paul had heard a Gentile refer to the gospel as crazy talk. He would later write to the church in Corinth, describing the typical response he encountered from both Jews and Gentiles.

*So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense. – 1 Corinthians 1:23 NLT*

Festus knew little about the Jews and their religion. And all Paul’s talk about a crucified rabbi miraculously coming back to life sounded like crazy talk to him – much as it does to many today. On the other side of conversion, the message of the cross always sounds ridiculous. Paul put it this way, “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” (1 Corinthians 1:18 NLT). In other words, it is only after coming to faith in Christ that one can truly understand the remarkable truth of the cross and Christ’s death on it. The description of Jesus dying on the cross for the sins of mankind sounds farfetched and difficult to comprehend. It comes across as little more than some kind of religious fantasy story. But for those who have come to faith in Christ, the cross

becomes the hope on which their salvation hangs and their eternal life depends. Again, Paul expressed this sentiment to the church in Corinth.

*<sup>24</sup> But to those called by God to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> This foolish plan of God is wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God's weakness is stronger than the greatest of human strength. – 1 Corinthians 1:24-25 NLT*

Festus thought Paul had lost his mind. But Paul insisted that his words were truth, not the crazy thoughts of a madman. And at this point, Paul turned his attention to King Agrippa, appealing to his knowledge of the Jewish people and their ways. Paul somehow knew that Agrippa was aware of all that had happened concerning Jesus. He also knew that Agrippa was the great-grandson of Herod the Great, the man who had been king when Jesus had been born. He was the one who had tried to eliminate the potential threat of Jesus, who the magi had described to him as the newborn king of the Jews. Herod the Great had ordered the executions of all baby boys under two living in the vicinity of Bethlehem. Agrippa had a family heritage that was directly linked to Jesus, the Messiah. And Agrippa, as the official who had jurisdiction over the temple and held the authority to appoint the Jewish high priest, knew the ways of the Jews. He was familiar enough with Jewish history and their beliefs to know that what Paul was saying was based on truth, not fantasy. And Paul boldly asked the king, “King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe” (Acts 26:27 ESV). What is Paul doing here? Is he claiming that Agrippa was a God-fearer and believed in the Hebrew Scriptures? That’s unlikely. But Paul was putting Agrippa on the spot. He was creating a dilemma for the king, by forcing him to state whether he believed what the Jewish prophets wrote or not. Because of his close connection with the Jewish people as their king, his oversight of the temple and his ties to the high priest, Agrippa had to be very careful how he answered Paul’s question. If he replied that he did not believe what the prophets had written concerning the Messiah, he would risk offending the Jews. So, he chose not to answer the question at all, replying instead, “Do you think you can persuade me to become a Christian so quickly?” (Acts 26:28 NLT). He avoided the question by asserting that Paul had been trying to convert him. And Paul didn’t deny it.

*“Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that both you and everyone here in this audience might become the same as I am, except for these chains.” – Acts 26:29 NLT*

It would have been Paul’s greatest wish to see Agrippa, Festus and every other person in the room that day come to faith in Christ. He wanted them to become as he was. Paul was chained, but a free man. They were free from chains but imprisoned by their sin and under the curse of death because of their rebellion against God. Paul’s desire was that they might discover the joy of forgiveness for sin and freedom from the penalty of death found in Jesus Christ and made possible by His death and resurrection. But there would be no one saved that day. And Paul would remain a prisoner of the Roman government. In fact, Agrippa replied that, had not Paul made his appeal to go to Caesar, he could have gone free, because he had done nothing worthy of death or imprisonment. So, Paul was destined to go to Rome. His fate was sealed. But it was

all part of God's perfect plan for his life and His overarching plan for the redemption of mankind.

## Abandoned Hope

Acts 27:1-20

<sup>1</sup> And when it was decided that we should sail for Italy, they delivered Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan Cohort named Julius. <sup>2</sup> And embarking in a ship of Adramyttium, which was about to sail to the ports along the coast of Asia, we put to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica. <sup>3</sup> The next day we put in at Sidon. And Julius treated Paul kindly and gave him leave to go to his friends and be cared for. <sup>4</sup> And putting out to sea from there we sailed under the lee of Cyprus, because the winds were against us. <sup>5</sup> And when we had sailed across the open sea along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we came to Myra in Lycia. <sup>6</sup> There the centurion found a ship of Alexandria sailing for Italy and put us on board. <sup>7</sup> We sailed slowly for a number of days and arrived with difficulty off Cnidus, and as the wind did not allow us to go farther, we sailed under the lee of Crete off Salmone. <sup>8</sup> Coasting along it with difficulty, we came to a place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lasea.

<sup>9</sup> Since much time had passed, and the voyage was now dangerous because even the Fast was already over, Paul advised them, <sup>10</sup> saying, "Sirs, I perceive that the voyage will be with injury and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives." <sup>11</sup> But the centurion paid more attention to the pilot and to the owner of the ship than to what Paul said. <sup>12</sup> And because the harbor was not suitable to spend the winter in, the majority decided to put out to sea from there, on the chance that somehow they could reach Phoenix, a harbor of Crete, facing both southwest and northwest, and spend the winter there.

<sup>13</sup> Now when the south wind blew gently, supposing that they had obtained their purpose, they weighed anchor and sailed along Crete, close to the shore. <sup>14</sup> But soon a tempestuous wind, called the northeaster, struck down from the land. <sup>15</sup> And when the ship was caught and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and were driven along. <sup>16</sup> Running under the lee of a small island called Cauda, we managed with difficulty to secure the ship's boat. <sup>17</sup> After hoisting it up, they used supports to undergird the ship. Then, fearing that they would run aground on the Syrtis, they lowered the gear, and thus they were driven along. <sup>18</sup> Since we were violently storm-tossed, they began the next day to jettison the cargo. <sup>19</sup> And on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. <sup>20</sup> When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest lay on us, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned. – Acts 27:1-20 ESV

Back in chapter 19, Luke reported that Paul had been compelled by the Spirit of God to visit Macedonia and Achaia before going to Jerusalem. Paul was constantly receiving input from the Spirit, providing him with direction and even preventing him from going certain places. His ministry was motivated by his desire to obey the commission given to him by Jesus, but it was directed by the Holy Spirit. In chapter 16, Luke records just such an occasion.

*<sup>6</sup> Next Paul and Silas traveled through the area of Phrygia and Galatia, because **the Holy Spirit had prevented them from preaching the word in the province of Asia at that time.** <sup>7</sup> Then coming to the borders of Mysia, they headed north for the province of Bithynia, but **again the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them to go there.** – Acts 16:6-7 NLT*

And somewhere along the way, Paul had been given what had to have been a Spirit-inspired desire to go to Rome. Acts 19:21 reports Paul's impassioned statement: "I must go on to Rome!" And now, after his hearing before King Agrippa and Festus, he was on his way. But this journey was not going to be an easy one. He was still a prisoner and he was on his way to stand trial before the emperor of Rome, still facing charges that could result in his death. Nothing about this phase of Paul's life was easy or trouble-free. It seems that with every step he took, the difficulties increased in number and intensity. And yet, he was innocent of any wrongdoing, a fact with which both the governor and the king concurred.

Luke spends a great deal of time chronicling this portion of Paul's life. He provides a great deal of detail, describing each phase of Paul's journey to Rome with what appears to be keen interest. But why? It seems that Luke, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, was trying to show that Paul's desire to go to Rome, while Spirit-inspired, was not a guarantee of a trouble-free journey. God was sovereign and orchestrating each step of Paul's trip to Rome, but that did not mean that Paul would not experience difficulties or go through trials along the way. Paul's confrontation with the Jews in the temple courtyard and arrest by the Romans, had stretched into more than a two-year delay. He had been moved to Caesarea for a hearing before Governor Felix but had remained in confinement when Felix found himself unable to arrive at a decision as to Paul's fate. And Paul had remained there for two years, until Felix had been replaced by Festus. It was to Festus that Paul had demanded a trial before Caesar and now, he was on his way.

The beatings, imprisonment, false accusations, threats, and plots against his life had just been the beginning. His trip to Rome was going to prove equally as intense and full of inexplicable trials and tests. But it is essential that we read this account as Luke intended it to be read: With a knowledge that God is in control. None of the events described in this chapter happened outside the sovereign will of God. And no one understood that better than Paul himself. We must give careful consideration to the attitude and actions that Paul displays all throughout this story. There is no sense of panic or fear. At no time does Paul seem to consider the troubles surrounding his life as an indication that he was somehow out of God's will for his life. From the moment he stepped foot on the ship to the day he arrived in Rome, Paul was content and at peace with the knowledge that his life was in God's hands.

In verse four, Luke gives a short, but telling glimpse into what was to come: "...the winds were against us." The entire journey will appear to be marked by a supernatural, spiritual-based conflict. There is little doubt that much of what Luke describes is meant to convey the battle taking place in the heavenly realms, as Paul himself described it.

*For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places. – Ephesians 6:12 NLT*

Paul was being led by God but being opposed by Satan every step of the way. Luke does not provide us with a step-by-step description or blow-by-blow account of how this battle unfolded. He does not attribute the storm to Satan. He doesn't even mention him. But his narrative provides us with a foreboding sense of the spiritual warfare going on behind the scenes.

*We sailed slowly for a number of days and arrived **with difficulty** off Cnidus, and as **the wind did not allow us to go farther**, we sailed under the lee of Crete off Salmone. – Acts 27:7 NLT*

*Coasting along it **with difficulty**, we came to a place called Fair Havens... – Acts 27:8 NLT*

*Since much time had passed, and **the voyage was now dangerous**... – Acts 27:9 NLT*

*Paul advised them, saying, "Sirs, I perceive that **the voyage will be with injury and much loss**, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives." – Acts 27:9-10 NLT*

*...soon **a tempestuous wind**, called the northeaster, struck down from the land. – Acts 27:14 NLT*

*...we managed **with difficulty** to secure the ship's boat... – Acts 27:16 NLT*

*...**fearing that they would run aground** on the Syrtis, they lowered the gear, and thus they were driven along. – Acts 27:17 NLT*

*Since **we were violently storm-tossed**, they began the next day to jettison the cargo. – Acts 27:18 NLT*

*When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest lay on us, **all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned**. – Acts 27:20 NLT*

All hope was abandoned. Or was it? There was at least one man in the boat who seemed to know that there was still hope, because there was still a God who had all things in His hands and under His control. Nowhere does Paul express fear that he had been abandoned by God. He did not view the storm as a sign that God was punishing him or somehow preventing him from arriving in Rome. His Spirit-inspired desire to go to Rome had not diminished. And as we will see in the next section of verses, God will provide Paul with clear confirmation that Paul will make it to his final destination without the loss of a single life. The storm was going to prove no match for God. And Julius, the Augustan Cohort in charge of delivering Paul to Rome; Aristarchus, the Macedonian traveling with Paul; and all the sailors on the ship, were going to

get a first-hand display of the power of God. They may have lost hope, but Paul hadn't. They may have feared for their lives, but Paul had an assurance from God that not a single life would be lost. Paul was headed to Rome. The winds would blow, the waves would crash, the boat would sink, the sailors would panic, but Paul would rest in the sovereign hand of God. His faith was in his God. His eyes were on the One who had called and commissioned him, not on the storms of life. And this story brings to mind a similar scene from the life of Jesus, when He and His disciples encountered a storm while sailing on the Sea of Galilee.

*<sup>37</sup> But soon a fierce storm came up. High waves were breaking into the boat, and it began to fill with water.*

*<sup>38</sup> Jesus was sleeping at the back of the boat with his head on a cushion. The disciples woke him up, shouting, "Teacher, don't you care that we're going to drown?"*

*<sup>39</sup> When Jesus woke up, he rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Silence! Be still!" Suddenly the wind stopped, and there was a great calm. <sup>40</sup> Then he asked them, "Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?" – Mark 4:37-40 NLT*

Paul experienced the same storm the sailors did, but without fear. Paul had faith. He trusted God. And it seems that Luke is silently asking us whether we will do the same.

## Take Courage

Acts 27:21-38

<sup>21</sup> Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul stood up among them and said, “Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and incurred this injury and loss.

<sup>22</sup> Yet now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. <sup>23</sup> For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, <sup>24</sup> and he said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar. And behold, God has granted you all those who sail with you.’ <sup>25</sup> So take heart, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told. <sup>26</sup> But we must run aground on some island.”

<sup>27</sup> When the fourteenth night had come, as we were being driven across the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors suspected that they were nearing land. <sup>28</sup> So they took a sounding and found twenty fathoms. A little farther on they took a sounding again and found fifteen fathoms.

<sup>29</sup> And fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come. <sup>30</sup> And as the sailors were seeking to escape from the ship, and had lowered the ship’s boat into the sea under pretense of laying out anchors from the bow, <sup>31</sup> Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, “Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.”

<sup>32</sup> Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship’s boat and let it go.

<sup>33</sup> As day was about to dawn, Paul urged them all to take some food, saying, “Today is the fourteenth day that you have continued in suspense and without food, having taken nothing.

<sup>34</sup> Therefore I urge you to take some food. For it will give you strength, for not a hair is to perish from the head of any of you.” <sup>35</sup> And when he had said these things, he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he broke it and began to eat. <sup>36</sup> Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves. <sup>37</sup> (We were in all 276 persons in the ship.) <sup>38</sup> And when they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship, throwing out the wheat into the sea. –

Acts 27:21-38 ESV

Earlier in the voyage, Paul had warned the ship’s officers of a bad premonition he had regarding the outcome of their voyage if they proceeded. And Paul had minced no words, saying, “I believe there is trouble ahead if we go on—shipwreck, loss of cargo, and danger to our lives as well” (Acts 27:10 NLT). But the soldier in charge of Paul and the rest of the prisoners on board had listened to the advice of the ship’s captain and crew, who had all agreed to keep sailing, in search of a safer port. Now, they found themselves in a predicament. They had sailed for days in violent seas, their ship battered by the waves and wind. The storm was so intense that it blocked out the sun during the day, thrusting Paul and his 275 shipmates into a perpetual state of darkness. For days on end, the sailors had battled the storm, unable to eat or sleep, at Luke indicates that they finally abandoned all hope.

But in the heat of the storm, Paul addressed the crew, reminding them that they should have heeded his initial advice. All that he had predicted had come true. And now they were on the brink of disaster. Things were out of their control. They had done all they could do, but the

storm had proven too great and their attempts to save themselves, too small. Yet, this wasn't a case of Paul telling them, "I told you so." He wasn't rubbing their noses in their failure to heed his advice. He was letting them know that His God was greater than the storm.

<sup>22</sup> *"But take courage! None of you will lose your lives, even though the ship will go down.*  
<sup>23</sup> *For last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me,* <sup>24</sup> *and he said, 'Don't be afraid, Paul, for you will surely stand trial before Caesar! What's more, God in his goodness has granted safety to everyone sailing with you.'* <sup>25</sup> *So take courage! For I believe God. It will be just as he said.* <sup>26</sup> *But we will be shipwrecked on an island."* – Acts 27:22-26 NLT

Right in the middle of what was probably the worst storm any of these sea-hardened sailors had ever experienced, Paul stood up and told them to take courage. He encouraged them not to fear. Can you imagine how ludicrous his words must have sounded to those men? Here was some Jewish prisoner and landlubber, attempting to calm their fears and assure them that none of them would die. All would turn out well. And, even more incredibly, this man was basing his words on a dream he had received from his God.

Paul had faith, and his faith would prove contagious. He had heard from God and he believed what he had been told. So, he told the men, "*euthymeō*" – take courage. They were to be of good cheer. Now think about what Paul was saying. The storm was still raging. The waves were still crashing against the side of the boat. The rain was still pouring down. The noise must have been deafening. But Paul was telling them to take courage and he clearly stated why they should. "For I believe God. It will be just as he said" (Acts 27:25 NLT). Paul trusted God. Even in the midst of the storm. Nothing had changed. Their circumstances had not improved. Paul was telling them to trust a God they didn't know and couldn't see, while everything was crashing down around them. Paul had learned not to focus his attention on immediate circumstances. What was happening around them was not proof of what was going to happen to them. While they had abandoned all hope, they had not been abandoned by God, and Paul told them as much. "God in his goodness has granted safety to everyone sailing with you" (Acts 27:24 NLT).

This story reminds me of a poem written in 1774 by William Cowper.

God moves in a mysterious way  
 His wonders to perform;  
 He plants His footsteps in the sea  
 And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines  
 Of never failing skill  
 He treasures up His bright designs  
 And works His sov'reign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;  
 The clouds ye so much dread  
 Are big with mercy and shall break  
 In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
 But trust Him for His grace;  
 Behind a frowning providence  
 He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,  
 Unfolding every hour;  
 The bud may have a bitter taste,  
 But sweet will be the flow'r.

Blind unbelief is sure to err  
 And scan His work in vain;  
 God is His own interpreter,  
 And He will make it plain.

All the sailors could see was the storm raging around them. They were drenched from the incessant rain and weakened from going for days without food. They had lost all hope. They had probably called out to their various gods, begging for salvation. They had thought about their wives and children at home and the thought of never seeing them again. They had exhausted all their mental and physical resources trying to save themselves. And now, Paul was telling them that his God had everything under control. They would be safe. There would be a shipwreck, but not a single man would be lost.

As the storm progressed, the sailors determined that their best hope of salvation was to abandon ship. Under the pretext of setting out additional anchors to keep the ship from running aground on the rocks, these men attempted to lower the ship's skiff or lifeboat. But Paul warned the guards who were watching he and the other prisoners, that if the sailors did not stay on board, everyone would die. So, the soldiers cut the ropes to the lifeboat, allowing it to drift away in the storm. Now, they had to trust God. There were no other options. For the sailors, the lifeboat had become an idol, a false hope of salvation. But Paul knew that it would have failed them. They would not have survived the storm in a boat so small. Their best hope for salvation was to remain in the ship and under the watchful care of God Almighty. But their actions reflect those of every human being who, when caught in the storms of life, attempts to find a way out. They seek a way of salvation and escape. Rather than place their trust in a God they can't see, they rely on something more tangible in nature. When the Israelites had been set free from slavery in Egypt and found themselves in the wilderness, they began to wonder about this God of Moses. While Moses was up on the mountain talking to God, the people determined to make their own god, an idol made of precious metal. They sought to create a god of their own making, something they could see. Their leader had disappeared. He had gone

to the top of the mountain and they had assumed he was not returning. And the God that had rescued them seemed to have bailed on them. So, they took matters into their own hands and fabricated their own source of salvation.

Paul wanted everyone to know that the best course of action was to remain right where they were. They were to stay on the boat, not to abandon ship. What they believed was going to be the source of their death, would actually play a vital role in their salvation. They were going to have to trust Paul, who had placed his trust in God. And Paul was so confident, that he encouraged the men to eat so that they could regain their strength, assuring them, “For not a hair of your heads will perish” (Acts 27:34 NLT). Then, Luke tells us, “everyone was encouraged and began to eat—all 276 of us who were on board” (Acts 27:36-37 NLT). The faith of Paul had infected the entire ship. When everyone else on board had abandoned hope and the sailors had tried to abandon ship, Paul had remained confident in the faithfulness of God. Instead of fear, he had exhibited faith. When everyone else was panicking, he was trusting. While the crew had grown weak and abandoned all hope, Paul had remained strong. He was exhibiting the very characteristics he had encouraged the Corinthians to have. “Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong” (1 Corinthians 16:13 ESV). And his courage had made an impact on all those around him.

## Shipwrecked, Snake-bit, and Sovereignly Spared

Acts 27:39-28:10

<sup>39</sup> Now when it was day, they did not recognize the land, but they noticed a bay with a beach, on which they planned if possible to run the ship ashore. <sup>40</sup> So they cast off the anchors and left them in the sea, at the same time loosening the ropes that tied the rudders. Then hoisting the foresail to the wind they made for the beach. <sup>41</sup> But striking a reef, they ran the vessel aground. The bow stuck and remained immovable, and the stern was being broken up by the surf. <sup>42</sup> The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, lest any should swim away and escape. <sup>43</sup> But the centurion, wishing to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and make for the land, <sup>44</sup> and the rest on planks or on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land.

<sup>1</sup> After we were brought safely through, we then learned that the island was called Malta. <sup>2</sup> The native people showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold. <sup>3</sup> When Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand. <sup>4</sup> When the native people saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live." <sup>5</sup> He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. <sup>6</sup> They were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god.

<sup>7</sup> Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the chief man of the island, named Publius, who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days. <sup>8</sup> It happened that the father of Publius lay sick with fever and dysentery. And Paul visited him and prayed, and putting his hands on him, healed him. <sup>9</sup> And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured. <sup>10</sup> They also honored us greatly, and when we were about to sail, they put on board whatever we needed. – Acts 27:39-28:10 ESV

Paul was headed to Rome. While it would appear that his journey was the result of a decision made by the Roman governor, Festus, and in keeping with Paul's own request for a trial before the emperor, Luke repeatedly insinuates that Paul's trip was due to the sovereign will of God. Yes, the Romans were funding the trip and had provided the soldiers to accompany Paul all the way to Rome. The sailors were piloting the ship on which Paul was a passenger, but as we have already seen, they were far from in control of the situation, and completely unable to deal with the weather conditions hammering their ship. Until Paul had intervened and assured them of God's sovereign plan to spare all their lives, they had been ready to abandon all hope of survival. The sailors had even tried to escape by using the lifeboat but were prevented from doing so by the Roman soldiers. Through the words of an angel, God had made it clear to Paul that everyone would be spared, even though the ship would be lost.

Luke wants us to recognize that this entire affair, from Paul's arrest in Jerusalem to his repeated hearings in Caesarea and his departure for Rome, had all been part of God's divine plan for Paul's life. None of this had happened by chance. And while everyone from the Jewish high priest, the Roman governor, King Agrippa, the centurion in charge of Paul's safety, and the ship's captain, thought they were in control, Luke repeatedly reveals that it was the sovereign God of the universe who was in charge of any and all things – from the wind and the waves to the decisions of men. As the angel had foretold, the ship carrying Paul eventually ran aground and began to break up. Everyone on board was forced to abandon ship and swim for shore. And while they had no idea where they were, God did. Upon reaching shore, waterlogged but safe, they discovered themselves to be on the island of Malta. And as the angel had predicted, not a soul had been lost. Every sailor, soldier, prisoner and passenger had been spared by God. What had appeared to be a hopeless ending to a very difficult and doomed journey, had ended in no loss of life. And the shipwrecked survivors found themselves surrounded by the caring citizens of Malta, who Luke describes as having showed them "unusual kindness." They had built fires on the beach in an effort to warm the weary men who had washed ashore. So, not only had they survived the shipwreck, but they were greeted and well taken care of by the people of Malta. They hadn't washed ashore on some deserted island or along an uninhabited section of the Maltese shoreline. Again, the sovereign hand of God had been propelling them along and protecting them every step of the way.

But God was not done. As Paul was adding wood to one of the fires, a venomous snake escaping the flames, sunk its fangs into his hand. The natives of Malta, seeing Paul shake the snake from his hand, assumed the worst. They quickly made the determination that Paul was an ill-fated soul who, while having escaped drowning at sea, was destined to die for his sins.

*"No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live." – Acts 28:4 ESV*

Yet, once again, Paul survived. He was far from ill-fated, cursed or doomed. He was under the watchful eye of God Almighty. His life was not destined to end as a result of drowning or poisoning. Storms would not take his life, neither would a snake. God was not done with Paul. Paul was under the impenetrable force-field of God's protective plan. There was nothing anyone or anything could do to him that did not first have to come through God's hands and with His permission. Paul had a confidence in God that matched that of the author of Hebrews.

*<sup>5</sup> For God has said, "I will never fail you. I will never abandon you."*

*<sup>6</sup> So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper, so I will have no fear. What can mere people do to me?" – Hebrews 13:5-6 NLT*

In fact, what can the storms of life do to me? Or vindictive Jews? Or all-powerful Romans? Or governors and kings? Or even a deadly venomous snake? For Paul, the answer was nothing. Nothing at all.

When the people of Malta failed to see Paul swell up and drop-down dead, they had determined that he must have been some kind of god. How else could they explain such a miraculous scene? They had no concept of God Almighty. And while they believed in the idea of supernatural beings, knew nothing of Yahweh and were completely ignorant of Jesus, the Messiah. But it would not be long before they saw the power of God on display, as Paul was given the opportunity to perform a miracle in their midst, healing the father of a man named Publius. And Luke tells us that when news of this incredible event got out, “the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured” (Acts 28:9 ESV). Paul’s presence on Malta was eventful. From surviving a deadly snake bite to healing the sick, Paul was a walking advertisement for the power of God. And while Luke doesn’t report it, there’s little doubt that Paul was sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with everyone who would listen. He didn’t waste a single second of his time on Malta. Yes, he performed miracles. He healed the sick. He cured those who came to him with diseases. But based on what we know about Paul, he shared the good news of salvation made possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus. And according to verse 11, God would provide Paul with a three-month window of opportunity to do so. He was still headed to Rome. That would be his final destination. But Malta would prove to be a divinely determined detour that had been a part of God’s divine plan all along. Stormy seas, helpless sailors, a shipwreck, and a poisonous serpent were no match for the sovereign will of God.



## The Hope of Israel

Acts 28:11-22

<sup>11</sup> After three months we set sail in a ship that had wintered in the island, a ship of Alexandria, with the twin gods as a figurehead. <sup>12</sup> Putting in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days. <sup>13</sup> And from there we made a circuit and arrived at Rhegium. And after one day a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli. <sup>14</sup> There we found brothers and were invited to stay with them for seven days. And so we came to Rome. <sup>15</sup> And the brothers there, when they heard about us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage. <sup>16</sup> And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who guarded him.

<sup>17</sup> After three days he called together the local leaders of the Jews, and when they had gathered, he said to them, “Brothers, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans. <sup>18</sup> When they had examined me, they wished to set me at liberty, because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case. <sup>19</sup> But because the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar—though I had no charge to bring against my nation. <sup>20</sup> For this reason, therefore, I have asked to see you and speak with you, since it is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain.” <sup>21</sup> And they said to him, “We have received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brothers coming here has reported or spoken any evil about you. <sup>22</sup> But we desire to hear from you what your views are, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against.” – Acts 28:11-22 ESV

After their shipwreck on Malta, the Roman centurion and his troops who had been assigned the task of delivering Paul to Rome, determined to spend the winter on the island. In the early spring, when the weather made safe travel possible, the centurion booked passage on a ship headed to Italy. Luke makes an interesting observation, commenting that the ship that would carry Paul on the last leg of his journey has a figurehead on the bow that represented the twin gods. This was a reference to the Greek gods, Castor and Pollux. We can't be sure why Luke chose to include this information, but it's almost as if he is trying to convey the irony of the situation. If you recall, back in chapter 14, when Paul and Barnabas had gone to Lystra and had healed a man with crippled feet, they were immediately lauded as gods, with the people shouting, “These men are gods in human form!” (Acts 14:11 NLT). They claimed that Barnabas was Zeus and Paul was Hermes. Well, Castor and Pollux were the sons born to Zeus as a result of his relationship with a human, Leda, queen of Sparta. According to Greek mythology, Zeus transformed his two human sons into gods and gave them the responsibility of providing for the safety of sailors. So, perhaps Luke found humor in the fact that the figurehead on the ship to carry Paul (Hermes) to Rome represented the two sons of Barnabas (Zeus). On top of that, these two gods (Castor and Pollux) were supposed to be the ones who protected sailors from

the storms at sea. Considering all that Luke and Paul had just endured on their journey to Rome, all of this would have come across as more than a bit ironic.

When they finally set foot on Roman soil at the port of Puteoli, they were greeted by fellow believers. We're not told how these people came to faith. But we know that, on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples, there had been individuals from Rome in the crowd that heard them speaking in foreign languages.

*<sup>9</sup> Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and **visitors from Rome**, <sup>11</sup> both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God.” – Acts 2:9-11 ESV*

These visitors from Rome and elsewhere in Italy, were most likely Jews, who had come to Jerusalem for the celebration of Passover and the feast of Pentecost. And we know that more than 3,000 people came to faith as a result of Peter's impromptu sermon. It's likely that some of the visitors from Rome and other regions of Italy were among those who came to faith. So, they would have returned to Rome, ready to share the news of the gospel with their friends and family members. Regardless of how these people had come to faith, Paul and Luke found themselves surrounded by fellow believers as soon as they stepped off the ship. And they stayed with them for seven days.

Upon arrival in the capital city of Rome, Paul and Luke were once again greeted by fellow believers. This must have been a tremendous encouragement to these two men, who were far from home and who had just endured a great deal of pain and suffering to make it this far. What a powerful reminder this must have been to Paul of the unstoppable power of God's sovereign plan. Paul had grown used to arriving in a town and being the lone Christian, responsible for sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with people who had never heard His name before. But here he was, in the heart of the Roman empire, where no apostle had been before, and God had already been there. The gospel had already arrived, and the Spirit had begun His work.

One of the things we learn about Paul in this passage is his relentless desire to share the gospel with the Jews. Just three days into his stay in Rome, he called the leaders of the local Jewish congregation, desiring to share with them all that had gone on and why he was there. Paul was getting ahead of the game, preempting the Jewish leadership from Jerusalem, who had surely sent a contingent to Rome to represent their case against Paul before Caesar. Paul wanted to make sure that the local Jews heard his side of the story before the opposition had a chance to poison the well. And so, he related all that had happened in Jerusalem, assuring them of his innocence, and clearly presenting the basis for his imprisonment and presence in Rome: "it is because of the hope of Israel that I am wearing this chain" (Acts 28:20 ESV). Once again, he tied his arrest and imprisonment to the claim that Jesus was the hope of Israel: The Messiah. These Jews would have known that Paul was referring to the Messiah. The arrival of the Messiah was

something all Jews hoped, wished and prayed for. Even Jews living as far away as Rome, would have longed for the day when their long-awaited Messiah showed up and returned the people of Israel to their former state of glory. Those Jews living in the capital of Rome would have been in the minority, surrounded by the power and paganism of Rome. They had no temple. Every day they faced reminders of their own oppressed state and the weakened condition of their own nation. They were no longer a force to be reckoned with, as in the days of David and Solomon. The Romans and their gods were the bullies on the block.

It would have been hard for these people to maintain their hope in the Messiah while living so far from Israel. Their sense of anticipation would have been beaten down and driven from them by the daily affairs of life. With each passing day, their hope would have diminished, and their resignation would have increased. But Paul came bearing good news, and they desired to hear more. They admitted that they knew nothing of Paul's confrontations in Jerusalem and had received no visitors bearing news or words of ill will against Paul. But they expressed their desire to hear more, telling Paul, "we desire to hear from you what your views are, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against" (Acts 28:22 ESV). They had heard about Jesus, but to them, he was nothing more than the martyred leader of a religious sect that had a less-than-ideal reputation. And yet, they were interested. Their curiosity had been piqued. Here was Paul, the messenger of the good news to the Gentiles, being invited by the Jews in Rome, to tell them more about Jesus, the hope of Israel. God works in mysterious ways.



## This is Not the End

Acts 28:23-31

<sup>23</sup> *When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers. From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. <sup>24</sup> And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved. <sup>25</sup> And disagreeing among themselves, they departed after Paul had made one statement: "The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet:*

<sup>26</sup> *"Go to this people, and say,  
"You will indeed hear but never understand,  
and you will indeed see but never perceive."*

<sup>27</sup> *For this people's heart has grown dull,  
and with their ears they can barely hear,  
and their eyes they have closed;  
lest they should see with their eyes  
and hear with their ears  
and understand with their heart  
and turn, and I would heal them.'*

<sup>28</sup> *Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen."*

<sup>30</sup> *He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him,  
<sup>31</sup> proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness  
and without hindrance. – Acts 28:23-31 ESV*

As we prepare to wrap up this study on the Book of Acts, we come to Luke's concluding paragraphs covering Paul's arrival in Rome. In a sense, Luke doesn't complete the story. He leaves us hanging, with Paul in prison and his final fate left unstated. It's almost as if he was planning a sequel. The way he ends the book is much like the final episode in the first season of a Netflix TV series. It's a cliff hanger that leaves us wanting to know more. But the second season of Luke's "Acts of the Apostles", if he ever planned one, never aired.

What do know is that just three days after his arrival in Rome, Paul called for a meeting with the local Jewish leadership. He wanted to explain why he was there and what had happened in Jerusalem to necessitate his arrival as a prisoner of the Roman government. The local Jews had received no news regarding the events leading up to Paul's initial arrest. There had been no visits from the representatives of the Sanhedrin and, as a result, the Jews in Rome had no idea what Paul was talking about. But they wanted to hear more. And hear more they did. Luke tells us that Paul met with them from morning until evening, "testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets" (Acts

28:23 ESV). Paul may have been a prisoner of Rome, with a Roman guard attached to him at all times, but he never shirked from the commission given to him by Christ. He continued to share the gospel, doing everything in his power to persuade Gentiles and Jews that Jesus was Savior of the world. And Luke reveals that the crowd was divided over what they heard Paul say that day. Some believed, while others rejected his message. And Paul broke up the meeting when he quoted from the prophet Isaiah:

<sup>26</sup> *“Go to this people, and say,  
“You will indeed hear but never understand,  
and you will indeed see but never perceive.”*  
<sup>27</sup> *For this people's heart has grown dull,  
and with their ears they can barely hear,  
and their eyes they have closed;  
lest they should see with their eyes  
and hear with their ears  
and understand with their heart  
and turn, and I would heal them.”* – Acts 28:26-27 ESV

Paul quoted from Isaiah 6:9-10, where God spoke to the prophet, providing him with a message concerning the people of Judah. God was warning Isaiah that they would not listen to a word he said. They would hear, but not understand. They would see, but not perceive. Why? Because they had hard hearts and deaf ears. And God inferred to Isaiah that their stubborn resistance to His message of repentance had been His doing. God could have softened their hearts, but He chose not to. He could have opened their eyes to see the reality of their situation and the incredible graciousness of God's offer to take them back if they would repent. But He didn't. And the people of Judah would eventually end up defeated by the Babylonians and taken into captivity.

And Paul directly tied this prophecy from the prophet of God to apply to the people of God living in his day. And Paul was not the only one who had used this passage to indict the Jewish people in the first century. Jesus Himself quoted it to His disciples. But right before He did, He told them, “You are permitted to understand the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven, but others are not. To those who listen to my teaching, more understanding will be given, and they will have an abundance of knowledge. But for those who are not listening, even what little understanding they have will be taken away from them. That is why I use these parables...” (Matthew 13:11-13 NLT).

Jesus explained His parables to the disciples, but He didn't do the same thing for the Jews. And the majority of them continued to reject His message regarding the Kingdom of God and His role as Messiah. And the same thing was true in Paul's day. They were still wrestling with the idea that Jesus, the rabbi from Nazareth, who had been crucified by the Romans, had actually been the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. And they most certainly struggled with the concept that Jesus had been raised back to life by God, as proof that He had been who He had claimed to be.

Which is what led Paul to break the news to them that he had been sharing with other Jews all throughout his journey to Rome.

*“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” – Acts 28:28 ESV*

The majority of the Jews would not listen, but the Gentiles would. And Paul had seen that reality proved out time and time again in place after place. He had repeatedly gone to the Jews in every city he visited, and he had watched them reject his message and respond in anger at his audacity to insinuate that they needed salvation. And even during the two years that Paul remained in Rome, he would continue to preach the gospel to anyone who would listen, “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (Acts 28:31 ESV).

Luke has brought his book full circle. He began it talking about the Kingdom of God, and he finished it the same way. In the opening lines of his history of the Christian church, Luke had told Theophilus that his gospel had been intended to deal “with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen” (Acts 1:1-2 ESV). The Book of Acts had been written to pick up the story where the gospel had left off, when Jesus had “presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3 ESV). Jesus had spent His final days with the disciples, telling them about the Kingdom of God. And now, we see Luke closing out his book with Paul speaking about the Kingdom of God. As stated earlier, Luke doesn’t tell us what happened to Paul. He was still a prisoner of the Roman government. He had been brought to Rome, at great expense, to stand trial before Emperor Nero. But Luke doesn’t provide us with those details.

According to Clement of Rome, the Bishop of Rome from 88-98 A.D., the apostle Paul eventually died, but he also provided no details as to the means of his death.

*5 Through envy Paul, too, showed by example the prize that is given to patience: 6 seven times was he cast into chains; he was banished; he was stoned; having become a herald, both in the East and in the West, he obtained the noble renown due to his faith; 7 and having preached righteousness to the whole world, and having come to the extremity of the West, and having borne witness before rulers, he departed at length out of the world, and went to the holy place, having become the greatest example of patience. – 1 Clement 5:5-7*

Church tradition has long held that Paul was eventually beheaded by Nero, as part of his persecution of the church. But there is no compelling evidence that proves how and when Paul died. It seems that Luke was less interested in ending his story with the death of Paul, than eluding to the fact that the gospel was going to the Gentiles. Jesus had commissioned His disciples to take the gospel to the “ends of the earth.” Rome was not the end of the earth, but it was the center of the world at the time. And through its wide-spread influence and network

of roads to virtually all point in in the known world of that day, the gospel would continue to spread, and the church would continue to grow. Paul would eventually die, but the gospel would not. The apostles would all fade from view, passing away and out of the limelight. But the message of salvation, made possible by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone would make its way around the world, completely transforming the landscape of society for generations to come. And God's message of redemption continues to spread. The world has gotten smaller. Advancements in technology and travel have made the remotest parts of the planet accessible and transmission of the gospel into every imaginable tongue, possible.

Interestingly enough, Paul wrote a letter to the church in Rome, where he reminded them that God had plans for the Jews. The very ones whose hearts He had hardened and whose eyes He had blinded to the truth, He will one day restore.

*<sup>25</sup> I want you to understand this mystery, dear brothers and sisters, so that you will not feel proud about yourselves. Some of the people of Israel have hard hearts, but this will last only until the full number of Gentiles comes to Christ. <sup>26</sup> And so all Israel will be saved. As the Scriptures say,*

*"The one who rescues will come from Jerusalem,  
and he will turn Israel away from ungodliness.*

*<sup>27</sup> And this is my covenant with them,  
that I will take away their sins." – Romans 11:25-27 NLT*

God was not done in Paul's day. And God is not done in our day. Paul was in prison, but the gospel was not. Our world seems resistant and even hostile to the message of the gospel, but God is not done bringing in the "full number of the Gentiles." The history of the church did not conclude with the last chapter of Acts. It continues to be written and only God knows when and exactly how it will all end. But Paul gives us an insight into what that day will look like.

*<sup>16</sup> For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a commanding shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God. First, the believers who have died will rise from their graves. <sup>17</sup> Then, together with them, we who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Then we will be with the Lord forever. <sup>18</sup> So encourage each other with these words. – 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18 NLT*