

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Luke had written an earlier account of the life and ministry of Jesus and in that account the Holy Spirit was actively involved in the birth, mission and ministry of Jesus. This later account could be titled the Acts of the Holy Spirit in the Church. While Jesus was the physical expression of God to the world, the Church is the physical expression of Christ to the world. We (the Church) did and can accomplish what we are called to do only by and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

For a more comprehensive treatment of various passages, see the other documents listed under Acts.

Chapter 1

{1:1} In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach {2} until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.

The earthly ministry of Jesus was the beginning of the work the church is to complete in manifesting the Kingdom of God and implementing the principles of this Kingdom. God instructed the disciples through the Holy Spirit even when Jesus was with them. He instructs us in the same way today.

{3} After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.

God had proven Himself to the children of Israel during a forty *year* period before they entered the Promised Land as a new nation. In a similar way, Jesus proved Himself to those who would become the church during a forty *day* period of time.

{4} On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. {5} For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

Jesus spent over three years giving intensive training to a small group of disciples so that they could do the kind of work that He had been doing. Jesus had told them, "The work that I do, you shall do, and greater work, because I go unto My Father." Jesus had given them training, and authorized them (via the Great Commission) to do the job and yet He told them to wait. Training was not enough. Authorization or commissioning was not enough. Power would be required to put the training into effective use. All three are needed to do the job right.

{6} So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" {7} He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.

It is difficult to change an idea that has deep roots in our minds. The disciples had always believed that when the Messiah came He would establish an earthly kingdom. They did not realize that such a kingdom would not be until the Second Coming.

{8} But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Before such a kingdom can be established, the citizens of that kingdom must be prepared. This is the work of the church. We are to be witnesses in the power of the Holy Spirit so that many will be born of the Spirit and thus be suitable to participate in the restored kingdom.

{9} After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. {10} They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. {11} "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

We think of Heaven as a place physically above us. Heaven is definitely on a higher spiritual plane. Jesus could have just disappeared and enter into the realm of heaven but chose to ascend so that His followers could see the event. When Jesus returns, He will make His presence known by descending in such a way that people will know what is happening.

{12} Then they returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day's walk from the city. {13} When they arrived, they went upstairs to the room where they were staying. Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. {14} They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

After times of intense spiritual encounters, we are more likely to be in prayer and to earnestly seek God's will for our lives. We need the mountain top experiences to draw us back into a closer walk with God.

{15} In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) {16} and said, "Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus-- {17} he was one of our number and shared in this ministry." {18} (With the reward he got for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out. {19} Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) {20} "For," said Peter, "it is written in the book of Psalms, "'May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it,' and, "'May another take his place of leadership.' {21} Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, {22} beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection."

The natural leadership talents of Peter continued to be evident. We are not told he was led to take the

action he did. The Lord's instructions were to simply wait until power would come upon them.

We don't always realize how many people followed Jesus besides the twelve who were called the disciples. Others also followed. Peter thought a requirement for Judas' replacement should be that the person had been with them from the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry.

{23} So they proposed two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. {24} Then they prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen {25} to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs." {26} Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.

We do not know how many men met the criteria of having been around during the earthly ministry of Jesus from the time of His baptism by John up to and including the resurrection. Apparently, the two named met the criteria and the group did not have any further way to discern whom God had chosen. The group then left the choice up to God by "casting lots." They then did the equivalent of "flipping a coin" to determine God's will. In our churches today after the coming of the Holy Spirit, we would not be willing to trust God to lead in such a way. This incident was the last time the Bible records that "casting lots" was used to make a choice between alternatives in the operation of the church. One problem in such an approach is that we may not have identified all the options God would have us consider. Some have argued that the eleven disciples chose Matthias but God chose Paul; however, Paul did not meet the criteria of having been with Jesus throughout His earthly ministry and had not been a witness of the resurrection.

Chapter 2

{2:1} When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.

Waiting was a significant act of faith for these early believers. When they started waiting, after Jesus ascended into Heaven, they did not know that something significant was going to take place just ten days later, on the Day of Pentecost. It may have required months or even years before something would happen. They didn't have to wait that long. The group of 120 disciples and followers of Jesus were together when God intervened in a magnificent way.

{2} Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. {3} They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. {4} All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Much symbolism was in the physical phenomena that occurred that day. There was communication going on involving the various ways that we typically communicate with each other. Hearing, sight and speech were all involved. They heard sounds that reminded them of the wind blowing. The Greek word for wind and spirit is the same word. They saw cloven tongues that looked like fire. When John the Baptist was ministering in the wilderness of Judea, he said that the Messiah would baptize with the Holy Ghost and with fire. We see the ministry of the Holy Spirit as that of a refining fire that burns away the dross of this earthly life. These disciples spoke as the Spirit directed them indicating a surrender of self to the working of God in their lives. James tells us that the tongue is the most unruly member of our body and the most difficult to tame. Apparently, the Lord started with the most difficult member of the body to show the power of the Spirit to bring discipline to the life of the believer. We may also argue that being an effective witness for Jesus involves letting God speak through us by the power of the Holy Spirit.

{5} Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. {6} When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. {7} Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? {8} Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? {9} Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, {10} Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome {11} (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs--we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!"

God's timing is always right. After ten days of praying and waiting, I would imagine that many of the disciples were wondering if anything were going to happen. Sometimes when we pray, we want God to answer us right now. Yet consider the loss of impact if God had poured out the Holy Spirit on the first day that they started to pray. None of the foreign visitors would have been in Jerusalem at that time. The impact for helping to spread the gospel message would have been greatly reduced without these people who would take the story back to their native lands.

{12} Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?" {13} Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine."

When God acts in a sovereign way and impacts the affairs of people, amazement and confusion are typical. At the time such interventions are happening, we do not understand them. We may have a tendency to be critical of those involved. However, Biblical history would teach us that we should not judge such things until the fruit of what is happening is seen.

{14} Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. {15} These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning!

Though the people heard the message, they needed to have some explanation of what was going on. Someone needed to put the event in the proper historical context. Something miraculous had happened and those who witnessed it responded in one of two ways. Some were amazed and wondered what was happening. Others thought that they knew all the answers and were filled with scorn and ridicule for the disciples. After all, if it were not happening to them, then it was not worth having. Miracles need interpreting and Peter stood up along with the other eleven disciples and interpreted what was happening.

{16} No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: {17} "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. {18} Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. {19} I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. {20} The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. {21} And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'

This was prophecy that had come true. This was the very thing Joel had prophesied. We see the initiation of the "last days." At the end of those last days, many wonders will occur. In the mean time, the world must be prepared for what is coming. That preparation is the work of the church and the empowerment to accomplish the work is by the Holy Spirit. His presence and power manifest themselves in prophesy and visions (among many other happenings -- see 1 Cor 12). The goal is that Jesus would be the firstborn among many brethren -- that many will be "saved." Salvation is available to those who call upon the name of the Lord.

{22} "Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know.

The focus of our message must be Jesus. The historical evidence of the miracles of Jesus was available to the people to whom Peter spoke and it is available today. Historical evidence is not enough, there must be confrontation of those who are living apart from God's provision.

{23} This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. {24} But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

Peter confronted the Jews with the reality of what they did. He then contrasted their actions to what God did to overrule their verdict.

{25} David said about him: "I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. {26} Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will live in hope, {27} because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. {28} You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.' {29} "Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. {30} But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. {31} Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay.

After Peter related what had just happened to the prophecy from Joel, he then linked it to the recent crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. The Jews were familiar with the passage in Psalms 16:10. David wrote, "For Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt Thou suffer Thy Holy One to see corruption." Peter assured them that this passage did not apply to David but referred to the Messiah. It had been fulfilled in the resurrection of Jesus and the acceptance of the work of Jesus and His exaltation in Heaven was proven by the coming of the Holy Spirit. Those who were in Jerusalem that day had witnessed this historical milestone in God's plan of salvation.

{32} God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. {33} Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. {34} For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said, "The Lord said to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand {35} until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'" {36} "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

God does not leave us without evidence and proof. The resurrection of Christ was confirmed by many witnesses. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost was proof of the exaltation of Jesus to the right hand of the Father in Heaven. Even this was prophesied in the Scriptures. The purpose to which Jesus is working through the church is to defeat the enemies of God and to bring all things under His lordship.

This inspired preaching by an uneducated fisherman found its home in the heart of the hearers. Old Testament scriptural prophecy provides convincing proof of the purposes of God and serves to put the things we see in perspective. We should be interpreting everything we experience in light of the word of God.

{37} When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" {38} Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. {39} The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off--for all whom the Lord our God will call."

After confrontation and confirmation through the scriptures then comes conviction. The only acceptable response when we are brought under conviction for our sins is to repent and turn to Jesus who has provided a way of salvation. Our preservation (continuing and on-going salvation) is empowered by the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Powerful preaching was a characteristic of the early church. The Holy Spirit inspired Peter to communicate in words the people could understand. They did not have to guess what he was talking about. Peter didn't preach a psychological theory, but told the "spiritual facts of life." Powerful preaching results from the proclamation of

divine truth and the willingness to call SIN exactly what it is. We cannot “beat around the bush” in confronting the sin issue. Too much is at risk. The wages of sin is death!

People asked what they were to do. The answer to what we are to do about sin in our lives is the same one that Peter gave the people that day: Repent. This was the cry of John the Baptist as he prepared the way for the Messiah. It was the subject of the first sermon that Jesus Himself preached. It is THE only acceptable response we have when we are confronted with the reality of our sins. Repentance is the first step we must take. Without true repentance (a change of the mind that results in a change of behavior), there can be no true faith. Jesus preached “Repent and believe.”

Peter had just stated that Jesus was the Messiah and these Jews knew the Messiah was to be their Savior to bring forgiveness and deliverance from sin. Therefore, the baptism Peter called for was a demonstration of their belief that through the work of the cross they had forgiveness (remission) of sins.

The next step was that God would give each believer the Holy Spirit. He is the Source of our new life and He must be resident in the life of the believer or there is no validation of the salvation experience. We should realize that God does not come into our lives to just be a guest, but to be Lord of our entire being. He IS Lord and we must let Him reign in our lives or we will miss the benefit of the salvation that God purchased for us.

One significant part of the message that the Jews needed to hear was that this Good News of God’s salvation was not just for them, but was to extend to all people.

{40} With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." {41} Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. {42} They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

The beginning of the church was marked with strong exhortation for people to come to Jesus for salvation. The appeal Peter made for the people to “save themselves” reminds us that salvation is something to which we must willingly respond. God will not force Himself on us to save us against our wills. When He calls we must decide who is going to be Lord in our lives. On that day when the little band of believers was empowered by the Holy Spirit, some 3000 souls responded with a decision to let the risen Christ be Lord and Savior for themselves. The world in which we live is still corrupt and many still need to be saved out of the world system.

The early church grew rapidly and, as we still see with new Christians, a hunger for spiritual food and for fellowship with other of like belief was evident in the lives of the members of the first church. Fellowship was a chief characteristic of the Church. They stuck together and stood up for one another and propped each other up. Their point of commonality was Jesus. They learned together and they celebrated the marvelous work God had done for them in Jesus as they broke bread together. Another one of the reasons these people grew and had such power was that they also prayed together. There cannot be a powerful church unless it is a praying church.

{43} Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles.

They knew they were living in the presence of God. This realization came not only from the faith they had but also from the demonstration of the fact that God was active in their lives. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. Because of the time the apostles had spent with Jesus (the Living Word), they had learned to believe that God intervenes in the affairs of man and sets aside natural laws for the purposes of the Kingdom of Heaven. Wonders and signs were given as the church reached out in ministry to the world around them and to each other. The sick and lame were healed, evil spirits were cast out, the dead was brought back to life. The wonders and signs are still operating among the believers. However, many will not believe that miracles still happen and God does not disappoint them.

{44} All the believers were together and had everything in common. {45} Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. {46} Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, {47} praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Genuine worship and joy unbounded was characteristic of the early church. As we worship God with deep reverence, recognizing Him as Lord and having appreciation of His benefits toward us, then He responds by sending His joy into our hearts. This joy overflows into praise and causes the Christian to have an attractiveness to others that would seek to know God.

They were a true community of believers who loved each other and shared not only what they believed, but also what they possessed. The love they had for each other made it possible for God to express Himself through them. The nature of God is that of “generosity motivated by love.” He shared His love with us and put His spirit within us. Just as the early Christians made the work of the Kingdom of God their first priority, we too must put God first in all we do. As we do this, the church will grow as people are drawn to the salvation they see manifested in our lives.

The life in the community of the believers was characterized by learning, fellowship, and prayer. They grew as others joined them and found their needs being met in miraculous ways. We should see the power of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives in the same way those in the early church did. If we don’t see it, just

remember: God has not changed!

Chapter 3

{3:1} One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer--at three in the afternoon.

Peter and John had spent the previous three and a half years in the company of Jesus. They had witnessed the miracles and they had heard His teaching. They were traumatized by the crucifixion, elated by the resurrection and empower at Pentecost. What do you think was upper most in their minds as they went about their daily tasks? They were thinking about Jesus and what was happening in the Kingdom of God. These were the focus and central theme of their lives.

{2} Now a man crippled from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. {3} When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. {4} Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, "Look at us!" {5} So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. {6} Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk."

When they encountered the lame man at the entrance to the Temple, they immediately thought of his needs in terms of what the Lord could do for him. The beggar was hoping for money; however, he had his sights set too low. God had something much more valuable to give him and that was wholeness.

Nothing would have happened that day if Peter and John had not been willing to step out in faith in the Risen Lord. If Peter and John had a pocket full of money, would they have just given the man a few coins and gone on to prayer time in the Temple? I hope that would not have been the case. We should not let the fact that we have some physical resources available to us cause us to lose sight of the greater (indeed infinite) resources we have in Christ Jesus. We should not let the "duties" of a religious system blind us to the needs of people that can be solved only in context of the Kingdom of God.

{7} Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. {8} He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God.

The results of not relying on our own puny resources but of looking to Jesus were miraculous. Peter told the man, "In the name of Jesus, rise up and walk." He then reached out and lifted him up. We can learn from these two actions. First, we must be willing to speak to problems we encounter in accordance with the will and character of Jesus. Those we help should have no doubts regarding our motivation or "where we are coming from." The power (ability) does not reside in us, it only flow through us. We often overlook the second thing that Peter did. He reached out and took the man by his hand and pulled him up. So often, we in our churches "preach at" the problems but do not turn our hands to help turn the situations around. More often than not, we are satisfied to just throw money at problems and we don't even bother to say anything.

{9} When all the people saw him walking and praising God, {10} they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

As the good news and the power of the Kingdom of God impacts the lives of people, they become a testimony of the truth of what God has done and can do. People can recognize changes in lives. We may not have been physically impaired before coming to Christ but we did have problems of the soul which should have been transformed by the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Those who knew us before should be able to give testimony of the change brought on by the transforming power of Christ in us.

{11} While the beggar held on to Peter and John, all the people were astonished and came running to them in the place called Solomon's Colonnade.

God uses miracle to get the attention of people so they will listen to the Gospel message.

{12} When Peter saw this, he said to them: "Men of Israel, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?"

If God is working through us to do great things, then we must be careful to give the credit to Him and use every opportunity to point people to Jesus.

{13} The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. {14} You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. {15} You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this.

The starting point in bringing people to God is a confrontation of the sin in their lives. The Jews needed to be challenged to face up to the terrible sin they committed in rejecting God Who came to them in the person of Jesus. Though they rejected Jesus, God vindicated Him by the resurrection and provided witnesses to share the good news with the world.

{16} By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see.

God was and is willing to confirm the truth of His message to the world by miraculous intervention in the lives of people. He has promised to answer our request for anything we ask according to His will.

{17} "Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. {18} But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer. {19} Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, {20} and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you--even Jesus.

God is gracious to overlook our ignorance and to love us though we are not very lovable. He forgives us as

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we repent and turn to Him so we can receive the Gift of His Son to live in us in the person of the Holy Spirit.

{21} He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets. {22} For Moses said, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you. {23} Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from among his people.' {24} "Indeed, all the prophets from Samuel on, as many as have spoken, have foretold these days. {25} And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, 'Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.' {26} When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways."

The Jews could not expect to have a second chance to see and experience God Incarnate again. Jesus would not come back in their lifetime. Sometime in the future Jesus will return and restore all things. In the meantime, we must rely on the witness of those who have experienced Christ and believe the word of God that testifies of the Messiah. God blesses those who have such faith by delivering us from the ways and consequences of wickedness.

Chapter 4

{4:1} The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. {2} They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. {3} They seized Peter and John, and because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. {4} But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand.

In situations where "religion" is firmly entrenched, introducing a new way (for example, the Gospel of Jesus Christ) will be met with great resistance. We see this in modern day Israel among the Jews and in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq. The Church in the first century also encountered strong opposition from leaders of the religious system of their day.

{5} The next day the rulers, elders and teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. {6} Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and the other men of the high priest's family. {7} They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"

The religious leaders recognized a significant miracle had occurred. They knew this was not just a coincidence and they knew Peter and John did not have the ability (in and of themselves) to cause this to happen. Just as the Roman Catholics pray to various saints for specific needs, the Jews practiced calling upon the name of dead patriarchs in their prayers. The Council had called Peter and John to give an answer as to which name they had used or by what power this miracle occurred. They also recognized the possibility that the devil and the forces of evil can do mighty acts. They had heard the stories of how the magicians of Pharaoh's court had duplicated some things that Moses had done to convince Pharaoh that God had sent him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. The Sanhedrin may have been concerned that Peter and John had used demonic powers.

We should not fault the Sanhedrin for attempting to discover the source of the power demonstrated. We need to be on guard regarding spiritual matters. The devil will appear as an angel of light and in the last days the devil will deceive many with "lying wonders" even to the point of causing fire to come down from the sky.

{8} Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! {9} If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, {10} then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. {11} He is "the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone." {12} Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

Jesus had promised His disciples "But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time *you will be given what to say*, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you (Matt 10:19-20). The time had come for that promise to be fulfilled and as Peter spoke the Holy Spirit enabled him powerfully.

Peter was probably aware of their concern regarding demonic power. He was careful to point out that what had happened was not just a stunt to impress people. It was a good deed done for someone in need. The fact that good had come out of what had happened should have been an indication of the source. James tells us "every good and perfect gift comes to us from the Father of Lights in Whom there is no variability nor shadow of turning."

Peter knew this was the same group of people who had condemned Jesus as a blasphemer and had concluded He should die. This knowledge did not stop him from telling them what had happened was by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. It took boldness to confront these religious leaders on their own turf.

Lest there was any doubt about Whom he was speaking, Peter reminded them they had crucified this Man. Though they were powerful in their society, God had overruled them and had raised Jesus from death. Peter then went on to relate Jesus to the Messianic promises and to show what they (the Sanhedrin) had done was prophesied many years before. This same Jesus was "the stone that the builders rejected." The Gospel of John tells us that "Jesus came unto His own, but His own received Him not." That was not the end of the story. Our rejection of Jesus does not change the fact that He is Lord. In the words of the Psalmist, "He has become the Chief Cornerstone."

They proclaimed the truth of the Gospel message that day in the hearing of the Jewish religious leaders. Jesus is God's ONLY provision for salvation. No other name, in heaven or earth, is sufficient.

{13} When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. {14} But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. {15} So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together.

The world has trouble understanding the effect of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of a person.

Knowing we are in proper relationship to Almighty God will give us boldness to do His will. The understanding we have is beyond our own ability and confounds those who look to the institutions of man for wisdom.

When God acts in power to heal, then the skeptics are in no position to deny what has happened. {16}

"What are we going to do with these men?" they asked. "Everybody living in Jerusalem knows they have done an outstanding miracle, and we cannot deny it.

{17} But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn these men to speak no longer to anyone in this name." {18} Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

In the face of "an outstanding miracle" these people should have been rejoicing and trying to discover how they too could participate in God's blessings. However, they had become so enamored with their own system of religion they were blind to what God was doing. They then resorted to what those who have weak positions always do and that is try to control through threats and fear.

{19} But Peter and John replied, "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. {20} For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." {21} After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. {22} For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old.

When we know we are right, then we do not need to back away from those who would attempt to silence us. The church must get back to the point of right relationship with God and focus upon God's purposes rather than human agendas. We become weak when we are not where we should be in our relationship to God.

{23} On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them.

{24} When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God.

The persecution of the church had begun. When the church is attacked, then it must respond and raise the sword of the Spirit to the challenge. The war is waged in prayer and the weapon is the word of God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them.

{25} You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? {26} The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One. {27} Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. {28} They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.

As we see the actions of the enemies of the cross and the Kingdom of God, we should relate what is happening around us to prophecies from the Scriptures. The actions of the Jews and the Romans were predetermined according to the word of God.

{29} Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. {30} Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."

The world would attempt to silence the message of God's salvation through Jesus Christ. In the face of such attempts we need great boldness. This boldness comes from confirmation of the word of God through answered prayer and miracles. We must step out in faith based on the measure of faith we have. As we do that, our faith grows as does our boldness.

{31} After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

God is faithful and response to the prayer of faith of His people. He manifest His presence among them by physical evidence. The place was physically shaken. He also manifest His presence by a new energizing caused by the stirring of the Holy Spirit within them. Such evidence gives holy boldness.

{32} All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.

A generous spirit characterized those of the early church. Such behavior as seen in the early church is a predictable result of having God's love being the major influence in our lives.

{33} With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.

The truth of the word of God unleashes the power of the resurrection to give new life to those who were dead in their sins. The grace of God made them gracious.

{34} There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales {35} and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. {36} Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), {37} sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

We glibly say that all we have belongs to God. The test of the reality of our belief in this truth is seen in the action we take. "From time to time" implies there was not a wholesale liquidation of assets but they sold things as was needed to support the work of the church and to advance the kingdom. As we act with such generosity, we can do so without fear of financial ruin. As David observed in Psalm 37:25-26 "I was young and now I am old, yet I
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have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread. They are always generous and lend freely; their children will be blessed.”

Chapter 5

{5:1} Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. {2} With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

The temptation for selfish action is always present with us. Many people are openly selfish and others, though they know that selfishness is not appropriate, will make a show of generosity that hides their true motivation.

{3} Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? {4} Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God."

We may fool many people by a show of generosity designed to gain favor for ourselves, but God knows our hearts. We can never deceive God. Hypocrisy is a constant danger for all Christians. Ananias could have sold the property and told people "I am giving half of what I got for this property to the church." There was no requirement to give it all or give any of it.

{5} When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. {6} Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him. {7} About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. {8} Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?" "Yes," she said, "that is the price." {9} Peter said to her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also." {10} At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband.

The judgment of God in human history is given to us to show the severity of sin. The first two hypocrites were dealt with very severely. Many other hypocrites have been in the church but have not had the same judgment in history (time) as did these two.

We can be thankful that by the grace of God we who sin do not receive instantaneous sentence of judgment. However, we should not presume upon the grace of God, but upon realizing the presence of sin in our lives, confess it, repent from it and (if appropriate) restore things to their proper order.

{11} Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

Our God is an awesome God and we should reverence Him in all situations. We must realize that He holds the power of life and death (both physical and spiritual).

{12} The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade.

The presence and power of God through the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers produce results in the church. Such results confirms the word of God and lives of others are transformed.

{13} No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. {14} Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.

When the church is functioning in power, then people will stand back in awe. As they realize the genuineness and sense the encompassing love of the church, then people are drawn to God and become part of His body.

{15} As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. {16} Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed.

People have great needs. Today they reach out to the government or to the medical profession to provide help. They do not see the church as a source of power to make a difference in their lives except perhaps on the spiritual level. The church is not recognized as a source of physical help or healing. Even those in the church do not see themselves as change agents in the physical world.

{17} Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. {18} They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail.

When the church is seen as a threat to the status quo of a culture, then there will be opposition. As the early church grew stronger, the Jewish religious leaders took action to silence the leaders of the church. The Sadducees were most concerned about what was happening. They were the liberal wing of the Jewish religion and did not believe in angels, miracles, or anything supernatural. Those things happening in the church were in direct contradiction to what they believed. Miracles and healings and evil spirits being cast out were blatant refutations of their doctrine. It is not surprising they were indignant and filled with jealousy. They used their influence to have the apostles arrested and put into prison. The status quo in our nation has shifted during the past 100 years so that we have become more like the Sadducees in that many have a humanistic world view. The true church is viewed by these as a threat to their agenda and we hear their attacks and ridicule almost daily.

{19} But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. {20} "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people the full message of this new life."

Even if we are physically detained, we must not let opposition stop the gospel message. God will provide a way for His will to be accomplished. God had a different outcome in mind than that of the Sadducees so He sent an

angel and simply reversed what they had done. The angel instructed Peter and John to go back to the temple and resume what they had been doing.

{21} At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people. When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin--the full assembly of the elders of Israel--and sent to the jail for the apostles.

{22} But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, {23} "We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside."

God was working through the church to accomplish His agenda and the religious leaders of the day were caught up in their own agenda. They were having meaningless meetings and the church was evangelizing the lost. Could it be that we today have gotten caught up in meetings and other groups are recruiting the lost to join lost causes?

The Jewish leaders had the same problems many have today: they were not aware of what God was doing. They could not discern spiritual things because they were spiritually dead.

{24} On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were puzzled, wondering what would come of this.

{25} Then someone came and said, "Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people."

Those who deny the supernatural and refuse to believe that God still working in the lives of people would be confused by reports of God's intervention in the affairs of men. If they had been open to spiritual truth, then they would have recognized that a significant thing had happened. Instead of them seeking to know God's will in the matter they followed their own agenda.

{26} At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them.

The most important thing to the Jews was to have the meeting and call the apostles to account for disobeying their instructions. In spite of all the evidence, then let the pride of their position overrule logic.

{27} Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. {28} "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name," he said. "Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood."

We can fall into the same trap as the high priest was in. He had such a (in his own mind) lofty position he feared losing what he had. He saw what was happening, not in terms of what new thing God was doing, but in terms of the threat to his position and security. He was more concerned about what the people of Jerusalem would think about their guilt of putting Jesus to death that what God thought about it. Though they stood condemned before God for having sentenced Jesus to death on the cross, they were seemingly unconcerned about it. What did concern them was what people thought about them. They did not want the people of Jerusalem to know the truth that they had sentenced and innocent man to death.

{29} Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than men! {30} The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead--whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. {31} God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. {32} We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

Peter and the others were not concerned about the concerns of the Sanhedrin. The apostles' responsibility was to God and not to man. God had overruled man's decrees by raising Jesus from death and exalting Him to His right hand. The apostles were witnesses of what happened. The apostles had seen the crucifixion, watched Jesus die and then experienced the resurrected Lord. They had been there when Jesus ascended into the heavens and they were there on the Day of Pentecost and experienced the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit. They could not deny the truth of what they knew and they would not be silenced. They did not fail to live up to the words of Jesus when He said, "You shall be My witnesses."

We see evidence of restrictions all around us regarding the expression of our faith. Public events used to be opened with prayer. Our children were exposed to a time of prayer at school. Teachers could read the Bible during their "break time." High school choral groups could sing the classics though many of these were songs of praise to God. But now, all these are not allowed. Despite such "rules," many do what they believe God would have them to do. Some students will meet at school for a time of prayer before classes begin. Some student athletes will observe a prayer time when the game is over. These have boldness to obey. We should also be bold in our neighborhoods, in our organizations and everywhere we go. They could not be silent and we too must not be silent as we see what God is doing in the world and in our lives.

{33} When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death.

Religious fervor that results in fury and death wishes against those who believe something different than that which we believe does not find its origin in God whose character is love and grace.

{34} But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. {35} Then he addressed them: "Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men."

Those who are knowledgeable and are respected have a great responsibility to speak out on issues rather than just follow the crowd. We should always follow the advice of Gamaliel and "consider carefully what we intend to do." We are not to abandon our reasoning only our rationalizations. In fact, God invites us to come reason with

Him. "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD:" (Isa 1:18)

{36} Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. {37} After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered.

The study of history is important for us. We can learn from the examples of other and avoid similar mistakes. However, one cannot assume things will always be as they have been.

{38} Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. {39} But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God."

If God is "doing a new thing in the earth," then the old paradigms will not longer fit what is happening.

{40} His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

Our ideas of justice and what is fair are far different than what happened 2000 years ago. We can perhaps see some hope in the fact the Jewish authorities abandoned the idea to kill the apostle; however, we realize how far they needed progress in the concept of human right when we read that the apostles were beaten because of their beliefs.

{41} The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. {42} Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.

Those who have never had to endure physical suffering for the cause of Christ probably find it difficult to understand the gracious behavior and attitude of the apostles. In fact, today, many Christians are easily offended and will abandon worship attendance at the slightest excuse. Those who have experienced Jesus will not let even real suffering and disgrace deter them from proclaiming the good news.

Chapter 6

{6:1} In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

When we come to God through the way Jesus made for us, we are given a new nature. Our minds, however, are still in tune with the ways of the old nature. The transformation process is just that: it is a process and takes time. In the meantime, we behave less than "Christian" in our interactions with each other. We still have prejudices and greed and the attendant problems these create.

{2} So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.

The church leaders did not preach a sermon and exhort the members to be mature and act maturely toward each other. Mature behavior is not something we do through will power. It comes from maturity and maturity comes from a lifetime of growth in the Lord. Our growth in the Lord is a result of taking up our cross daily and following Jesus. All this takes time.

In the face of the reality of the situation that just telling people to "do what is right" does not get the job done, the leadership instituted a means for the church to function effectively with a division of responsibilities for various duties.

{3} Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them {4} and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

The choice of people to take responsibility for handling the administration of resources that provide for physical needs was left to the congregation. However, their choices were limited to those who were filled with the Spirit of God and demonstrated wisdom. If a person is left to make decisions based on his own leadership, then even something as simply as distributing food can cause problems in dealing with a large group of people.

Pastors of churches find themselves with too little time to be in prayer and the word because they are caught up in the daily operation of the churches they serve.

{5} This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. {6} They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

The complaint arose from the Hellenistic Jews and the entire group chose men who were of that background to distribute the food. This was a gracious move on the part of the Hebraic Jews. In matters of disagreement, someone must take a first step in showing trust of the other person if relationships are to be restored. This works best when the more powerful (because of position, physical strength, intellect, or numbers) initiates the trust relationship.

The commissioning or ordination by laying on of hands was a carry over from the Hebrew culture. Such a ceremony makes a declaration to the people that those thus ordained are supported by the present leadership.

{7} So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

Growth and carrying out the business of the church is best done in an orderly fashion. God is not the

author of confusion.

As the church grew, other people began to investigate what was happening in a more serious way. Those who knew the Old Testament scriptures best (priests) could see the fulfillment of the prophecies in the life of Christ and what was happening with those who followed Him. The evidence was and is convincing for all who will but look.

{8} Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. {9} Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)--Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen, {10} but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.

In addition to the duties of the deacon in attending to the physical needs of the church, Stephen and others had spiritual ministries also. When we impact the world for Christ, opposition will arise. If no one is opposing what we are doing, then we might well wonder if we are doing anything worthwhile that will make a difference in the world for the Kingdom of God.

{11} Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God." {12} So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. {13} They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. {14} For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

We should not underestimate what the world will do to oppose the Kingdom of God. Christians fail to realize that the world does not operate from the same moral standards or sense of fairness we have come to take for granted. Most people have no compunction against lying or bribery or even murder if it will advance their cause.

{15} All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Those in positions of civil or religious authority are not immune to operating from a position of their own self interest. They will ignore the evidence of truth and accept a lie if it suits their purposes.

Chapter 7

{7:1} Then the high priest asked him, "Are these charges true?" {2} To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran. {3} 'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.' {4} "So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. {5} He gave him no inheritance here, not even a foot of ground. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child. {6} God spoke to him in this way: 'Your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. {7} But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,' God said, 'and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.' {8} Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs.

If we are falsely charged by the enemies of Christ, then we must be careful to not use the occasion to defend ourselves but to proclaim the truth of the Good News. Stephen was faithful in taking this approach and started with the call of God to Abraham.

{9} "Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him {10} and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt; so he made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace. {11} "Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our fathers could not find food. {12} When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers on their first visit. {13} On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph's family. {14} After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all. {15} Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our fathers died. {16} Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money.

We can use the historical facts of God's dealing with His people to gain insight to the way God uses individuals to accomplish His will and His work of salvation. All of the history of the nation of Israel pointed to the coming of the Messiah.

{17} "As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt greatly increased. {18} Then another king, who knew nothing about Joseph, became ruler of Egypt. {19} He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our forefathers by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die. {20} "At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child. For three months he was cared for in his father's house. {21} When he was placed outside, Pharaoh's daughter took him and brought him up as her own son. {22} Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action. {23} "When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his fellow Israelites. {24} He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. {25} Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not. {26} The next day Moses came upon two Israelites who were fighting. He tried to reconcile them by saying, 'Men, you are brothers; why do you want to hurt each other?' {27} "But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, 'Who made you ruler and judge over us? {28} Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?'

Historically, the people of Israel had seen and experienced types of saviors in Joseph and in Moses. These point us to Jesus in Whom we find the culmination of God's salvation for all of humanity who will believe. Just as Moses was initially rejected by his people, so Jesus was rejected.

{29} When Moses heard this, he fled to Midian, where he settled as a foreigner and had two sons. {30} "After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. {31} When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to look more closely, he heard the Lord's voice: {32} 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.' Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look. {33} "Then the Lord said to him, 'Take off your sandals; the place where you are standing is holy ground. {34} I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt.' {35} "This is the same Moses whom they had rejected with the words, 'Who made you ruler and judge?' He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. {36} He led them out of Egypt and did wonders and miraculous signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the desert.

The call of Moses to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt was a picture of the spiritual salvation that leads us out of our slavery to sin and into the land of promises of the Kingdom of God.

{37} "This is that Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.' {38} He was in the assembly in the desert, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers; and he received living words to pass on to us. {39} "But our fathers refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. {40} They told Aaron, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt--we don't know what has happened to him!' {41} That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and held a celebration in honor of what their hands had made. {42} But God turned away and gave them over to the worship of the heavenly bodies. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets: "Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the desert, O house of Israel? {43} You have lifted up the shrine of Molech and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship. Therefore I will send you into exile' beyond Babylon.

As we recount historical facts, we must relate these to God's purpose in Jesus Christ. The reason Jesus came is because of our sin. There is ample evidence in the history of Israel to show the need for a Savior. God dealt with the people of Israel with redemptive love and yet they continued to reject His best for them.

{44} "Our forefathers had the tabernacle of the Testimony with them in the desert. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. {45} Having received the tabernacle, our fathers under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, {46} who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. {47} But it was Solomon who built the house for him. {48} "However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says: {49} "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be? {50} Has not my hand made all these things?"

The expression of the dwelling place of God had changed during the history of His dealing with Israel. It was in the Tabernacle, then it was in the Temple, and now it would be in the church through His presence in the heart of every believer.

{51} "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! {52} Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him-- {53} you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it." {54} When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him.

We must be careful to not think ourselves to be better than those who clearly rejected God's will for their lives. With 20-20 hindsight we seen the error of their ways, but we may be making similar errors and bad decisions in our day-to-day decisions. We may be routinely resisting the Holy Spirit as He leads. We may be critical of God's messengers and end us denying Jesus by our behavior. Just as the Jews rejected what Stephen said, we too might take offense at being told about sin in our lives.

{55} But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. {56} "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

We must be open to let God use us in trying situations. If we wish to see Jesus this side of glory, then it will be in the middle of persecution and in the fiery furnace of trials.

{57} At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, {58} dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. {59} While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." {60} Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

It is ultimate pride that causes us to think that we have the ultimate relationship with God. If we hear of someone who has had a deeper experience or a closer walk with God, then we tend to think of that person as weird or a fanatic. We may not stone them with physical rocks, but we slay them with words of criticism.

Chapter 8

{8:1} And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. {2} Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. {3} But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.

Saul was a person of great zeal. Little is ever accomplished without zeal. However, for good to be accomplished, our zeal must be brought under the Lordship of Jesus.

The jealousy inspired hatred of Christians was unleashed with death of Stephen. People tend to be like sharks in that most will not attack until there is blood in the water and then mob psychology takes over.

God used the persecution to spread the gospel beyond Jerusalem. The actions of Saul may have been typical of others who persecuted the church. The effect was to make the Christians "leave the nest" and spread the

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word.

{4} Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. {5} Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. {6} When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. {7} With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. {8} So there was great joy in that city.

We hear the message of the love of God and it sometimes falls on callous ears. There are those in the world who have never heard the gospel message and its impact on them is significant. We cross paths with people routinely who are not familiar with the word and they are in need of a miracle in their lives. Many need deliverance from evil spirits and more need healing from physical and mental problems. Based on our actions, we apparently do not believe God can or will help these.

{9} Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, {10} and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, "This man is the divine power known as the Great Power." {11} They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic.

We tend to dismiss the power of the devil and think it is unsophisticated to think there is anything to witchcraft, sorcery, and other such occult practices. Even the most primitive people recognized there is a spiritual world in which this physical world intersects. Admittedly, some who claim to have such power are charlatans and dupe people for their own personal gain. If there is an absence of power in the church or if the church is not present, then many will be drawn to the occult. People will follow leadership, even if it is bad leadership.

{12} But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. {13} Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.

The people were hungry for spiritual truth and they accepted the gospel message. Evidently, Philip proclaimed the message with "signs and wonders following." If we preach the good news and no one can see any evidence that it makes a difference in the lives of people, then few will believe and come to Jesus.

{14} When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. {15} When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, {16} because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. {17} Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

The leaders of the church (the apostles) had interest and impact on the various local bodies of believers. Each local body did not operate independently of the whole church. They were not congregationalists.

In Acts 2:38, Peter proclaimed, "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." Christians are divided in their interpretation of the sequence of and meaning of what actually happened in the giving of the Holy Spirit in this case. Some say the inner work of grace of having the Holy Spirit had already happened. What was missing was the evidence of any manifestation of power in the lives of the believers. When Peter and John placed their hands on them it was evident to observers that something happened. Others claim that the inner work of having the Holy Spirit had not happened to these people until the apostles laid their hands on them. This was "one of three" evidentiary occurrences of the giving of the Holy Spirit. The first was with the Jews on the Day of Pentecost, this was the second to the Samaritans, and the third was with the house of Cornelius (representing the Gentiles).

{18} When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money {19} and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." {20} Peter answered: "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! {21} You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. {22} Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. {23} For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin."

Some will argue that the conversion of Simon of Samaria was not real and that was why he had such thoughts. New Christians who have truly believed are still influenced by their old way of thinking. This is why Paul urged those in Rome (and us) to be transformed by the renewing of their minds.

The rebuke of Peter to Simon was sharp and swift. Such error needs to be named for what it is so the new Christian can make the right choices.

Peter gave Simon the steps he should take (repent and pray for forgiveness). Peter seemed to be uncertain of the Lord's forgiveness in such matters. John (in his first letter) stated with certainty that forgiveness will be forthcoming when we confess our sins. (1 John 1:9-10)

{24} Then Simon answered, "Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me." {25} When they had testified and proclaimed the word of the Lord, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages.

We can and should enlist others to pray with us regarding sin in our lives. We need to support each other and to hold each other accountable.

Wherever we go we should be proclaiming the gospel to all who will listen.

{26} Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road--the desert road--that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza."

When we finish one mission for the Lord, He has something else for us to do. The work of the Kingdom is never completed -- there is much to do. Some people today are so sophisticated that the idea of angels speaking to people is rejected. Yet, in the early church, we find many instances of angelic appearance. Very specific instructions were given to Philip as to where he was to go; however, he was not told what he was to do at first.

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{27} So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, {28} and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet.

The angel did not tell Philip the target nor the mission but to just “go.” God can use us if we are obedient to His direction. We must be obedient in a timely fashion. If Philip had procrastinated, then he would have missed the person to whom God was sending him.

This person was not necessarily a true eunuch. This term was commonly used to referred to government officials. He was certainly not the keeper of a harem but was the financial head of Ethiopia. He was a person who was proactive and could exert influence. Such people are useful in the kingdom of God if they are led by His Spirit.

{29} The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." {30} Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked.

When Philip moved in closer to the chariot and heard what the man was reading, then the purpose of his mission became clear to him. We need to be “out and about” and observe and listen to what is happening around us. By doing so, we realize opportunities to witness for Jesus. Philip was not intimidated by the political position of this man. Philip was on mission for the King of kings and he acted boldly to make himself available to be a witness for Jesus.

{31} "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. {32} The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth." {33} In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth." {34} The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?"

Many people are still searching for truth and meaning in life. Many are open to the message of the Gospel if we will but share it with them. To do so, we must take initiative and be prepared to tell others about Jesus.

Most assume this man was a black man who was converted to Judaism. He may have been an Israelite who was lived in Ethiopia and worked for the queen. If he was a non-Jew then he would be the first Gentile (by birth) to have accepted the Gospel rather than the family of Cornelius.

{35} Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. {36} As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" {37} {38} And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. (Note: vs 37 -- the requirement to believe with all your heart that Jesus is the Son of God is not in the oldest manuscripts.)

Jesus is revealed in the Old Testament and the Plan of Salvation (trust and obey) is evident there, also. The power to “live the saved life” is fully revealed in Jesus Christ and is accomplished through the new life we have in Him by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

There is no hesitancy on the part of those who truly believe to follow the Lord in baptism. We should have no hesitancy in baptizing any who truly believe and should welcome them into the family of God regardless of their background.

{39} When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. {40} Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

The miraculous taking away of Philip from the presence of the man of Ethiopia was confirmation of the validity of what he had just experienced.

God had other work for Philip to do and empowered him to accomplish it. Because Philip was available to God, because he knew the word of God, and because he had been saved by the grace of God he was able to participate in one of the most unusual witnessing experiences to ever happen. We may not be visited by angels, nor hear audible messages for the Holy Spirit, and we may never be translated from one place to another; however, we can participate in leading a lost person to a saving knowledge of Jesus. In the same way Philip was available, we need to be available for God to use us to share the gospel message.

Chapter 9

{9:1} Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest {2} and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

We must be careful in being closed minded to what God is doing. We may think we know absolutely what is right and what is wrong and have much zeal about what we do. However, if our zeal is misdirected, then we will find ourselves in opposition to God.

{3} As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. {4} He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" {5} "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.

You've heard of people who were so set in their ways that you have to use a 2x4 to get their attention. What happened to Paul on the road to Damascus is an example of God using drastic means to get a person's attention. I wonder how many unusual situations we run into on a daily basis that are simply God trying to get our attention. We think we simply experienced an accident without realizing that God wants us to listen to Him.

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{6} "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." (NIV)

{6} And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do. (KJV)

Saul recognized that something or someone of a far greater power than he had ever before encountered had confronted him. He could have rebelled. He could have remained blind in his rebellion. Instead he submitted to the authority of Jesus and said, "What will you have me to do?"

Some say God will not force anyone to be saved against their will. In Paul's case, he still had a choice of following or rebelling after the encounter. Prior to this incident, Paul had no desire to be a follower of Jesus; however, we see God bringing about circumstances that caused Paul to change his desire (will). Sometime we have situations in our life that seem to be difficult or unfair or just do not make any sense. Could these be that God is trying to get our attention because He had something that we want us to do for Him?

God's instructions to Paul were quite simple: "Arise, go into the city, listen for the next instruction." ARISE or GET UP is a good starting point for most of us. When there is a job to be done the first step in finishing the job it is to simply get up so that we can get started. Our problem in doing things is usually in getting started or just taking that first step. GO INTO THE CITY would say that God's will for our lives can sometimes involve our being in a certain location. This may also tell us that we need to be where the action is to be able to accomplish something for the Kingdom of God. We have a tendency to practice our Christianity in the Church house and fail to take it into the city. LISTEN FOR NEXT INSTRUCTION may be the most difficult part of following God. Once we get into some project, we often will use our own wit to complete the task. We may find ourselves working to accomplish a very worthwhile objective but using unethical means to accomplish it. We need to be in tune with God so that we not only begin well, but also end well.

{7} The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone.

We sometimes see others doing unexplainable things in the name of Christ and we may tend to judge them wrongly. It may be they have heard a call from God to a work that we do not know about. Those who observed Saul's behavior were not capable of judging him in what he did.

{8} Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. {9} For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

Saul was already spiritually blind to what God was doing and then God taught him a lesson regarding blindness by giving him physical blindness for a period of time. We are all blind and need God to send someone to open our eyes to what He is doing in the world.

Fasting was a significant part of the Pharisee's religious life. This practice was used in many occasions of crises in the history of Israel. No doubt, Paul felt that this was a crisis situation in his life that was worth fasting about.

{10} In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered.

{11} The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying.

{12} In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

On the road to Damascus, Jesus directly intervened in the life of Saul. Such occurrences are rare. It is more likely that such intervention happens through other people. Ananias was a follower of Christ and he was used in a special way to accomplish the will of God. It is not often that we distinctly hear the voice of God directing us to do something. Most of the time when God speaks to us it is in ways that are not as clear. In this case, God did not want to leave anything to chance. In fact, God not only prepared Ananias to minister to Saul, he also prepared Saul to receive the ministry. I think that it is important for us to pray that God would prepare the hearts of those to whom we would minister or share the gospel so that it will be received in the proper way.

{13} "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem.

{14} And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name." {15} But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.

{16} I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

Ananias had serious concerns about what God had asked him to do. He knew what Saul had come to do and he was concerned for his safety. But God had already taken care of Saul's hostility and had replaced it with a spirit of submission. Ananias could not imagine why God was interested in helping this man who had done so much damage to the cause of Jesus. If it had been left to Ananias, he would have just left the Saul alone in his blind condition. We need to always be in touch with what God is trying to accomplish and not try to implement our own agenda.

{17} Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord--Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here--has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." {18}

Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, {19} and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.

We need to be obedient to the leading of the Holy Spirit as God does His work through us. As Ananias found, our judgment of whom God can use might be faulty. God had plans to do great things through Saul of Tarsus. God saw the potential in this man and we must view people through the eyes of God and the great potential

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they can have once they have surrendered their wills to the will of God.

{20} At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.

Paul's conversion did not diminish his zeal; however, that zeal was now under the direction of the Holy Spirit. God can use people who are intense. He calls us to be "hot" or "cold" but not "lukewarm."

While the A.V. uses the word "Christ," most translations and the ancient texts use the word "Jesus." It is not a stretch for the Jews to believe that the Messiah was/is the Son of God. However, it was a big step to have them believe that Jesus of Nazareth was God the Son.

{21} All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" {22} Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ.

The change in our behavior after our conversion should be as dramatic as that experienced by Paul. After we have been born of the Spirit, then we began to really understand spiritual truth and we can relate what God has done throughout history to His purposes in Jesus Christ.

{23} After many days had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him, {24} but Saul learned of their plan. Day and night they kept close watch on the city gates in order to kill him. {25} But his followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall.

If we are effective for the Kingdom of God, then someone will begin to oppose us. The actions they take against us may not be as drastic as trying to kill us; however, the ridicule and criticism will emerge to attempt to silence our influence. There is wisdom in knowing how to pick our battles. Some situations call for us to simply withdraw and other would call for us to stand up to the forces of evil. We need to be sensitive to God's leading in these matters.

{26} When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. {27} But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. {28} So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. {29} He talked and debated with the Grecian Jews, but they tried to kill him. {30} When the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

Our reputations have lives of their own. It is almost impossible to overcome the impression someone has of another person. We should guard our reputations so that we build good ones that would keep people open to hear the truth of the gospel. We must also be sensitive to help others whose reputations have been tarnished by their life before Christ.

{31} Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.

The early church had experienced persecution for a time. When the pressure was removed they took advantage of the situation to openly share their faith and thus grew. In other places in the world severe persecutions make it very difficult to share the gospel message with others. In our country, we have very few restrictions and yet we do not use the situation to share the gospel as we should. Consequently, the church in America is decreasing in percentage of population. Could it be that we fear man more than we fear the Lord?

{32} As Peter traveled about the country, he went to visit the saints in Lydda. {33} There he found a man named Aeneas, a paralytic who had been bedridden for eight years. {34} "Aeneas," Peter said to him, "Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and take care of your mat." Immediately Aeneas got up. {35} All those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord. {36} In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which, when translated, is Dorcas), who was always doing good and helping the poor. {37} About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. {38} Lydda was near Joppa; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, "Please come at once!" {39} Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them. {40} Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up. {41} He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called the believers and the widows and presented her to them alive. {42} This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord.

God blessed the ministry of the early church with miracles that confirmed the messages preached. Peter was bold in the faith and stepped out in faith that Jesus would do what He said He would. People were healed and the dead were raised. Since God is the same yesterday and forever, then why are we not seeing the same kinds of confirmation of the gospel message today? God hasn't changed. Maybe the problem is lack of boldness to act on the literal word of God.

Many doubter are whispering in our ears: "Miracles aren't needed any longer since we have the written word of God." "God doesn't heal except through the medical profession." "They didn't have all the medicines we have today."

Many people believed when the word was proclaimed with power and the church grew greatly. Today, the church is not growing greatly (or at all in some areas) because people do not see that it can provide answers or solutions to their needs. When those in church leadership deny the power of God, then we cannot expect anything different from what we are seeing.

{43} Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon.

God has seasons of planting and reaping. The initial work Peter did in the area was yielding results and
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Peter stayed there waiting for God's next move.

Chapter 10

{10:1} At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. {2} He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.

Evidence abounds for all who will see that God is. This Roman soldier had faith in God and recognized that God is generous (full of grace). We will become and behave like that in which we believe. Cornelius acted on his faith by helping people in need. He also saw the need for regular communication with God.

{3} One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!" {4} Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked. The angel answered, "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God.

The Jews had regular prescribed times of prayer throughout the day. Apparently Cornelius had adopted this same practice. Many religions of the world have frequent prayer times for their followers. We who should know God best because of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives seem to neglect prayer more than those who are far from God. This does not seem right.

Not only does God exist (He is), He is also a rewarder of those who seek Him. God had a significant blessing for Cornelius and his family and He sent an angel to announce it. Cornelius had given to the poor and God is concerned about the poor. Therefore, if we give to the poor, then we are really giving to God. We cannot out give God.

{5} Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. {6} He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea." {7} When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. {8} He told them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

Those who are close to God will recognize His directions and commands and act upon what He says. The need to be vigilant and attentive to what God wants us to do is ever present. We are not likely to have an angel visit us with a message such a Cornelius did. However, God does have tasks he wants us to do and these are communicated to us in many ways. You may hear of a need in your neighborhood or someone may ask you to get involved in a particular ministry. Such information may be God directing you to a work of ministry.

{9} About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. {10} He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance.

God had already prepared the heart of the one who needed salvation and now He was about to prepare the heart of one who had already been saved. Peter was physically hungry and wanted a meal. When we get very hungry or thirsty, then we become very focused and can think of nothing else. God desires for us to have a hunger for lost souls and to want to see them saved as a priority in what we do.

{11} He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. {12} It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air.

God's plan of salvation is intended for all mankind. The diversity of animals in the sheet was representative of the diversity of mankind and God wants to save all who will believe regardless of their present status. Some may act like animals and some may be mean as snakes or be a flighty as birds but God can save them all. However, faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. Someone must tell them what God has done for them in Jesus Christ.

{13} Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." {14} "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." {15} The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

Jesus had already told the disciples to take the gospel to ends of the earth. All mankind was to hear the message. We tend to hear what we want to hear and ignore the rest. Peter had a paradigm of who make up the people of God and practically everyone in that group was Jewish. Everyone else was deemed unclean. God sees the end results and He knows that all are unclean until they have been washed in the blood of the Lamb.

{16} This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

God needed to speak to Cornelius but once and he obeyed immediately. It took three times to get the attention of Simon Peter. Many people have been prepared to hear and accept the gospel message. They have crises in their lives and they are open to salvation. The problem is that no one comes to them to share the story of Jesus and His love. The saints may be on the roof asleep waiting to be fed. While Peter had a vision many Christians today are simply sitting in a daze in the pews of our churches soaking up watered down sermons about feeling good about themselves. Consequently, they are undernourished but bloated with too much water and have no sense of hunger for the meat of God's word.

{17} While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. {18} They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

God is at work to bring people and events together so that His purposes can be accomplished. Many situations we think are just "coincidental" have been designed by God.

{19} While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. {20} So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."

When we are faced with situations which require action on our part that is contrary to that which we think is right, then we need a word from God to assure us as we venture into new territory.

{21} Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?" {22} The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say."

Sometimes the details of what God is doing and what He wants us to do must come from another person. We need to exercise some caution and not believe everyone who says he has a message from God. However, we can have assurance based on how God has been dealing with us leading up to that point.

{23} Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests. The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa went along.

Obedience to what God has called us to do is to simply take the first step and do as much as we know to do. Many times we are only given enough light to take one step at a time.

We cannot know if Peter was anticipating the need for witnesses as to what God would do or that he wanted some traveling companions. In either case it was good to have some brothers in the Lord go with him.

{24} The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends.

When God impacts our lives we can't keep it to ourselves. Cornelius was already being a witness.

{25} As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. {26} But Peter made him get up. "Stand up," he said, "I am only a man myself."

Cornelius had no way of knowing what was accepted protocol in approaching Christian leaders. The only way he knew to approach people of great authority was to bow down. We tend to forget that we in the church have grown to know what is appropriate in our dealing with each other. We tend to speak a certain jargon and use terms that are not familiar to those who have had little or no exposure to the church. We need to be sensitive to the needs of people who are new in the faith.

Peter was careful to not let himself be caught up in pride because of what God was doing through him. We also must guard against taking credit for what God is doing.

{27} Talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. {28} He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. {29} So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?"

When God is doing a new thing, we must be willing to toss out the manmade rules and taboos so we can follow God. God is not limited by the artificial barriers we have erected for ourselves.

{30} Cornelius answered: "Four days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me {31} and said, 'Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. {32} Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.' {33} So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us."

Cornelius remembered and related the details of what happened that day when God interjected Himself into his life. The events surrounding our conversion should be indelibly engraved in our memory. If your conversion didn't make an impression on you, then find out why.

{34} Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism {35} but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.

We still have trouble with the concept that God does not show favoritism. If others are not as we are, then we may think God doesn't care as much for them as He does for us and those who are similar to us. This is a case of imputing our motives and thoughts to God. The challenge is for us to adopt God's thoughts as our own.

{36} You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.

{37} You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached-- {38} how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

Jesus was well known through that region and the news of the crucifixion, resurrection and the growth of the church was common knowledge. Most people knew about it from what they had heard. Though many (perhaps all) in that region had heard, not all responded as Cornelius did. It is not enough to just know the facts.

{39} "We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree,

{40} but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. {41} He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen--by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.

While many had heard about Jesus, the word of one who had been an eye witness to what had happened would be powerful. We who have encountered the Living God and have been born of the Spirit have a witness we must share with others.

{42} He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. {43} All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Peter had learned much since the Day of Pentecost and could relate the happening of recent times to prophecies of the Old Testament. He was prepared to present convincing proof from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Messiah.

{44} While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.

God doesn't need much preaching to bring people to a point of conviction and conversion.

{45} The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. {46} For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, {47} "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." {48} So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

Though we may know the truth that God is not a respecter of persons, we may still be amazed when He blesses others in the same way He blesses us. The impact of the presence of God on a person's life should be such that other believers can know that God is with them.

Question: If "tongues" manifested on the Day of Pentecost were simply languages of the day for the benefit of the visitors in Jerusalem, then why were they manifested in the household of Cornelius?

Chapter 11

{11:1} The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. {2} So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him {3} and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them."

Apparently, the whole story didn't make it back to Jerusalem -- just the part of Peter telling Gentiles the Gospel and socializing with them. Even today, change in the way we do things is difficult to implement. People develop a set of beliefs which may not be based on the total truth. We are to know the full counsel of God and not just build our paradigm from a few selected passages of Scripture.

{4} Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened: {5} "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. {6} I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles, and birds of the air. {7} Then I heard a voice telling me, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.' {8} "I replied, 'Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' {9} "The voice spoke from heaven a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.' {10} This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again. {11} "Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. {12} The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man's house. {13} He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. {14} He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.'

Peter learned early the need to be ready to give an account why things were as they were. We need to be prepared for whatever God calls us to do. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would come to our assistance and would bring to mind things we had experienced or read. However, if we do not experience anything or if we are not reading the word of God, then how can we expect the Holy Spirit to bring such things to our mind.

{15} "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. {16} Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' {17} So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?"

We need to be able to relate our experiences to the word of God so we can put them in proper perspective. Many complain that to walk in faith they have to abandon logic. This is not so. Peter observed, related it to what he knew to be the truth (the words of Jesus) and then came to a very logical conclusion. Peter's defense was simple, "What was I to do, stand in God's way?" That is really the way it is with all significant things that happen in the salvation experience. They are not things we accomplish but simply what God is doing. He may use us to plant a seed or water an idea, but God is always responsible for and should get the credit for the increase.

{18} When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."

What could they say? What had happened at the home of Cornelius was in agreement with the character of Jesus and the love He taught. However, what had happened was not in line with their normal way of thinking. The rest of the church leadership exercised reasoning and followed what God was doing rather than sticking to their old way of thinking. When we are confronted with a choice of tradition versus the way Jesus would do something, then we must decide who is Lord of our lives. Many of our traditional churches resist any changes in what they have been doing for the past 100 years and ignore what God did nearly 2000 years ago.

{19} Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. {20} Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.

The evangelistic work in Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch may have been coincidental with the work Philip did in Samaria. It may have preceded the experience of Cornelius. The mind set of many in the early church was to share the message of salvation with only the Jews. Some think that the Greeks mentioned here were Jews who spoke Greek (Hellenist Jews). If these were truly Gentiles, then we can conclude that God was at work in several areas to bring the message to all the world regardless of the prejudices and paradigms of the early church.

{21} The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. {22} News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. {23} When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.

Many people are starved for spiritual truth and will seize upon it when someone share the good news with them. Many areas of our nation are in spiritual darkness and many who have their names on the roles of church

need help. It took persecution in Jerusalem to get the church to go out and share the Gospel with others. What will it take for us?

As new churches came into being, the church at Jerusalem had a sense of responsibility to nurture the new congregations. Just as Barnabas encouraged those at Antioch, we need to be about the business of encouraging others in their faith walk.

{24} He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

Sometimes the work of God in an area can be greatly enhanced by the help of a dynamic person being brought in to help.

{25} Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, {26} and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

As the work of the church grows, additional leadership is needed. Those who try to do everything without the help of others will quickly wear out. Barnabas remembered the bold and daring new convert whom he had helped several years before in Jerusalem and saw that the kind of enthusiasm and knowledge of the word of God he has seen in Paul was what was needed to help this new church. He returned with Paul and the two of them established a teaching ministry in addition to the evangelism that was going on in the area. Teaching and evangelism are needed for any church to maintain its vigor and health and continue to grow.

Antioch was a significant city of the Roman empire and the influence of the church was felt there. In fact, the notice of what God was doing there led to the people of the area giving a label to the followers of Jesus for it was there that they were first called Christians. The church at Antioch was not just a group of Jews that had started to follow another leader, but included Greeks and Romans as well. A new name was given to those who followed the Christ

{27} During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. {28} One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.)

{29} The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. {30} This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

God provides His church with information they need to grow and thrive and to help with other parts of the Body of Christ. When we are informed of a need, then we should consider that call to help and an opportunity to minister. Elements of teamwork and the spirit of interdependence was at work in this church. Early in their history, they needed spiritual assistance in the form of someone the church at Jerusalem to come and provide support and encouragement. Now it was their turn to help with the physical needs of the church at Jerusalem during the famine and persecution occurring there.

Being concerned about the well being of others is truly a sign of love. It is part of what being a Christian is about. The fact that the group in Antioch recognized they were part of the same group of people that made up the church at Jerusalem even though one group was a mixture of Jews and Gentiles and the other group was mainly (all) Jews. They recognized that God's plan is inclusive for all people and that working together we can see the objective of taking the good news to everyone become a reality.

Aside: the concept of accountability was at work in the early church. The disciples did not send money by just one person. When two are entrusted with a responsibility, then they can provide a witness for each other that all was done in proper order.

Chapter 12

{12:1} It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. {2} He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword.

The enemies of the Cross did not and have not given up their fight to stop what God is trying to do. After an initial persecution in which the church was scattered to many places in that part of the world there was a time of relative peace. The followers of Jesus shared their faith and the church grew. The news of this growth eventually reached the Jewish leaders who evidently incited the Roman officials to take action against the church leaders.

{3} When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

{4} After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover.

Evidently Herod thought that pleasing the Jewish leaders would make his job easier. Rather than doing what was right or fair, he thought primarily about himself and what would be good for himself.

Many times the price of leadership is persecution by the opposition. The thinking of the way of the world is that "if we kill the leaders, then the movement will die." Just the opposite usually happens when the movement is based on sound fundamental principles of righteousness and justice.

{5} So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. {6} The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance.

In the physical realm, the church may often find itself unable to do anything. They had no weapons of the world and if they had attempted to rescue Peter, the soldiers would have killed him immediately. The weapons of

warfare the church has are spiritual and they are strong and effective to fight the real battle against powers and principalities in the spiritual realm.

{7} Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists. {8} Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him. {9} Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. {10} They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

Intervention of God through visual appearances of angels are rare. However, God does provide protection for us from the everyday dangers we encounter. The dramatic rescue of Peter helps to build our faith by strong evidence of what God is continually doing for us.

We may not be arrested and bound by chains and prison walls, but we can find ourselves trapped in other things which keep us from the work of the Kingdom of God. We need deliverance from the affairs of this life and as we awaken out of our sleep we can see the "chains" that bind us fall off. As we are freed from the fetters that bind us to the false security systems of the world, we then must follow the messenger (or message) God send to us to be free of the broader prison of a world mind set that is all around us.

{11} Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating."

As God works to free us from the entrapments of this life, we may not realize what is happened until we look back on the events and put them into perspective. It is in examining things that happen to us that we can see the work of God in our lives.

{12} When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying.

When we are freed from the hindrances of the world, then we should seek out the fellowship and support of believers. The church can influence what happens in a secular world by prayer. We have failed to exercise our influence on the world and the world is decaying and degrading.

{13} Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. {14} When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!" {15} "You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel." {16} But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished.

We are seldom prepared for the answers to prayer that God gives to us. He does not always answer in the same ways as before. Though the believers were praying for God save Peter from the situation, they were not anticipating such a miraculous answer. We must be careful to not limit God by our lack of belief.

{17} Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the brothers about this," he said, and then he left for another place. {18} In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter.

When we are in confrontation with the civil authorities, we need to be very wise in selecting the timing and the place of confrontation. A cooling off period is sometimes needed so that rampant emotions can have a chance to calm down.

{19} After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed. Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there a while.

If the church is unprepared for God's supernatural intervention, the world is even less so. The disappearance of Peter was impossible to explain from their limited view point. The only explanation for them was that the guards were at fault and the pride typical of worldly leaders resulted in the death of the guards.

{20} He had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. Having secured the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace, because they depended on the king's country for their food supply.

In the operation of civil governments one can expect controversy among various factions since all parties are motivated by selfish motives. Blastus fulfilled the role of a lobbyist in the court of Herod.

{21} On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people.

Herod dressed in his finery for an outward show of how powerful he was. This was an attempt to intimidate any opposition he might have. This is the way of the world.

{22} They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man."

The outward show of pomp had its desired effect. The people were impressed. This same phenomenon works today in that most of us are greatly influenced by appearances and do not look beyond the outward show to see if any substance is beneath the surface.

{23} Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.

We can see from this judgment in history what God thinks of such prideful behavior. God makes examples of people so that others may learn from the consequences of their behavior. Not many who are motivated by pride seem to have learned anything from what happened to Herod.

{24} But the word of God continued to increase and spread. {25} When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark.

God had and has an agenda that will be fulfilled. The opposition of the enemy will be dealt with in God's own time. When the end of the story is manifest in time, then we shall see that the victory belongs to Jesus.

Chapter 13

The early church was given a commission by Jesus to take this Good News to all the world. What happened was that they took the message to Jerusalem. After the persecution started, they took the message to wherever they were forced to go, usually, sharing it only with other Jews. The sharing of the Gospel was on a fairly casual basis in most cases. I don't believe that this was exactly what Jesus had in mind when He gave the Great Commission to the church. I believe that He wanted the word to go out in a more deliberate, even planned, fashion. There is a word that people are starting to use to describe this type of planned, deliberate initiative and that word is "proactive." The early spread of the Gospel was mainly a "reactive" response to the circumstances in which they found themselves.

In the church at Antioch, things began to change. This group of Christians began to take some action. Under the leadership of Barnabas, they brought in some help to teach those that had become Christians. Barnabas traveled to Tarsus and brought Paul back with him. Not only did this group study the Word of God, but they also prayed and fasted. How did they know to pray and fast? Those actions were a result of studying the Scriptures. They wanted God's direction as to what they should be doing as a church so that they would be doing His will. You might ask why they didn't just look in the last chapter of Matthew's Gospel and they could see that it was clearly stated. The reason they didn't was because Matthew had not yet written the account and even if he had, it would not have been available to everyone. In response to their seeking to know the will of God, they were given an answer.

{13:1} In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. {2} 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."

Often we have a tendency to "do something" without first hearing a word from God. So many times we are uncertain as to what we should do in specific matters related to the will of God and how we will impact the Kingdom of God. All too often we do something in spite of our uncertainty without spending the time to seek the will of God. If we have not had a clear word from God, then we should continue to "wait upon the Lord" rather than act out of our own limited wisdom. When God does reveal His will, then what we do will be in His power and we will know the meaning of "they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." We can learn a lot from the church at Antioch of Syria. The church at Antioch drew close to God through worship and fasting. Such activities, which are born of humility, cause us to be open to what God would have us do. If we are initiating our own agenda and are just being busy, then we may not be listening to hear the voice of God.

{3} So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. {4} The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus.

Even when we have been given a word from God regarding what we are to do, we can not abandon drawing near to God. As God begins to work among us, the more we need to be about prayer and fasting. As God calls us to a ministry, He will also direct where we should go and when.

{5} When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper.

Paul's ministry to the Gentile was always preceded by first sharing the good news with the Jews. The Jews should have had the background to understand what God was doing and to believe. Another good reason to approach the Jews first was that they were expecting the Messiah. The problem was that they had a preconceived idea of what a Messiah was to do and Jesus did not fit the little box they had made for Him.

John (Mark) was a nephew of Barnabas. Scriptures do not record that the Holy Spirit instructed them to take John with them.

{6} They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, {7} who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. {8} But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith.

Many people desire to hear the gospel and respond to but just do not know how. We who have the knowledge of the gospel should make it available by sharing our faith with all who will listen.

We should not be surprised to find opposition to the gospel. Sometimes this opposition is based on erroneous spiritual belief and at other times it is based purely on greed or a desire for power.

{9} Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, {10} "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? {11} Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind, and for a time you will be unable to see the light of the sun." Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. {12} When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.

Paul proclaimed the gospel but not in words only. He proclaimed it with demonstration of the Holy Spirit

and power. Most proclamation today is in words only. We see many with a form of Godliness but so often they deny the power of Godliness.

Paul did not attempt to fit into the world system of things but openly confronted error when he found it. Today, we seldom call sin what it is. We fail to recognize the influence of the devil and rarely rebuke another person or group who opposes the advance of the Kingdom of God. Consequently, few are amazed at the teaching about the Lord.

{13} From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem.

When Paul and Barnabus had accomplished the work they came to do, they then moved on to new territory. We may tend to become overly comfortable in a place and fail to move on with God to new opportunities of service.

{14} From Perga they went on to Pisidian Antioch. On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and sat down. {15} After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue rulers sent word to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak."

From the wording "they ... sat down" and the invitation of the synagogue rulers for them to speak, we might conclude that Paul and Barnabus let it be known they had a message to share with the people. They possibly sat down in the seat of the rabbis. The lesson for us is that we must be bold with the gospel message and not hold back just hoping someone will ask us to say something.

{16} Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said: "Men of Israel and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me!"

When we are presented with an opportunity to share the good news about Jesus, we must not hold back in some sort of false humility.

{17} The God of the people of Israel chose our fathers; he made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt, with mighty power he led them out of that country, {18} he endured their conduct for about forty years in the desert, {19} he overthrew seven nations in Canaan and gave their land to his people as their inheritance. {20} All this took about 450 years. "After this, God gave them judges until the time of Samuel the prophet. {21} Then the people asked for a king, and he gave them Saul son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin, who ruled forty years. {22} After removing Saul, he made David their king. He testified concerning him: 'I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.' {23} "From this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, as he promised.

The culmination of all that God was doing in calling Abraham is seen in Jesus Christ. God's Plan of Salvation for mankind was revealed in His relationship with Abraham and his descendants and by the messages of God's prophets over the course of nearly two thousand years of their history. We see Jesus in the miraculous birth of Abraham's son Isaac, in the willingness of Isaac to be offered as a sacrifice, in the Passover lamb, in the flinty rock in the wilderness which yielded life-giving water after it was struck, in the manna, and in many other places. We find Him in the prophecies and the psalms. All pointed forward to Jesus. Our lives should be so ordered that we point others to Jesus, the Savior and Lord.

{24} Before the coming of Jesus, John preached repentance and baptism to all the people of Israel. {25} As John was completing his work, he said: 'Who do you think I am? I am not that one. No, but he is coming after me, whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.'

When we attempt to convince someone of a truth, we must start with where they are in their belief and lead them to the light of what God is doing. This can be done in a reasonable and logical way. We should give witness to what God has done in the lives of others and our own life.

{26} "Brothers, children of Abraham, and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent.

The gospel message must find a personal application in the lives of those who hear it. We start with what God has done in the past and with what God has done with others. However, we must bring people to face the reality that God is also dealing with them.

{27} The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. {28} Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed.

{29} When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb.

There are so many points of fulfillment of specific prophecy associated with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, that only a fool would think that it was just coincidence. Even though the Jews who were in Jerusalem had heard the reading of the Scriptures every Sabbath, they could not or would not connect the message in the Scripture with the message that was evident in the life of Jesus and they had rejected him in direct fulfillment of the very prophecies they had been reading. We need to guard ourselves from hearing the Word of God and not asking ourselves how it applies directly to our lives. Even though the Jews in Jerusalem had rejected Jesus they could not overrule what God was doing in bringing salvation to mankind. Not everyone accepts what God does for them. In fact, many will oppose God. This is not a surprise to God. One of the most convincing arguments of the truth of God's word is the prophecies that have already been fulfilled. We can use examples of fulfilled prophecies to erase doubt in those who are searching for truth.

{30} But God raised him from the dead, {31} and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people.

The most convincing proof of the authenticity of Jesus being God's true way of salvation is the resurrection. Philosopher and leaders have been many throughout history and all have died. Only Jesus rose from death as convincing proof that He is the Son of God.

{32} "We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers {33} he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it

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is written in the second Psalm: "You are my Son; today I have become your Father." {34} The fact that God raised him from the dead, never to decay, is stated in these words: "I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David." {35} So it is stated elsewhere: "You will not let your Holy One see decay." {36} "For when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers and his body decayed. {37} But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay.

As we share the gospel with others, it is not enough to just present the facts. We need to be convincing by removing any doubt. Paul used several examples of Scripture to convince his listeners. {38} "Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. {39} Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses.

The message must be personalized for the hearer. Too often, the gospel is presented as a "set of facts" and the listener is not challenged to think of its application to himself. The conclusion of Paul's arguments was a direct outcome of the alignment of the events of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus with the Old Testament. God's promise of salvation was through Jesus. Our justification before God which could not be achieved by the keeping of the Law of Moses was accomplished in our accepting, by faith, what God had provided for us in Christ.

{40} Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you: {41} "Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you."

Not only is there benefit to all who accept the gospel and trust in Jesus, there are also consequences for all who reject Him. Gaining the positive and avoiding the negative are motivators.

{42} As Paul and Barnabas were leaving the synagogue, the people invited them to speak further about these things on the next Sabbath. {43} When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God. {44} On the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.

The response of those who heard the message was that they wanted to hear more and they urged Paul and Barnabas to return the next Sabbath. When they met the next week the whole town turned out to hear the message. The word had gotten around and people wanted to know more about this Good News. Paul's preaching of the Gospel must have been like a breath of fresh air compared to the legalism of the Jews. The Gospel message is its own best advertisement.

Many are still eager to hear God's Plan of Salvation. We tend to not share the gospel with people since we think they have already heard the message. Some who have attended church all their lives have never really heard the gospel message. Others have not attended church and do not listen to religious broadcasts and they certainly don't know of the love of God in Christ Jesus. If we start sharing our faith, then we too might draw a crowd.

{45} When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying. {46} Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles.

We can expect opposition when we are making an impact on lives of people. The opposition may come from a dead religious establishment or from the promoters of humanism (sometimes these are the same).

Paul did not pull any punches in his message. He did not water it down to make it socially acceptable. So many people today attend churches and they have never heard the good news that Jesus paid our sin debt and we have a way to come to the Father. The only thing many have heard is a social gospel. Evidence of the lack of the whole truth being proclaimed was seen several years when Jimmy Carter was campaigning for president. He described himself as a "born-again" Christian. Confusion abounded even among "religious" people regarding the meaning of being born again. The truth is that the social gospel is nothing more than humanism with a clerical collar. If the central theme of our message is not Jesus Christ, then we have missed the point.

{47} For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth." {48} When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. {49} The word of the Lord spread through the whole region.

The commission Paul recited is from Isaiah 49:6. This passage is obvious Messianic in that Jesus is truly the Light of the World. However, as we are in Christ and being obedient to Him — to that extent — and to that extent only does the Messianic prophecies apply to us. Paul was being the light to the Gentiles. In fact, that light was to shine through Paul. Today that Light of the World needs to shine through us.

God was in the process of including all the nations of the earth into His salvation. Those who believed were ordained to eternal life. The structure of the Greek sentence says "And hearing the Gentiles rejoiced ... and believed, all were appointed to life eternal." This rendering is consistent with other passages in the Bible regarding the availability of salvation to all who believe. The claim that God has chosen some for salvation and some are predestined to damnation is not consistent with many passages in the Bible.

The availability of the salvation of God to ALL that will believe was certainly good news to the people. There was also a realization by the people that they had responsibility in this matter to make a choice. The logic of Someone paying the penalty for our sins was reasonable to those that heard the message. The sufficiency of Jesus to be the One to pay the price was validated in His resurrection from death. These events that Paul presented were directly related to promises that had been recorded thousands of years before and showed the grand design and significance of what had occurred. The natural outcome of all these things is to respond to God's provision for the

forgiveness of our sins and to accept His promise of New Life in Christ.

No wonder the Gentiles were glad. These people were concerned about their eternal destiny. The answers to their questions were in the message from Paul. The Gospel really is good news to those who are wise, to those who realize that man is more than a highly developed animal.

{50} But the Jews incited the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city. They stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region. {51} So they shook the dust from their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium. {52} And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

When religious establishment leaders team up with civil authorities then we have a formula for squelching the truth and preventing any change. We wonder why people are so petty. The Jewish leaders were not content to allow their power base to be eroded and they took action. Leadership in dead churches will act in the same way when the Spirit of the Lord is moving in some of the congregation. Any who would prevent the preaching of the Gospel (by substituting a humanistic agenda and message) should heed the words of Paul to the Jews. In rejecting the truth of what is doing, they judge themselves to be unworthy of everlasting life. This is the way it works: God gives us every opportunity and we choose to either do good or evil, to walk the high road or the low road, to have life or death.

Chapter 14

{14:1} At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed. {2} But the Jews who refused to believe stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers.

Whatever God does, He does it well. God wants us to be effective in our work of the ministry. God wants us to be fruitful in addition to being faithful. However, not all people will respond positively to the Gospel message.

{3} So Paul and Barnabas spent considerable time there, speaking boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to do miraculous signs and wonders.

Paul and Barnabas did not give up in the face of opposition but carried out what God had sent them to do. God empowered their ministry and confirmed His word to the people who heard. We, too, must not be discouraged when others disagree but continue in the work of the Kingdom so that God can do His work through us.

{4} The people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles. {5} There was a plot afoot among the Gentiles and Jews, together with their leaders, to mistreat them and stone them. {6} But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country. {7} where they continued to preach the good news.

Eventually, those who continue to rebel against God will resort to physical violence. If their "war of words" is not successful, they will use other means to control and enslave others. We see this behavior in Islamic countries and in other areas where people are literally tortured and killed for believing in Jesus. When such is the case, then the work must move on to other areas.

{8} In Lystra there sat a man crippled in his feet, who was lame from birth and had never walked. {9} He listened to Paul as he was speaking. Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed {10} and called out, "Stand up on your feet!" At that, the man jumped up and began to walk.

All of us suffer from a birth defect (the Adamic nature) and we are limited in our ability to function as God would have us to live because of it. Everyone in the crowd had needs that could be met by Jesus, but this one man was truly listening. He realized his need and was willing to literally step out in faith.

As Paul observed the man, he noticed something about him, which Luke describes as "faith." Many times when you are talking to people you can tell how they are responding. Paul sensed that this person was believing the message. So he did something very bold in that he stopped his preaching and called out to the man telling him to stand up. Then the amazing happened. The man jumped up and walked around.

You may have heard of people being healed. You may have experienced healing yourself because someone prayed for you. You may have prayed for others and witnessed healing for them. Anytime we speak of healing today the question usually arises: Does God still heal? Yes, but not everyone whom we pray for is healed. Do miracles still happen? Yes, but it is not an everyday occurrence. Is salvation for the soul only or does it include wholeness for our bodies? God's goodness and grace extends to our entire being, yet at times we do get hurt and we do get sick. None of us understand why the results of one situation is so different from what we see happen in another situation. Yet, because I know that God does still heal and miracle still happen and that God's grace is for our entire being, I ask for healing for myself and for others.

{11} When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" {12} Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker. {13} The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them.

If people do not know the truth about the Living God, then they will invent explanation for phenomena they observe. The people had never seen anything such as this before. They had not witnessed obvious supernatural power happening at the command of a person. To them, the only obvious conclusion was that Paul and Barnabas

were gods in human form. This was a polytheistic society in that they had many gods that they worshiped. The chief god was named Jupiter and his messenger was Mercury. So they decided that Barnabas was Jupiter and that Paul was Mercury since he did most of the speaking.

There were legends among the pagans that sometimes their gods would come to be among the people disguised as humans and would reward those people who were hospitable to them. These folks were not going to take any chances. They were going to make a sacrificial offering to Barnabas and Paul.

{14} But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they tore their clothes and rushed out into the crowd, shouting: {15} "Men, why are you doing this? We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and sea and everything in them. {16} In the past, he let all nations go their own way. {17} Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy." {18} Even with these words, they had difficulty keeping the crowd from sacrificing to them.

When the man was healed the people got all excited and they started talking among themselves in their native language which Paul and Barnabas could not understand. They did not realize what the people were preparing to do. However, when they saw the oxen being brought in all decorated for sacrifice, they figured out what was happening and they took immediate action to stop it. Paul and Barnabas knew that the healing had come from God's power and not their own; however, the tendency of most people is to relate to what they see and never look beyond the appearance of things.

This error of the people provided another opportunity for Paul and Barnabas to tell the people more about the true and living God. They started out by assuring the people that they were human being no different from the people of Lystra. This is important because some people might have the tendency to believe that God only saves and empowers a certain select group of people. The Good News is that all may come to God through Jesus Christ. The second point that Paul and Barnabas made was that the religious exercises that they were going through were pointless and had no value since there is only one true God. The third point is that they were now living in a new time when it would no longer be acceptable for people to do what was right in their own sight having only the evidence of the creation to point them toward God. Now we have the message and revelation of God in Jesus Christ that is clear and all can know the nature of God and can turn to Him through Jesus.

{19} Then some Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won the crowd over. They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. {20} But after the disciples had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas left for Derbe.

Mass rallies and mob psychology may be cousins. Just days earlier the people were thinking Barnabas and Paul were God and then they tried to kill Paul. We must not be misled by the "support" and response that comes from a crowd of people. Until there is an individual and personal commitment, then any change must be viewed as temporary and passing.

Paul may have died from the stoning -- he later wrote about being caught up to the third heaven. If he was killed, then God raised him from death to complete the work He had for Paul to do. When we are in God's will, we need not fear even death.

{21} They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, {22} strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said.

At the very least, God's healing hand was upon Paul. After having been stoned, one would need a miraculous recovery to be able to travel the next day. In spite of rejection by some, we must continue on to do the work to which God has called us. There will be hardships even (or especially) when we are in the center of God's will.

{23} Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust. {24} After going through Pisidia, they came into Pamphylia, {25} and when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. {26} From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. {27} On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. {28} And they stayed there a long time with the disciples.

The work of establishing local churches needs to continue even as in the days of Paul and Barnabas. There are many areas in our nations where the presence of the church is weak or non-existent.

Most of the church at Antioch did not go out to set up church but they supported the work with their resource and will prayer and fasting. Because they were a part of what God was doing, they could enter into the celebration of what God had accomplished.

Chapter 15

I remember growing up in a time when some people thought that a person could not be a Christian and go to the movie theater, that Christian women could not wear makeup or have short hair, that being saved was a result of what we do and don't do. I guess that there are still a lot of people who believe those sort of ideas. The concept of what is "acceptable moral behavior" has changed considerably in the last 40 years, but many still have the idea

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that salvation is something that we earn by living a good moral life (the definition of which changes each year), being fair with other people (however you define that) and believing that there is a God (or as some are likely to state it, "a higher power"). Such ideas are completely contrary to the Gospel message and are very much like the error that some Jewish Christians tried to interject into the practice of the early church.

{15:1} Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." {2} This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. {3} The church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad.

Old habits are hard to break and old paradigms (the way we think about things) are even harder to get rid of. People have a lot of silly notions about how things work and it is difficult to avoid thinking in certain ways about things once they have been put into your mind, especially when these ideas are introduced at an early age. For example, how many of you could break a mirror and NOT think about seven years of bad luck? What about walking under a ladder? Spilling salt? Black cats? Just the other day I overheard an older man say something about hurricanes bringing in cold weather. This is nonsense, but many people give credibility to such ideas by letting them influence what they do.

Those Jewish Christians that had been raised in a very orthodox environment (Pharisees) were taught from the earliest times about the origin of circumcision and how important it was for the Jews. They could not imagine anyone being pleasing to God that had not been circumcised. Now I believe that all the laws of Moses had good reasons for being given to the people. Many of the health practices are right in line with what modern day medicine has discovered. However, to make these a requirement for salvation misses the point of the grace of God and the fact that salvation is so precious that it cannot be earned.

Paul and Barnabas recognized the error of the teaching and they saw that it would be a serious impediment to the spread of the Gospel. If the Jewish laws were imposed on the grace of God, then Christianity would be nothing more than a sect of Judaism. They wasted no time in refuting the teaching. Of course, they did not change the minds of those that were teaching the error and it became necessary to get a ruling from the church leaders in Jerusalem.

As Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem, they used the opportunity to share what God was doing among the Gentiles as a result of the missionary trip they had taken.

{4} When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. {5} Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses."

As they shared the message of what God was doing through their ministry -- Gentiles were being added to the church, the Pharisees in the church challenged the authenticity of what had been happening since these Gentiles had not been circumcised nor were they following the law of Moses. This controversy was the very reason that Paul and Barnabas had come to Jerusalem.

{6} The apostles and elders met to consider this question. {7} After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. {8} God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. {9} He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. {10} Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? {11} No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are."

Conflict can be constructive or destructive depending on how it is handled. The two groups could have taken the stance that they were right and that they would not listen to the other side and that approach would have caused a split in the early church. The matter was brought before a council of the church leaders and the two sides argued back and forth. After hearing what the arguments were, Peter then stood up to give his thoughts on the matter. He had seen that the very first Gentiles were saved without any other requirement except that they believed God and trusted Him. The conversion experience of Cornelius and his family was just like what Peter had experienced. God had given them the Holy Spirit in the same way that he did for the Jews that believed. It was evident that God had not set up any special requirements for salvation when He saved Cornelius. That same grace would work for the Jews as well as for the Gentiles.

Peter's message gives a sequence of events that are essential if the church is to carry out the Great Commission: First of all, God made a choice to call Peter to carry out a task. We as Baptists believe that God does call people to the ministry. Some other groups believe that the gospel ministry is a career that one chooses for himself. The difference in effectiveness of ministers is perhaps a result of whether the person is called or not. Secondly, people have to hear the gospel. It is important that the message of salvation be proclaimed in our churches. I have known people who had gone to church for years and had never heard the plan of salvation. We need to get rid of the "pop psychology" from the pulpits and preach the gospel. The third point is that belief (faith) is necessary for a person to be saved. This is more than just mental acceptance of the idea, but is an

acknowledgment that because of God's redemptive act in Christ Jesus that Jesus is now Lord of our life. Next we see that those who are saved are given the Holy Spirit to live in them and they know that they are saved. People who don't know if they are saved or not are not! The fifth thing is that the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives is to bring about purity in our lives and in doing so causes us to become more and more like God (be ye holy for I am holy). The impossibility of earning salvation by being good is the next point that Peter makes. Finally, God's grace is sufficient for our salvation as we believe.

{12} The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. {13} When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me. {14} Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. {15} The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written: {16} "After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, {17} that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things' {18} that have been known for ages. {19} "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. {20} Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. {21} For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath."

Those that had argued that keeping of all the Jewish law was necessary for salvation realized that they had been ignoring the facts of what God had already done. They were saying one thing and the clear evidence was something else. Now the council was ready to listen to what had been happening among the Gentiles by the missionary team that God had ordained out of the church at Antioch.

Sometimes we get so caught up in our own agendas of "what we want to see" that we might be missing "what God is doing." Great things were happening in the kingdom of God which was in direct contradiction to the paradigm that the Pharisees had and they could have missed it. We need to be careful that we do not miss what God is doing today by concentrating on the trivial issues rather than the Good News that we are saved by grace.

{22} Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers. {23} With them they sent the following letter: The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings. {24} We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. {25} So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul-- {26} men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. {27} Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing.

From the earliest times, the importance of unity in the faith was deemed to be a high priority by the leaders in the church. The idea of local autonomy had not emerged. Each local body was under authority. The issue being addressed had such impact that just a letter was not enough; two people from the church at Jerusalem were also sent to confirm the message.

Our tendency today is such that not only do our churches want to be autonomous but each person wants to be autonomous. No one submits to the authority of anyone. Consequently, leaders have no one to lead. The sheep refuse to recognize any shepherd.

{28} It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: {29} You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.

Of all the Jewish traditions and requirements these were specifically emphasized. There are essentially two areas address in these prohibitions: the spiritual and the physical. Both these impact the soul. First, we must not pollute ourselves spiritually by any practice that opens us to demonic activity in our lives. The prevailing belief among the pagans was that by eating the meat sacrificed to idols the person was empowered by the false god represented by the idol. Since false religions have demonic origin, then by accepting such doctrine and eating the meat for that purpose opens a person to demonic influence. They also believed that drinking the blood of animals would give them the strength of the animal. Secondly, sexual immorality pollutes the body which is the temple of God. The sexual drive is very strong in people and if it is not controlled then it rules.

{30} The men were sent off and went down to Antioch, where they gathered the church together and delivered the letter. {31} The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. {32} Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers. {33} After spending some time there, they were sent off by the brothers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them. {34} {35} But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord.

When truth prevails and church leadership is following the leading of the Holy Spirit, then God's people are blessed.

{36} Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing."

Anything we do needs attention and care. It is not enough to just plant the seed or start the work of a ministry. There must be follow up and encouragement.

{37} Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, {38} but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work.

We only have one chance to make a first impression. Mark made a negative impression on Paul and that

influenced Paul's willingness to trust him. We know that later on Paul changed his mind as Mark proved himself to be faithful. Just as God does not give up on us when we fail, we must be willing to give others additional chances as they grow in their faith.

{39} They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, {40} but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. {41} He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Conflict is part of the human experience. We can agree to disagree and still love each other. God can use different approaches to expand the work of the ministry when there is disagreement. Because of the difference, two mission teams went out rather than just one.

Chapter 16

{16:1} He came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was a Jewess and a believer, but whose father was a Greek. {2} The brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. {3} Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.

We should always be alert to finding new leaders among the young people in the church. These need to be disciplined by having them work along side those with more experience.

The question of the necessity of circumcision had already been settled as not being a requirement for believers to be a part of the church. However, it was necessary if Timothy was going to be able to speak to unbelieving Jews in the synagogues where they visited.

{4} As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. {5} So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

Communication with and visits from church leaders help the local church to be faithful. Hearing the gospel message from a different perspective gives new insight and helps to inspire the member to be more faithful.

{6} Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. {7} When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. {8} So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas.

When we start a work for the Kingdom of God, we do not always (ever?) know exactly how the Lord will lead us and how it will turn out. We can and should plan, but we must be willing to change our plans as God directs us.

{9} During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

{10} After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. {11} From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day on to Neapolis. {12} From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

If we are open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, then God will make His will known to us. It may be no more than telling us the next step to take. However, if we have enough light to take one step at a time and know that it is God's will, then that is enough.

{13} On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. {14} One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. {15} When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

Apparently Philippi of Macedonia had no synagogue. Worshipers of God met near the river outside of town. Paul and those with him found these and shared the gospel message about Jesus. Some believed and received Jesus. God may channel our lives through strange places and unusual circumstances so that we can share the gospel with a particular individual. Wherever we are, whatever we are doing, and whomever we encounter, we should be alert to the possibility that this person needs to know about Jesus. It may be the very person to whom God has sent us.

{16} Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling.

Here was an example of a spiritual need in which a person was controlled by a demon or an evil spirit. To even speak of such things makes many of us feel uncomfortable. I think that in our modern terminology people would try to characterize the condition of the girl as having a mental illness.

{17} This girl followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved."

Notice that the spirit that was in control of the girl recognized Paul for who he was and what he was doing. Paul, Silas, Timothy, and probably Luke was with them at this time were described as servants of the most high God. The demon also recognized that Paul was proclaiming the message of salvation. Just because a person speaks the truth about a matter does not mean that he or she is trustworthy. It was not enough for this spirit of divination to just know that there is the true God and to be able to recognize His servants. If one does not surrender and come under the Lordship of God as we know Him in Jesus, then all the knowledge in the world does not do us any good.

{18} She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so troubled that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her.

It would not be sophisticated to talk about demon possession; however, Paul recognized the condition for what it was and addressed the need for deliverance by speaking directly to the spirit that was controlling the girl. The testimony of the witness that recorded this passage confirms that Paul knew what he was talking about since the spirit came out of the girl. After that she no longer had the ability to tell fortunes.

{19} When the owners of the slave girl realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. {20} They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar {21} by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice." {22} The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten. {23} After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. {24} Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

One of the things that is difficult for us to realize is that not everyone is interested in the well-being of others. In fact, many people are exploited because of their weaknesses and problems. This girl was actually owned by some men and they were making money from the fees that they charged for her to tell the fortunes of people. When she was released from the domination of the spirit of divination it was obvious to those that owned her and they realized that their business was just a past opportunity. They found that Paul and Silas were responsible for their loss and they had them arrested based on false charges regarding Roman law. The magistrate had them beaten and put into jail.

There was price to be paid for responding to the needs of others. Does that mean that we should not help others because it might cost us something? I hope not -- anything worth doing should be worth the cost of getting it done. We should not let the cost of helping stop us from doing what God has called us to do. If we are sensitive to God's leading, then we will likely be more successful in what we do.

{25} About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.

How many times have we praised God and sang when we were hurting and in trouble. Usually we sing and praise God when things are perfect. Paul had written to the Christians in Thessalonica, "In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you." Paul really believed in what he taught others. This is an example of people rising above their circumstance and being themselves in spite of the conditions around them. God is worthy to be praised regardless of our situation.

We are told that the other prisoners heard them. Our response to the problems that we encounter in life is the truest witness of our character and our relationship to God that the world will ever see. Sometimes we fail to realize this when we are going through difficulty, but those that are observing how we handle adversity realize what they are seeing.

{26} Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose. {27} The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped.

This earthquake is one of those amazing coincidences recorded in the Bible. This was not the first time an earthquake had happened in that area and most people would not have had any reason to associate it with what was happening to Paul and Silas; however, Paul and Silas knew. You may have miracles happening in your life that no one else will ever know about nor appreciate unless you tell them what God has done on your behalf.

What happened that night is somewhat of a picture of salvation in that when we are saved we find that the prison doors of our lives are opened and we are set free of things that bind us. The problem that so many Christians have is that they find comfort or pleasure in the chains or the stocks and they may lock themselves up again with the old habits and problems from which God has delivered them.

The jailer was asleep and the shaking and noise of the earthquake awakened him. He saw that the doors were open to the cells and was sure that everyone had escaped. He was faced with a choice. He realized that those in authority would hold him responsible for the prisoners being gone for which he would pay with his life. His only choice, as he saw it, was whether he would kill himself or let someone else do it. Apparently, he chose to take his own life.

{28} But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!" {29} The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. {30} He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" {31} They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household."

Sometimes we think that our only choice is which way we will die and do not even realize that we have a choice that leads to life. This is why the gospel message is truly good news. We can choose life and do so by believing God and putting ourselves under His Lordship. Notice that in response to the jailer's question of what he needed to do to be saved, Paul said "believe on the LORD Jesus Christ." We can emphasize the word LORD to point out that it is only by accepting Jesus as the authority in our lives that we realize the benefits of salvation. We can emphasize the word JESUS to show that God's means of salvation came through one that was truly human and yet was not subject to the Adamic curse. Since Jesus was the Son of God He was not in bondage to sin, not having a sin nature and since He did not sin, Satan had no authority in His life. If we emphasize the word CHRIST, we show that Jesus was the promised Messiah that was anointed by God with the Holy Spirit for power.

It is in crisis situations that most adults come to accept the claims of Jesus as Lord of all. This was certainly a crisis for the jailer. He was listening to the words of Paul and Silas as they explained God's plan of salvation. The simple message that "all have sinned and need to have forgiveness and that God has provided a way for that forgiveness to be given in the person of Jesus (God's Son) who died to pay the penalty for sin and rose from the dead to validate His claim" was given to the jailer and to his family.

{32} Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. {33} At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. {34} The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God--he and his whole family.

One of the evidences of a changed life is compassion and love for others. The jailer started showing Christian concern for Paul and Silas. He was taking care of their wounds from the beating. Another evidence of a changed life is obedience to the simplest of instructions and that was to be baptized. The jailer and his family were all baptized that night. Before the events of this night took place the jailer had probably wondered what could explain the crazy behavior of Paul and Silas as they sang praises to God while in prison. Before it was morning, the jailer was praising God and rejoicing in his salvation. The morning was sure to come and Paul and Silas with the jailer returned to the prison to see what the day would bring.

{35} When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order: "Release those men." {36} The jailer told Paul, "The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in peace." {37} But Paul said to the officers: "They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out." {38} The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed. {39} They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city. {40} After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and encouraged them. Then they left.

After sleeping on the matter the magistrates came to the conclusion that they had been manipulated by the men that had lost their business. They really had no reason to have arrested, beaten or jailed Paul and Silas. They were as so many people who find that they are wrong: they sent someone else to try to cover up the mess. The sergeants were sent to tell them that they could leave. Paul and Silas sought to make a point and strike some fear of the civil authority in these men who had broken their own laws. Both Paul and Silas were Roman citizens and the treatment that they received was a violation of their civil rights as Roman citizens. So they wanted a public apology. I don't think that they were just being contrary but wanted to perhaps make these magistrates a little more careful about how they would treat other Christian that would be living in the area. The apology helped to restore the reputations that the unjust punishment had hurt. We should do all we can to maintain our good name as Christians.

Chapter 17

{17:1} When they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue.

When Paul and Silas went to a new area such as Thessalonica, they began their ministry in the synagogue. The most likely converts were among the Jewish community. The Jews would be familiar with the promised Messiah and would be interested in what this evangelist had to say. The most fertile field for evangelism today is in places where few have heard the gospel. We might think our churches would be the least likely places for evangelism. Though many people who have their names on the roles of churches have never experienced the new birth, they seem immune to Christianity. Many have just enough Christianity to be inoculated against getting a real case of it. Bob Harrington (the Chaplain of Bourbon Street) commentary on this situation is "they have just enough to bug them, but not enough to bless them."

{2} As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, {3} explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ," he said.

One characteristic that leads to success in anything we do is being persistent. We find this necessary ingredient at work with the ministry of Paul and Silas. They continued to go back several times to reason with the Jews. Being sound and reasonable in what we say is also very important. Paul did not go back to just argue but to "reason" with them. The basis of Paul's premise was the Scriptures. He did not just present his own opinion or that of some contemporary philosopher. Paul was also careful to keep his focus on Christ. He did not talk about the great fellowship of the church in Jerusalem or in Antioch or anything else except Jesus Christ.

{4} Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women. {5} But the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. {6} But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other brothers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, {7} and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus." {8} When they heard this, the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. {9} Then they made Jason and the others post bond and let them go.

The result of Paul's preaching was that some Jews believed and many devout Greeks and women also believed. At that point, opposition started. The devil stirred up envy and greed in the minds of people in the area.

Eventually, the whole city was in an uproar. They were saying “These who have turned the world upside down are now here in our city.” I’ve heard it said that our enemies sometimes give the best testimony to the effectiveness of our witness. The Gospel of Jesus Christ DOES turn the ways of the world upside down. Jesus taught “He who will be ruler among you must be servant of all.” “It is only by dying that we can live.” “Bless those who curse you.” “The most valuable thing we can find (our salvation) is free.” “We can be free only by becoming a slave of Jesus Christ.” No wonder these people though Christians were turning the world upside down -- they were!

Paul and Silas realized that the situation had deteriorated to such a point that people’s emotions had taken over. When that happens, continuing it to reason with people is useless. As we witness to others, we too must be careful to keep the discussions out of the emotional realm. Once a discussion gets to that point it is time to move on. When we are presenting the claims of Christ to another person, becoming caught up in an argument is easy. If that happens, then we are likely to do more harm than good. Always keep calm. We can usually handle any argument another person might attempt to start with a statement such as “That doesn’t agree with Scripture.” We don’t need to defend the Gospel or the Cross. God is perfectly capable of doing that. Our job is to proclaim the message.

{10} As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue.

{11} Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. {12} Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men. {13} When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, they went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up. {14} The brothers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea. {15} The men who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.

Paul and Silas could have become discouraged and abandoned their mission effort after the reception they received at Thessalonica. They didn’t, but moved on to Berea. There they received a much better reception. We to may find rejection when we share the Gospel with certain people, but there will be others who are receptive and will have a proper response to the message. We rejoice when we find those who searched the scripture to see if the information being taught is true.

The established church has drifted before. Since we do have a tendency to drift, we might discover or hear a new truth of the gospel and since it is new to us, reject it as error. A classic example was the truth proclaimed by Martin Luther. Luther discovered “The just shall live by faith.” The church of his day had drifted so far away that its leaders could not recognize the truth and, consequently, rejected it without searching the scriptures to see if what Luther was saying was true.

I’m not advocating that we endorse every new teaching or doctrine. We should be cautious, but should not reject an idea just because it is new. Each time we read and really study a passage of scripture we should learn some new truth. We read it and our understanding becomes quickened so that we are likely to have one of those “Aha!” responses such as “So that’s what that means!” We should share such discoveries with our Christian friends. Such sharing strengthens each of us and it can also keep us from error by having other Christians either challenge or confirm our interpretation.

{16} While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. {17} So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. {18} A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbling trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

Paul went from Berea to Athens and waited for Silas and Timothy to join him there. In Athens, Paul encountered a different reception. The opposition was in the form of ridicule. How often do we run into this type response? Some will look at us with a smirk on their face and say “You don’t really believe that foolishness, do you?” This is the so-called intellectual approach to things of the Spirit. These people have not learned that true wisdom comes only from God. The things of the Spirit are spiritually discerned.

Many great scholars today do not believe Jesus is God the Son. Their unbelief is based on ignorance of the truths of the Gospel. They take issue with something they do not understand.

{19} Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? {20} You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean."

{21} (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

We should not hesitate to share the gospel even with the skeptics. Lew Wallace was a very famous general and literary genius. He and his fiend Robert Ingersoll, the famous skeptic, agreed to write a book that would forever destroy the myth of Christianity. For two years, Mr. Wallace studied in the leading libraries of Europe and America, seeking information which would enable him to write such a book. While writing the second chapter of his book, he suddenly found himself on his knees, crying out, “My Lord and my God.” This same man, Lew Wallace, later wrote the novel *Ben Hur*.

If you run into a so-called intellectual, simply challenge him or her to prove what the Word of God says is wrong and in the process, he will be convinced Jesus is Lord. That is what it is all about: the Lordship of Jesus. The Acts of the Apostles

Witness of Him. Vary your approach to fit the situation, base everything on the scripture, use reasonable arguments, don't be discouraged and pray. We really need to take the Great Commission seriously.

{22} Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious.

{23} For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

When we launch into an area that is new to another person, we must link what we are saying to what they can understand. In a similar way, God takes us from where we are and then transforms us into something new.

When the Greeks had heard a new philosophy or heard about a different deity, they simply added that to what they already believed. Worship of the one true God requires that we leave the others out and worship God only.

{24} "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands.

{25} And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. {26} From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. {27} God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. {28} 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' {29} "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone--an image made by man's design and skill.

One of the more important roles of the church is to tell the world about Jesus. Most people in the world still do not know Him. Many are still living in the ignorance and superstition of the world of the first century.

The false gods people worship require their subject bring things to them. The one true God is the Provider of all we need. The false gods are made by those who worship them. The one true God has made everything. The false gods demand sacrifices while the one true God provided Himself as sacrifice for us. The false gods are worshiped out of fearful dread while the one true God is worshiped out of grateful love.

{30} In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. {31} For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."

Though the plan and message of God's salvation has not changed, the way it has been communicated has been varied. The ultimate revelation of Who God is and how He saves is revealed in the Son of God through His life, His death, and His resurrection.

{32} When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." {33} At that, Paul left the Council. {34} A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

We find the proof of Jesus being Who He said He is in the resurrection. The virgin birth can not be proven after the fact of the birth, the sinless life of Jesus cannot be proven since no one was with Him at all times nor could anyone read His mind. Miracles had happened before and men had died when they were falsely accused. The provable difference in the life of Jesus compare to all others is the resurrection from the dead. It is at this very point of proof of the supernatural nature of Who Jesus is that many stumble and fail to find salvation.

Chapter 18

{18:1} After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.

Paul had shared the Gospel with those in the major cultural center of the western and middle eastern world. He, nor the Gospel, received a very good hearing. The message of God's salvation is foolishness to those who perish. It is not logical to the natural mind. Man, left to his own devices, would never have figured out God's plan. Therefore, God had to reveal it and it must be revealed again and again to everyone who will be saved. Having left the cultural center, Paul then went to one of the commerce centers of the world.

{2} There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, {3} and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. {4} Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.

The Jews were likely expelled from Rome because of the controversy among the Jews that arose regarding Jesus. Even this problem was used by God to bring something worthwhile to the work of the Kingdom of God. It allowed Paul to join his efforts with two other Christians. This union provided a base of operation for Paul in establishing a new work in that important area of the world.

{5} When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. {6} But when the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, "Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles."

Though Paul started in the synagogue, he moved into new territory when the resistance to the Gospel became abusive. There is so much work to do and so many people who are lost and needing to hear the Gospel that we cannot spend all our time on one or two stubborn individuals. Those need to clearly understand the consequences of their rejection and then we must move to areas where our work will bear fruit for the Kingdom.

{7} Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. {8} Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized.

When we fail to accomplish our goals, we can become discouraged. Paul had many disappointment since

he wanted his fellow Israelites to trust in Jesus and be saved and most of them rejected the Gospel. There were victories and some did believe. We must learn to celebrate the gains and avoid grieving over losses of that which we never possessed.

{9} One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. {10} For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city." {11} So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.

The work to which God had called Paul was so significant that special encouragement was needed to ensure that discouragement did not creep in and hinder the work. Most of us want to quit when we have the slightest resistance and everyone doesn't enthusiastically endorse what we are doing. If we are doing the right thing, then we must press on even if no one agrees.

{12} While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him into court. {13} "This man," they charged, "is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law." {14} Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to the Jews, "If you Jews were making a complaint about some misdemeanor or serious crime, it would be reasonable for me to listen to you. {15} But since it involves questions about words and names and your own law--settle the matter yourselves. I will not be a judge of such things." {16} So he had them ejected from the court. {17} Then they all turned on Sosthenes the synagogue ruler and beat him in front of the court. But Gallio showed no concern whatever.

The civil and criminal courts are not in position to decide matters of theology. It is an oppressive society that results from governmental leaders taking sides in disputes about religious or spiritual matters.

Those who do not have a strong case will seek help from the civil authorities and that failing will resort of physical attacks.

{18} Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchrea because of a vow he had taken.

We need to be sensitive to knowing when our work in a particular area is over and it is time to move on to something else or somewhere else. Leaders need to team up with others to multiple their ministry. Paul brought Priscilla and Aquila with him to Ephesus to assist with the ministry there.

We are reluctant to make vows since there is a commitment involve and we are living in a time when commitments are not very popular. Many tend to value freedom to do what they want to do above loyalty to a cause or a commitment.

{19} They arrived at Ephesus, where Paul left Priscilla and Aquila. He himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. {20} When they asked him to spend more time with them, he declined. {21} But as he left, he promised, "I will come back if it is God's will." Then he set sail from Ephesus.

Paul helped initiate the work in Ephesus but he did not stay on since he could leave the work there in the hands of his assistants.

{22} When he landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church and then went down to Antioch. {23} After spending some time in Antioch, Paul set out from there and traveled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.

We sometimes forget how important a visit from someone in leadership can be to encourage those who are actively involved in the work of the ministry. Leaders bear a great responsibility to know what is happening in their areas of accountability and to provide meaningful encouragement to those who are getting the job done.

Much of what we learn comes from what others share with us out of their experiences and what they have been taught. We also learn from our own experiences. As we assemble what we learn from others and from our own experiences it is extremely important that we build our lives upon a proper foundation. In other words, there may be many interpretations of the facts and the interpretation may be, and many times is, more important than the facts themselves. The foundation and the design of a house can be more important than the materials that go into. You can take the finest building materials around and construct a shack or you might build a mansion from laminated popsicle sticks.

One of the features of the early church was the open sharing among the members as they gathered for worship. Much of their learning of how to implement the practical aspects of Christian living came from these shared experiences. Today's Christians need to share more with each other from life's experiences as well as insights that we have as we study the Scripture.

{24} Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. {25} He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John.

By the study of the Old Testament Scriptures we can discover the truth of the Gospel message. Apollos had heard John the Baptist's message and had found it to be relevant to the Scriptures. The truth of what God has done and is doing in Jesus should create great enthusiasm in everyone who hears the message.

Apollos was apparently a gifted communicator. He was also a man full of enthusiasm and knowledge of the Old Testament. He had heard about Jesus and knew about the baptism that John the Baptist preached. However, there was a lack of knowledge regarding several crucial aspects of the Gospel. Based on what he knew of the Old Testament and what he knew of the life and work of Jesus, he was convinced that Jesus was the Messiah and he was

getting the word out to others. He was from Alexandria, Egypt and had traveled about teaching what he knew.

{26} He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.

When Apollos came to Ephesus he continued to preach and teach the Good News that he knew. He had apparently been there for some time and been successful in that people had believe and were following the way as they had been taught. There was a couple in Ephesus at that time, Aquila and Priscilla, that happened to heard Apollos teach in the synagogue there. They realized that he had not heard the "rest of the story." They handled the matter carefully and with sensitivity to the feeling of Apollos. They did not challenge him publicly as many people are likely to do today when they hear someone that may not know the complete gospel message. Apparently, Apollos did not know about Christian baptism and how that was related to the resurrection of Jesus and probably did not know about the coming of the Holy Spirit to empower the Church.

We do not have to know detail of the fullness of God's revelation in Jesus Christ to believe. It is better to know more and more of the greatness of God's goodness and the fullness of His faithfulness so we can share the whole truth with those who would be saved. We who are learning (and that includes all of us) should be open to hear from others who have walked with the Lord. Also, we who have grown in the Lord must be willing to share with those who are newer in the faith.

{27} When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. On arriving, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed. {28} For he vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.

It is good for Christians to encourage and endorse the work of faithful fellow Christians. We should attempt to minister as a part of the Body of Christ rather than just on our own initiative. Though Apollos was very knowledgeable of the Old Testament he was still able and willing to learn from others. This made him even more effective in his preaching. He continued in his traveling ministry and did so with the endorsement of the church at Ephesus. He went on to Corinth and was able to convincingly show from the Scriptures that Jesus was truly God's promised Messiah.

This information regarding Apollos helps us understand better the ministry of Paul. Paul had been influential with Aquila and Priscilla before they met Apollos. Also, the lack of knowledge of Apollos resulted in teaching that was incomplete and helps to explain what Paul found in parts of Ephesus when Apollos had left the area.

Chapter 19

{19:1} While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples {2} and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." {3} So Paul asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?" "John's baptism," they replied. {4} Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus."

Apparently, Apollos had established some disciples in the area before he met Aquila and Priscilla. These folks were disciples of Jesus and believed that he was God's Messiah. However, evidently, there was something missing that prompted Paul to ask the question, "Have you received the Holy Spirit since you believed?" They did not know what he was talking about. They had not even heard of the Holy Spirit. If Paul were to visit a typical church today, would he ask the same question he asked of the disciples at Ephesus? Many Christians today do not know about the Holy Spirit. Oh, they might remember seeing the name or singing a hymn that has the name in it or they might even recall that the name was used in the "baptismal formula" -- in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. However, knowledge of the Holy Spirit in their lives is about as strange to them as it was to these disciples at Ephesus.

These twelve disciples had been taught about the baptism of John which was symbolic of repentance. However, John the Baptist had pointed people to Jesus and had declared that Jesus would baptize them with the Holy Spirit. Jesus had told His disciples that they should wait in Jerusalem until they received the Holy Spirit and they did so when the Spirit was poured out upon them on the Day of Pentecost. In subsequent accounts, the coming of the Holy Spirit upon believer was recorded. We see it with regard to the believers in Samaria (Peter and John laid hands on them and the Holy Spirit came upon them) and in Caesarea at the home of Cornelius.

{5} On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. {6} When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. {7} There were about twelve men in all.

After Paul had fully explained the Gospel to these men, they were ready to receive all that God had for them. They wanted to be baptized into the name of Jesus. They were baptized and then Paul laid his hands upon them and they received the Spirit's presence and power in their lives. How did they know that the Spirit had come upon them? They spoke with tongues and prophesied. This verified that God was at work.

Is it any different today? Can we really expect people to receive the Holy Spirit when they believe if they are not given the complete gospel message any more than those disciples in Ephesus did? If verification of God working in the life of people was needed in their time, why would it not also be needed now?

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We can learn from each other and many times those that are the most educated and eloquent can learn from those that have simply walked with the Lord. If we want others to learn from us, then we must be sensitive to them and show respect for them as we share about Christ in our lives. Many people that we encounter do not realize the need to surrender themselves to God through Jesus Christ. They don't realize the necessity to publicly confess Him before others. They don't realize that believers should be baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit. They won't know unless someone tells them. You may be the one that God wants to use to share this essential information with another person.

{8} Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. {9} But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus.

By now, Paul could have predicted the outcome of his preaching to the Jews about Jesus. He could have abandoned going first to them before going to the Gentiles; however, he did not lose hope that one day they would be saved. We must also be faithful to take the message to God's people (starting in the church) and then to reach out to the unchurched also. We must not always conclude that the lost will come looking for Jesus at church. We need to take the message into the community and the secular lecture halls.

{10} This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord. {11} God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, {12} so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them.

God blesses the work He has called us to do. He confirms His message with signs and wonders or miracles. In this case, God went beyond ordinary miracles to extraordinary ones. How the church today needs the impact of miracles to wake us up out of our spiritual lethargy!

{13} Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, "In the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out." {14} Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this.

Some would deny the reality of evil spirits and attribute numerous disorders maladies to psychological problems that can be cured by counseling, lithium, and anti-depressants. Some problems are physiological in nature and relief can be found in medicine. Other problems are spiritual and these will never be cured by human means. We need the gift of discernment to know the difference.

We must be careful to avoid thinking that the phrase "in the name of Jesus" is a magic incantation that produces results.

{15} One day the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?" {16} Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.

If we are running around on our own initiative and working in our own power, then we cannot expect to find the protection and the power that comes from "dwelling in the secret place of the Most High." Some Christians have substituted presumption for faith.

{17} When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. {18} Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds. {19} A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas. {20} In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.

When the power of God is manifested or when people are frightened by the display of spiritual evil, then an awareness of the reality of the spiritual world can have a dramatic impact on people.

In our so-called sophisticated world of the 20th century, we are surprised by the number of educated people who rely on "spiritual advisers" or palm readers and fortune tellers. Many check their horoscopes daily and even high government officials have consulted with mediums. Devil worship is coming more and more into the open and people play with witchcraft in parlor games and no one seems to be concerned.

What is even more surprising is that in the church we see little or no awareness of spiritual realities. We have substituted Churchianity for Christianity. When we substitute traditions of men for God's ways, when we merely go through the motions of a "worship service," when we operate in our own strength, when our actions and even our words deny the power of God, then Churchianity has the upper hand. What we see in most churches today is a long way from the picture we see in verse 20 that "the word of the Lord prevailed." (KJV) The word of God prevails in our lives when we agree and act on His word. If we agree and act on the advice of the world, then all we have is a "cop-out" rather than a "moving out" of the church. Whatever the situation we are in, we have a choice of how we will respond. The choice can usually be simplified to "the way of the world" or "the way of Jesus."

Chapter 20

{20:1} When the uproar had ended, Paul sent for the disciples and, after encouraging them, said good-by and set out for Macedonia.

{2} He traveled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people, and finally arrived in Greece, {3} where he stayed three months.

Sometimes we in the church try to keep a low profile and blend in with the culture. We like to avoid controversy which is not always possible when we are driven by that which best advances the Kingdom of God.

When we encounter opposition, we need encouragement from leaders in the faith. In a similar way, a local congregation needs encouragement from the pastor and a Sunday School class needs encouragement from its teacher.

Because the Jews made a plot against him just as he was about to sail for Syria, he decided to go back through Macedonia.

Though we are not to be controlled by circumstances, we need to consider what happens around us and adjust plans to accommodate safety concerns if the adjustment does not compromise the plans and purposes of God.

{4} He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy also, and Tychicus and Trophimus from the province of Asia. {5} These men went on ahead and waited for us at Troas. {6} But we sailed from Philippi after the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and five days later joined the others at Troas, where we stayed seven days.

We read a lot about the ministry of Paul and tend to forget about all the other people of that first century who ministered along side him. In a similar way, we can focus on the pastor and forget about the work of the many dedicated Christians in a local body.

{7} On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight.

When people are new in the faith, they are eager to learn more and more. We should be concerned when the length of our worship time is controlled by the clock more than the content of the message.

{8} There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were meeting. {9} Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead.

The atmosphere in the upper room had become stale and hot because of the artificial light that was there. Though the message from Paul was excellent, the atmosphere in a church can cause people to be so asleep as to not be able to concentrate on the dynamic truth being presented. This can lead to people “dropping out” of church and being so inactive as to be spiritually dead.

{10} Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "He's alive!" {11} Then he went upstairs again and broke bread and ate. After talking until daylight, he left. {12} The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted.

When we discover a member of our congregation who has dropped out, we need to immediately go to them and encourage them and pick them up in the faith so they can be restored to an alive relationship in the body. When we do this all the people are encouraged.

{13} We went on ahead to the ship and sailed for Assos, where we were going to take Paul aboard. He had made this arrangement because he was going there on foot. {14} When he met us at Assos, we took him aboard and went on to Mitylene. {15} The next day we set sail from there and arrived off Kios. The day after that we crossed over to Samos, and on the following day arrived at Miletus.

We read about the life of various people God used and tend to think they spent all their time in prayer, meditation, preaching, or writing inspirational works. We then tend to think we are falling short in what God is doing through us since we have to go to work, mow the lawn, paint the house, etc. The truth is that those whom God used had to do the mundane things all of us do. What is normally recorded are only those things which are of spiritual significance.

{16} Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus to avoid spending time in the province of Asia, for he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible, by the day of Pentecost.

God has a plan for our lives; however, we still have choices and options in many areas. We must be careful not to sink into a fatalistic approach to life thinking “what ever will be will be.” We are to make decisions and have goals. However, we must also be willing to abandon our plans if God directs us to do something else.

{17} From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. {18} When they arrived, he said to them: "You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. {19} I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. {20} You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. {21} I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

The testimony of our lives before the church of Jesus Christ should be one in which we have no regrets nor remorse. We must be faithful now so that we have no need for embarrassment in the future when it is too late.

{22} "And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. {23} I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. {24} However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me--the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

If we have walked with the Lord for many years, then we are more likely to be able to know His will for our lives in the future. As we have observed His faithfulness in the past we are better able to put our full trust in Him for whatever may come our way tomorrow. We can do this knowing that God will use these “whatevers” to advance the cause of Christ.

Paul knew that prison and hardship were facing him and yet he did not know the details. God still lets His people know what He is doing and what is going to happen – yet we do not know all the specifics. Even in our day, we can hear the “distant hoofbeats” of a coming persecution for true believers. Just as Paul wrote to Timothy, “All who will live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” we can sense that the time is approaching when middle-of-the-road Christianity will no longer be an option. Things will happen so that we will be forced to take a stand for The Acts of the Apostles

or against Jesus. The stage is being set for Christ's return and leading up to that will be tribulation and persecution for a bold witness for Christ.

{25} "Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. {26} Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. {27} For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.

If we declare the full council of God when we deal with others, then we do not have to be concerned about missing an opportunity to tell them "the rest of the story." If we know someone who is not saved and we do not share Christ with them, then we have missed an opportunity to keep another human being from spending an eternity in hell. This is not a decision we should make for anyone. We should share the truth of Jesus and then allow the person to decide his or her own fate by either accepting or rejecting God's offer of salvation.

{28} Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. {29} I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. {30} Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. {31} So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

Though Paul spoke these words to the elders of the churches, they are good advice to all Christians. Each one of us has responsibility to "watch over" or to care for ourselves. Most of us have relationships of family, friends, and perhaps fellow workers. These relationships did not happen by accident since God is in control of our lives. God will work through us to bless and help others with whom we interact. We need the equivalent of a spiritual Neighborhood Watch to be on our guard lest any be drawn away from the truth.

{32} "Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

When we are no longer available for God to work through us to bless others, then we must trust God to continue to do His work in them. God works through others and through His word. Those who spend much time in the word will find more influence of God in their lives.

{33} I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. {34} You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. {35} In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: It is more blessed to give than to receive."

The effectiveness of our ministry can be hampered if there is doubt regarding our motives or our integrity. If people suspect a person is using his position as minister, Sunday School teacher, or deacon as a means to help himself financially, then everything done is viewed with suspicion. It is far better to eliminate all such doubts.

{36} When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. {37} They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. {38} What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship.

We build relationship with people and find that our lives are truly intertwined. It is only in parting that we realize how much of ourselves we have invested in those with whom we have developed close relationships. Though we grieved at the parting we can rejoice in knowing that what we have invested in them will have influence wherever they go and perhaps can bless others whom we will never meet.

Chapter 21

{21:1} After we had torn ourselves away from them, we put out to sea and sailed straight to Cos. The next day we went to Rhodes and from there to Patara. {2} We found a ship crossing over to Phoenicia, went on board and set sail. {3} After sighting Cyprus and passing to the south of it, we sailed on to Syria. We landed at Tyre, where our ship was to unload its cargo.

The missionaries of the early church had many challenges as they worked to fulfill God's call upon their lives. Travel from place to place was difficult. Today, we may find that the slightest inconvenience provides us with adequate excuse to not share the gospel with another person. We don't visit others if it is too cold, too rainy, or too dark. We must not allow difficulties to limit the gospel of Jesus Christ.

{4} Finding the disciples there, we stayed with them seven days. Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. {5} But when our time was up, we left and continued on our way. All the disciples and their wives and children accompanied us out of the city, and there on the beach we knelt to pray. {6} After saying good-bye to each other, we went aboard the ship, and they returned home. {7} We continued our voyage from Tyre and landed at Ptolemais, where we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for a day.

When we find people who are called to a special mission effort, then we should support them as the disciples at Tyre did with Paul. Christians need to help and encourage each other in the work they are doing for the Lord. We find ourselves inwardly focused in that we are not comfortable in opening up our homes to other people. We almost have a fortress mentality when it comes to our homes and will not allow ourselves to share our homes with those outside our family. As we continue in this mode, we limit the ministry God can do through us.

{8} Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. {9} He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.

We read bits and snippets of persons mention in the Bible and we tend to think of them only in terms of what they did in the recorded passage. It is interesting to learn additional information about these people and to know that they were like we are. They had families, they relocated to different cities, they continued to minister to other people and they were led into expanded ministries. For example, Philip started out as a deacon and God called

him into evangelism. Philip was also a family man with gifted children.

{10} After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. {11} Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, "The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'"

God will share information with us in accordance with our ability to properly handle that information. Paul was mature in the faith and was not going to be deterred from doing what God had called him to do.

{12} When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. {13} Then Paul answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."

{14} When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done."

Our normal reaction to information regarding impending danger is to turn aside or to wait until the danger has passed. When we know that God has called us to go into a dangerous situation and that being arrested and handed over to Gentiles was God's means of making sure that the Gospel message was advanced, then we proceed regardless of the circumstances.

{15} After this, we got ready and went up to Jerusalem. {16} Some of the disciples from Caesarea accompanied us and brought us to the home of Mnason, where we were to stay. He was a man from Cyprus and one of the early disciples.

When a Christian brother is in the midst of a difficult situation or where danger is present, others need to be there to support them during the ordeal.

{17} When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers received us warmly. {18} The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. {19} Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. {20} When they heard this, they praised God.

It is rather interesting that as we view the ministry of others we appraise the various aspects of that ministry as detached from the whole. The council at Jerusalem could endorse and rejoice in what Paul had done among the Gentiles. However, they tended to still view the world as Jew and Gentile rather than saved and unsaved.

Then they said to Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. {21} They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs. {22} What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, {23} so do what we tell you."

It is very difficult to change the way people think. When new paradigms come along (such as salvation by grace through faith) then those who have lived under the old paradigms misinterpret what those who are operating under the new paradigm are saying. Such mis-communication leads to accusations and disunity in the Body of Christ. We may do something for the sake of tradition which is OK but if we do the same things as a means of salvation, then we may find ourselves trying to earn our salvation.

Was there any justification for the accusations brought against Paul? Remember, the accusers were Christians and they were probably well meaning people. I doubt they just made up the story to cause Paul trouble. I can see how they could misinterpret what Paul taught if, for example, they obtained a copy of the letter Paul wrote to the Galatians. Look briefly at Galatians 5:2-4.

Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.

If you lift that right out of the Bible and ignore the rest of the letter, then you could say that Paul was teaching Christians (Gentiles and Jews) they should **not** be circumcised. We should be very careful about building a theology or doctrine around just a few verses. Do you remember what Jesus told Satan when He was tempted to turn the stones into bread? "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." The reason the body of Christ is divided today is that one group chooses to emphasize or de-emphasize one part of God's word over another.

There are four men with us who have made a vow. {24} Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law. {25} As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality." {26} The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them. Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them.

Sometimes we may find that going through the motions of some routine for the sake of sending a message to other people will have an impact on them. The elders reasoned that if Paul completed the purification rite and paid the groups expenses this act would convince other s he was a fervent support of all the Jewish customs and traditions.

{27} When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, {28} shouting, "Men of Israel, help us! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple area and defiled this holy place." {29} (They had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with Paul and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple area.)

It takes a very few people who are willing to twist the truth to create a very large problem for many people.

Some can stir up trouble because they are mis-informed and do not know the whole story. We must be careful to determine the truth and know all the facts before we take action.

{30} The whole city was aroused, and the people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut. {31} While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar. {32} He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. {33} The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. Then he asked who he was and what he had done.

Mass hysteria that leads to mob violence is very dangerous. Such events happen in the absence of proper authority. The Christian can avoid being caught up in such actions by realizing that we are to be under the authority of the Jesus Christ and He is always present with us.

When the soldiers came their very presence calmed the crowd. They took control of the situation and immediately began to gather information.

{34} Some in the crowd shouted one thing and some another, and since the commander could not get at the truth because of the uproar, he ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. {35} When Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great he had to be carried by the soldiers. {36} The crowd that followed kept shouting, "Away with him!" {37} As the soldiers were about to take Paul into the barracks, he asked the commander, "May I say something to you?" "Do you speak Greek?" he replied. {38} "Aren't you the Egyptian who started a revolt and led four thousand terrorists out into the desert some time ago?" {39} Paul answered, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city. Please let me speak to the people." {40} Having received the commander's permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the crowd. When they were all silent, he said to them in Aramaic :

When we are trying to determine the truth in any situation, we will find many voices clamoring to be heard. Many times the answers to our questions are held by those whom we would think to be the least likely to know what is happening. It is therefore important for us to keep an open mind when we are searching for truth.

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{22:1} "Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense." {2} When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet. Then Paul said: {3} "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. {4} I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, {5} as also the high priest and all the Council can testify. I even obtained letters from them to their brothers in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.

Paul had said that he became all things to all men that by any means he might win some to Christ. He spoke the language of the learned, both Greek and Hebrew but he also spoke the language of the common Jew, Aramaic. If we are to win anyone to the Lord, then we must approach them where they are. We must also be will to share about who we are and establish some points of identity.

{6} "About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. {7} I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, 'Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?' {8} "'Who are you, Lord?' I asked. "'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. {9} My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me. {10} "'What shall I do, Lord?' I asked. "'Get up,' the Lord said, 'and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.' {11} My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me. {12} "A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. {13} He stood beside me and said, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very moment I was able to see him. {14} "Then he said: 'The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. {15} You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. {16} And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.'

As we share with people and establish a point of commonality we must be prepared to move from there to what is distinctive in our relationship with the Lord. The message must be clear that when Jesus comes into our lives, we become different and that He has a purpose for our lives. Our Christian testimony from the point of conversion should be such that all can readily discern that our lives are different after we met Jesus than before.

{17} "When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance {18} and saw the Lord speaking. 'Quick!' he said to me. 'Leave Jerusalem immediately, because they will not accept your testimony about me.' {19} "'Lord,' I replied, 'these men know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. {20} And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.' {21} "Then the Lord said to me, 'Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'"

We must be bold in sharing the supernatural events of our relationship with the Lord. When we engage in a work which just doesn't make sense to the human mind, we should be able to point to the will of God as the reason for what we do. To the typical Jew, taking the good news of God's salvation to the Gentiles was irrational and not something they were prepared to accept.

{22} The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, "Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!"

When we talk with people about Jesus, it is well to be aware of certain high emotional words or topics that will end all normal conversation. It is best to communicate all you can before touching on such subjects. After these emotionally charged issues are raised, then real communication fails.

{23} As they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, {24} the commander ordered Paul to be taken into the barracks. He directed that he be flogged and questioned in order to find out why the people were shouting at him like this.

The idea of human rights and abuse of rights have come a long way since the first century. The idea that hurting a person will make him or her more truthful is rather strange to us.

{25} As they stretched him out to flog him, Paul said to the centurion standing there, "Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn't even been found guilty?" {26} When the centurion heard this, he went to the commander and reported it. "What are you going to do?" he asked. "This man is a Roman citizen." {27} The commander went to Paul and asked, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" "Yes, I am," he answered. {28} Then the commander said, "I had to pay a big price for my citizenship." "But I was born a citizen," Paul replied. {29} Those who were about to question him withdrew immediately. The commander himself was alarmed when he realized that he had put Paul, a Roman citizen, in chains.

We take our position of citizenship for granted. Most everyone we know is a citizen and we do not see much contrast in our present day world of how citizens are treated compared to non-citizens. In a world where there were "the conquerors" and "the conquered" the rights of citizen were assets to be desired.

Most Christian do not think about the fact that we are citizen of the Kingdom of God. We should value that relationship and know all the benefit of citizenship in God's Kingdom.

{30} The next day, since the commander wanted to find out exactly why Paul was being accused by the Jews, he released him and ordered the chief priests and all the Sanhedrin to assemble. Then he brought Paul and had him stand before them.

The Romans were driven by the need for information and reason before taking action. They were highly organized and concerned for proper operation within the scope of their set of rules. This philosophy helped them to conquer and control Europe and the Middle East.

Not only would Paul eventually stand before the leader of the western culture world (Caesar) and present the claims of Jesus Christ, he would present the claims of the gospel one more time to the leaders of the Jews.

Chapter 23

{23:1} Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, "My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day." How many of us can give such a testimony of faithfulness to the call of God upon our lives. We should everyday so as to be ready to testify as Paul did. {2} At this the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth.

Paul's statement was considered as blasphemy by the Jews since they saw their duty to God as keeping the law in its utmost detail. They knew no one could do that. Paul definition of duty involved trusting the Lord Jesus for his salvation.

{3} Then Paul said to him, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!"

Paul's words were severe criticism in that a whitewashed object was implied to be filthy beneath the surface but clean looking to the casual observer. It is hypocritical for anyone to hold others accountable to the standards they themselves will not meet.

{4} Those who were standing near Paul said, "You dare to insult God's high priest?" {5} Paul replied, "Brothers, I did not realize that he was the high priest; for it is written: 'Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people.'"

The criticism of Paul for insulting the high priest was not deserved for several reasons. First, the Jews as God's chosen people to be stewards of His Plan of Salvation was no longer valid. That stewardship had now passed to the Church. The only thing left was the destruction of the temple and the city and the dispersing of the Jews. To call this man "God's high priest" was an invalid assumption. Secondly, the insult Paul delivered was a justifiable rebuke by an apostle of Jesus Christ. Third, the true High Priest of God is Jesus having offered Himself as a perfect sacrifice and took the blood of His atonement into the heavenly temple. Since Paul recognized Jesus as the High Priest, then he did not "realize" or recognize the man Ananias as "the high priest of God."

{6} Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, "My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead." {7} When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided.

When we sense people are not willing to listen to reason and that no good can come from an encounter, it is wise to let the antagonist dispute among themselves. The group of Jews were divided among the Pharisee and Sadducees and Paul introduced an emotionally charged topic so they could debate among themselves.

{8} (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.) {9} There was a great uproar, and some of the teachers of the law who were Pharisees stood up and argued vigorously. "We find nothing wrong with this man," they said. "What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?" {10} The dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them. He ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force and bring him into the barracks.

The Sadducees were like modern day theological liberals and the Pharisees were like modern day fundamentalists. These people could find no middle ground of agreement and the same is true today. Both the Pharisee and the Sadducees were enemies of the cross and as such should fight among themselves rather than hinder the work of the Kingdom of God. We should pray that God will rescue us from such battles so that we will not be torn to pieces by being too close to such controversies. We have plenty of work to do that God has called us to without getting caught in such debates.

{11} The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."

God had a purpose in having Paul appear before the Sanhedrin and before the court of Caesar. People need to hear a clear testimony of the saving power of Jesus and His position as Lord of all before the judgment of God comes upon them for rejecting His love.

{12} The next morning the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. {13} More than forty men were involved in this plot. {14} They went to the chief priests and elders and said, "We have taken a solemn oath not to eat anything until we have killed Paul. {15} Now then, you and the Sanhedrin petition the commander to bring him before you on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about his case. We are ready to kill him before he gets here."

There are still enemies of the Cross and they still plot to hinder the Kingdom of God. Many Christians are being literally killed in many parts of the world and elsewhere Christian influence is under attack. The players have changed but the agenda is the same.

{16} But when the son of Paul's sister heard of this plot, he went into the barracks and told Paul. {17} Then Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Take this young man to the commander; he has something to tell him." {18} So he took him to the commander. The centurion said, "Paul, the prisoner, sent for me and asked me to bring this young man to you because he has something to tell you." {19} The commander took the young man by the hand, drew him aside and asked, "What is it you want to tell me?" {20} He said: "The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul before the Sanhedrin tomorrow on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about him. {21} Don't give in to them, because more than forty of them are waiting in ambush for him. They have taken an oath not to eat or drink until they have killed him. They are ready now, waiting for your consent to their request." {22} The commander dismissed the young man and cautioned him, "Don't tell anyone that you have reported this to me."

When we are under attack from the world system or the religious establishment, we can look to Jesus Who is still in control. God has a way of thwarting the plans of the wicked and bringing them to naught. We may see help come from various places. When God sends help, we must not question its source. Some Christians today would refuse help from a "Roman government." God is not a respecter of persons and can use anyone to accomplish His will.

{23} Then he called two of his centurions and ordered them, "Get ready a detachment of two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at nine tonight. {24} Provide mounts for Paul so that he may be taken safely to Governor Felix." {25} He wrote a letter as follows: {26} Claudius Lysias, To His Excellency, Governor Felix: Greetings. {27} This man was seized by the Jews and they were about to kill him, but I came with my troops and rescued him, for I had learned that he is a Roman citizen. {28} I wanted to know why they were accusing him, so I brought him to their Sanhedrin. {29} I found that the accusation had to do with questions about their law, but there was no charge against him that deserved death or imprisonment. {30} When I was informed of a plot to be carried out against the man, I sent him to you at once. I also ordered his accusers to present to you their case against him. {31} So the soldiers, carrying out their orders, took Paul with them during the night and brought him as far as Antipatris. {32} The next day they let the cavalry go on with him, while they returned to the barracks. {33} When the cavalry arrived in Caesarea, they delivered the letter to the governor and handed Paul over to him. {34} The governor read the letter and asked what province he was from. Learning that he was from Cilicia, {35} he said, "I will hear your case when your accusers get here." Then he ordered that Paul be kept under guard in Herod's palace.

God could have sent an army of angels to rescue Paul but He send 470 Roman soldiers instead. God's agenda was not to remove Paul from the situation but to have Paul share the Gospel message with the kings of the world governing system.

Chapter 24

{24:1} Five days later the high priest Ananias went down to Caesarea with some of the elders and a lawyer named Tertullus, and they brought their charges against Paul before the governor. {2} When Paul was called in, Tertullus presented his case before Felix: "We have enjoyed a long period of peace under you, and your foresight has brought about reforms in this nation. {3} Everywhere and in every way, most excellent Felix, we acknowledge this with profound gratitude. {4} But in order not to weary you further, I would request that you be kind enough to hear us briefly. {5} "We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect {6} and even tried to desecrate the temple; so we seized him. {7} {8} By examining him yourself you will be able to learn the truth about all these charges we are bringing against him." {9} The Jews joined in the accusation, asserting that these things were true.

The enemies of the Cross and God's plan of salvation are willing to speak against what God is doing through His people. They are not ruffians nor are they uncultured people, but are well educated and have material resources. Yet they have rebellious hearts that stand against God. In their own pride they think they are right. Just as Tertullus did, they present their charges against the church using inflammatory words so as to prejudice those who hear them against what God is doing. To those who are not aware of the spiritual battles that are being waged, and if they hear on one side of the argument, then it seem that these elitist are right.

{10} When the governor motioned for him to speak, Paul replied: "I know that for a number of years you have been a judge over this nation; so I gladly make my defense. {11} You can easily verify that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship. {12} My accusers did not find me arguing with anyone at the temple, or stirring up a crowd in the synagogues or anywhere else in the city. {13} And they cannot prove to you the charges they are now making against me. {14} However, I admit that I worship the God of our fathers as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that agrees with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, {15} and I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. {16} So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man. {17} "After an absence of several years, I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts for the poor and to present offerings. {18} I was ceremonially clean when they found me in the temple courts doing this. There was no crowd with me, nor was I involved in any disturbance. {19} But there are some Jews from the province of Asia, who ought to be here before you and bring charges if they have anything against me. {20} Or these who are here should state what crime they found in me when I stood before the Sanhedrin-- {21} unless it was this one thing I shouted as I stood in

their presence: 'It is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today.'

Paul's defense was equally well stated as that of the lawyer Tertullus. Paul was a learned man and did not apologize for his learning. Too many Christians today seem to take pride in their lack of learning. This manifest ignorance is a detriment to the Kingdom of God. God is not a God of lack of excellence but He "doeth all things well."

Paul did not hesitate to use logic and the tenets of the Roman system of law to refute the arguments of his accusers. His accusers had no basis for their accusations but were operating only on hearsay information. Those who accused him could not define the crime he had committed.

Paul managed to plead guilty of being a Christian and of believing and stating the truth of the resurrection of the dead. All of us should be accused of this.

{22} Then Felix, who was well acquainted with the Way, adjourned the proceedings. "When Lysias the commander comes," he said, "I will decide your case." {23} He ordered the centurion to keep Paul under guard but to give him some freedom and permit his friends to take care of his needs. Felix was as so many are today. They know what Christianity is about and many well mentally accept the facts of the matter but it makes no difference in the way they live. Knowledge will not save us. Felix was also as many are today in that he would not make a decision if there was another alternative he could take to delay it. Some will enter into eternity without having made a decision to follow Jesus as Lord of their life. {24} Several days later Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was a Jewess. He sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. {25} As Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, "That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you."

Apparently, Paul had some entertainment value for Felix. He wanted his wife to hear what Paul testified about his life. God used that opportunity to bring conviction to the Roman leader. Felix successfully resisted the conviction and ended the meeting with Paul. Encounters with Christians should bring conviction to the lost. If that is not happening, then we as Christians, are missing opportunities God has arranged for us.

{26} At the same time he was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him. {27} When two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, but because Felix wanted to grant a favor to the Jews, he left Paul in prison.

As we share our faith with others and nothing happens, it is easy to become discouraged. We may think we have failed in our approach. Many times (if not all the time) the problem is with the hearer. Felix had an alternative agenda in listening to Paul. He was listening for a bribe and not for a means of salvation for his soul. The sequence of events for a person to come to salvation is conviction from the Spirit of God, repentance on the part of the lost person, and belief unto salvation. Without repentance, then there can be no belief unto salvation.

Chapter 25

{25:1} Three days after arriving in the province, Festus went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem, {2} where the chief priests and Jewish leaders appeared before him and presented the charges against Paul. {3} They urgently requested Festus, as a favor to them, to have Paul transferred to Jerusalem, for they were preparing an ambush to kill him along the way. {4} Festus answered, "Paul is being held at Caesarea, and I myself am going there soon. {5} Let some of your leaders come with me and press charges against the man there, if he has done anything wrong." {6} After spending eight or ten days with them, he went down to Caesarea, and the next day he convened the court and ordered that Paul be brought before him. {7} When Paul appeared, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many serious charges against him, which they could not prove.

Just as Felix was corrupt in wanting a bribe from Paul, it is likely Festus was looking to the Jews to show their appreciation for revisiting the situation with Paul. He spent more than a week in Jerusalem to give them opportunity to entertain him.

The Jews were still dedicated to killing Paul; however, God was more intent on having Paul go to Rome to present the gospel to Caesar.

{8} Then Paul made his defense: "I have done nothing wrong against the law of the Jews or against the temple or against Caesar." {9} Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there on these charges?" {10} Paul answered: "I am now standing before Caesar's court, where I ought to be tried. I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well. {11} If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die. But if the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!" {12} After Festus had conferred with his council, he declared: "You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!"

Paul was a Jew and also a Roman citizen. This dual citizenship put him in a good position to be a witness to both societies. In the situation he was in Paul was also able to take advantage of being a Roman citizen to extend his ministry to those in high positions in government. In a spiritual sense, we too have dual citizenship. We are fellow citizens with the saints and we also have citizenship in a physical nation. There are times when we face choices regarding our citizenship. Just as Paul could use his Roman citizenship to advantage, there will be times when we will find that our citizenship in this country is a resource that can be useful in what we are doing in the Kingdom of God. There are clear cut rules that will apply in every situation. In the book *Community of the King*, H. A. Snyder comments: "But this will never be a neat clear-cut, triumphant road for the Church to follow. Obedience to the Gospel in a world when Satan is still active means living with tension. We should be alarmed when we are at home in the world or have total "peace of mind." Christian life in a non-Christian world is tension, stress and at times even agony. The whole system of social techniques aims to adjust the individual to the world and eliminate

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tensions. Our Lord called and continues to call out a new society of persons unconditionally committed to exchanging the values of the surrounding society for the standards of Jesus' kingdom."

It is tragic when we realize that we can get a fairer hearing from the secular world than we can from some who profess to know God. Paul found himself in a situation when his chances of survival were greater with going with the Romans than among his own people.

{13} A few days later King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea to pay their respects to Festus. {14} Since they were spending many days there, Festus discussed Paul's case with the king. He said: "There is a man here whom Felix left as a prisoner. {15} When I went to Jerusalem, the chief priests and elders of the Jews brought charges against him and asked that he be condemned. {16} "I told them that it is not the Roman custom to hand over any man before he has faced his accusers and has had an opportunity to defend himself against their charges. {17} When they came here with me, I did not delay the case, but convened the court the next day and ordered the man to be brought in.

The Roman system of governmental hierarchy has carried over to present day practices in many of our organizations today. We also see evidence of a judicial structure that provided rights for citizens. Such definition and procedure grew out of a need for people to protect themselves from those who would use their positions of power or authority to abuse others. The Jewish leaders apparently saw no wrong in condemning Paul to death though he had done nothing wrong. Until all men are converted to God through Christ Jesus we will need laws and ordinances and procedures to protect the weak from the strong and the poor from the rich. It is important that these policies have the benefit of Christian thinking as they are formulated.

{18} When his accusers got up to speak, they did not charge him with any of the crimes I had expected. {19} Instead, they had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive.

Just as the Romans were confused over the dispute the Jews had regarding God's plan of salvation, we confuse the lost world as the various parts of the church argue and attach each other.

{20} I was at a loss how to investigate such matters; so I asked if he would be willing to go to Jerusalem and stand trial there on these charges. {21} When Paul made his appeal to be held over for the Emperor's decision, I ordered him held until I could send him to Caesar."

We read or hear vitriolic attacks of one sect of Christianity against other Christians and conclude as Paul did that the secular system shows more compassion and mercy than does the people who claim to be people of God. Some of the greatest hate in the world today is between Jew and Arab and both claim to worship the God of Abraham.

{22} Then Agrippa said to Festus, "I would like to hear this man myself." He replied, "Tomorrow you will hear him." {23} The next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great pomp and entered the audience room with the high ranking officers and the leading men of the city. At the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. {24} Festus said: "King Agrippa, and all who are present with us, you see this man! The whole Jewish community has petitioned me about him in Jerusalem and here in Caesarea, shouting that he ought not to live any longer. {25} I found he had done nothing deserving of death, but because he made his appeal to the Emperor I decided to send him to Rome. {26} But I have nothing definite to write to His Majesty about him. Therefore I have brought him before all of you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that as a result of this investigation I may have something to write. {27} For I think it is unreasonable to send on a prisoner without specifying the charges against him."

As the situation developed, Festus had a dilemma. He had to send Paul to Caesar to have his case heard but he did not know what the charges were. The arrival of King Agrippa (who was familiar with Jewish customs and laws) provided another opportunity to identify the charges against Paul.

Many people are naturally curious about spiritual things. We find many non-Christians intrigued with the end-time prophecies and teaching about the end of the world. People are drawn to the unusual and unexplained happenings. Agrippa had this natural curiosity as most people do even today.

Such curiosity can either lead people to find God or may be an opening for the devil to get a firmer grip on the life of a person. Without the presence of the church and the truth of God, then the possibility of error is multiplied.

God had prepared Paul to take the truth before the world's leaders and He was now arranging the opportunity for kings and emperors to hear the message.

Chapter 26

{26:1} Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You have permission to speak for yourself." So Paul motioned with his hand and began his defense: {2} "King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense against all the accusations of the Jews, {3} and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies. Therefore, I beg you to listen to me patiently. {4} "The Jews all know the way I have lived ever since I was a child, from the beginning of my life in my own country, and also in Jerusalem.

As Paul stood there, he could see the prophecy about his life come into being as he was about to bring the gospel message to kings. So when he said that he was glad to be able to speak for himself about what the Jews were accusing him of, this was not just empty words. Paul knew that God was guiding his life and the fact that he had been unjustly imprisoned did not cause him to be bitter. Paul had advised Timothy "be prepared in season and out of season" to preach the word. The situation he was in might be classified as one of those "out of season" opportunities. I would imagine that when Paul first heard the prophetic words that he would bring the message

before kings, he did not think that he would do so as a prisoner. God's ways are not our ways.

Agrippa was familiar with Jewish history and Paul was going to use that familiarity to present a convincing argument that Jesus is God's promised Messiah. Paul first developed some background information about himself to establish that he was someone who was well acquainted with the Jewish law and that what he believed was not a result of being misinformed about the law and the prophets. Paul had been a member of the most strict group of Jews, the Pharisees. He also pointed out that his accusers knew what his background was and they would be in agreement with him on this point.

{5} They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that according to the strictest sect of our religion, I lived as a Pharisee. {6} And now it is because of my hope in what God has promised our fathers that I am on trial today. {7} This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. O king, it is because of this hope that the Jews are accusing me. {8} Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead? {9} "I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. {10} And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. {11} Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them.

As part of the introduction to his testimony, Paul went right to the heart of the issue about Jesus. God had promised the nation of Israel a Messiah and all the Jews even to this day anticipate the coming of that person. Paul preached that Jesus is God's promised Messiah and that the proof of it was the fact that God had raised Him from the dead. Some of the Jews (the Sadducees) took issue with this simply because they did not believe in the resurrection. These were like so many of our modern day so-called Christians that dismiss anything that is supernatural. They "believe in God" but the god they believe in has no power.

Paul challenged the group there to consider the logic of whether the Almighty God, the Creator of heaven and earth, would have any difficulty in bringing the dead back to life. This seems like a small thing compared to the unlimited power of God. Even today people are disbelieving relative to this particular point of faith.

Paul had an effective witness for Christ because he had experienced Christ and had participated in the Kingdom of God. He had seen and heard what he was relating to others. Too many people today are ineffective in their witness because all they have is a "hear say" testimony. They can relate what they have read about or what happened to someone else but they are without a real witness of how salvation has affected their lives.

{12} "On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. {13} About noon, O king, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. {14} We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'

We can be zealous for God and be completely outside of His will for our lives. Being enthusiastic for a cause is important if anything is to be done. Real success comes to a life when we are both right and fervent. Many Christians today are the mirror image of the pre-conversion Paul. He was zealous and wrong in his doctrine and many Christians today are right doctrinally but have no zeal for the work of the Kingdom of God.

{15} "Then I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' the Lord replied. {16} 'Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. {17} I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them {18} to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

Two of the more important people in the life of the early church were Peter and Paul. Both were action oriented and people of intensity. Both had to be redirected to be useful to God. It may be easier to redirect an inspired person than to inspire a directed person. If we have no zeal then we may be in that company of the "lukewarm" which Christ wanted to spit out.

Just as God had a mission for Paul, He has a plan and purpose for our lives. However, if our ship is still in the harbor, then it will be difficult for God to direct our lives. We should not expect God to steer a ship that is not moving.

{19} "So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven. {20} First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds. {21} That is why the Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. {22} But I have had God's help to this very day, and so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen-- {23} that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles."

We may be moving and doing and stirring about and God may be dealing with us to direct our lives, however, if we are not obedient, then we will still be wrong. Paul had such an extraordinary experience that he could not misinterpret what God wanted him to do. All of us may not have such a clear message from God and we will need to be listening to the still small voice that God typically uses as He directs us. Many might think they would like to have such an experience as Paul had but that would be like someone using a large stick to hit us each time they wanted our attention. If we are listening to God, then He doesn't need to use such drastic methods with us.

Paul gave credit to God for the fact that he was still alive to be able to give witness to that group. He concluded his arguments at the same point that he started his defense: based on the word of God which was the Old Testament scriptures. He taught nothing that could not be substantiated by Moses and the prophets. Even the point of greatest controversy that the Messiah was to bring salvation to the Gentiles is clearly pointed out in Isaiah 49:6. "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."

{24} At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defense. "You are out of your mind, Paul!" he shouted. "Your great learning is driving you insane."

The preaching of the gospel is indeed foolishness to those who are perishing. To win by losing, to live by dying, and to trust a God you cannot see seem illogical to the natural man. We should not consider it unusual if the world thinks we are peculiar. If we blend in too well with our surroundings, then something is wrong. We are supposed to be light in the darkness.

{25} "I am not insane, most excellent Festus," Paul replied. "What I am saying is true and reasonable. {26} The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. {27} King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do." {28} Then Agrippa said to Paul, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" {29} Paul replied, "Short time or long--I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains."

When man's perspective is broadened beyond the natural realm to include the spiritual, then the reasonableness of what God has done in Christ Jesus is realized. Festus was unfamiliar with what God had already revealed of Himself through the prophets but Agrippa was not. Therefore, Paul concentrated on Agrippa who showed some evidence of understanding. Many times people need some "incubation time" to allow the "seed" of the word of God to germinate before they can actively trust with a saving faith. Many people in our churches have heard and mentally agree with the word of God, but they have never trusted to the point of salvation.

Paul made his appeal to the king for him to believe and be converted. Agrippa was, however, like so many people that are "almost persuaded" to surrender their life to God through Jesus. As the saying goes, "Close only counts in horse shoes." God calls us to give ourselves totally and completely to Him and accept Him as Lord of all. This was the hope and prayer that Paul had for those that heard him that day in Caesarea. It should be our hope and prayer for everyone who we know and we should be ready to give voice to our faith so that everyone we know will know Jesus also.

{30} The king rose, and with him the governor and Bernice and those sitting with them. {31} They left the room, and while talking with one another, they said, "This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment." {32} Agrippa said to Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."

Truly Isaiah was right when he wrote "And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed. (Isa 6:9-10) The Jews could not understand as readily as the heathen did.

Chapter 27

Paul was finally on his way to Rome. God had called Paul to be a messenger to the Gentiles. Caesar represented the Gentile world. He was the leader of the most powerful nation the world had seen until that time.

{27:1} When it was decided that we would sail for Italy, Paul and some other prisoners were handed over to a centurion named Julius, who belonged to the Imperial Regiment. {2} We boarded a ship from Adramyttium about to sail for ports along the coast of the province of Asia, and we put out to sea. Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica, was with us. {3} The next day we landed at Sidon; and Julius, in kindness to Paul, allowed him to go to his friends so they might provide for his needs. {4} From there we put out to sea again and passed to the lee of Cyprus because the winds were against us. {5} When we had sailed across the open sea off the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we landed at Myra in Lycia. {6} There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy and put us on board. {7} We made slow headway for many days and had difficulty arriving off Cnidus. When the wind did not allow us to hold our course, we sailed to the lee of Crete, opposite Salmone. {8} We moved along the coast with difficulty and came to a place called Fair Havens, near the town of Lasea.

The rigors of travel in times past cause us to appreciate the conveniences we have today. Many times we complain of the difficulty we have of doing the Lord's work and of the time involved. Compared to the situation of the first century (or even the last century), we have no excuse.

{9} Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Fast. So Paul warned them, {10} "Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also." {11} But the centurion, instead of listening to what Paul said, followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship.

God gives wisdom to those He has called to carry out His work. This wisdom finds application in all areas of life and is not limited to just spiritual things. We would do well to seek advice of Godly people rather than worldly "experts."

{12} Since the harbor was unsuitable to winter in, the majority decided that we should sail on, hoping to reach Phoenix and winter there. This was a harbor in Crete, facing both southwest and northwest. {13} When a gentle south wind began to blow, they thought they had obtained what they wanted; so they weighed anchor and sailed along the shore of Crete.

Many times we find ourselves in positions of no good options. We commonly call this “between a rock and a hard place.” When this happens, we look for any “sign” of direction in which to go or for what might appear to be a more favorable condition. The majority will usually opt to do something since this gives us an appearance that we are in control. We hear people say, “I rather do something, even though it is wrong.” We are also fond of saying, “Don’t just sit there, do something.” In many cases, wisdom would teach us that “those who wait upon the Lord renew their strength.”

{14} Before very long, a wind of hurricane force, called the "northeaster," swept down from the island. {15} The ship was caught by the storm and could not head into the wind; so we gave way to it and were driven along. {16} As we passed to the lee of a small island called Cauda, we were hardly able to make the lifeboat secure. {17} When the men had hoisted it aboard, they passed ropes under the ship itself to hold it together. Fearing that they would run aground on the sandbars of Syrtis, they lowered the sea anchor and let the ship be driven along.

Once again, the majority was wrong in their decision to leave what they judged to be an “unsuitable harbor.” We may attempt to “improve” our condition (move to a better or more comfortable harbor) which has merit; however, unless God instructs us to do so, then we run the risk of having our ship fall apart. We are then left with a situation of just holding on for survival.

{18} We took such a violent battering from the storm that the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard. {19} On the third day, they threw the ship’s tackle overboard with their own hands. {20} When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved.

When we take unnecessary risks in life and do so on our own initiative then we may find that we suffer great losses in an effort to just survive. In the storms of life we soon find that much of the cargo we carry around is really a hindrance and much of the acquired capability we have just weigh us down. As we, in desperation, cast these aside, we will likely face desperation if we had our hope and faith in such things.

The centurion followed advice of those with natural light rather than Paul who had divine light. The result was that they were driven by the circumstances that surrounded them. They were helpless in such a situation. If we are relying on our own wisdom, then we too can be swayed by every wind of change that comes along. Just as the ship’s crew could not see the sun or the stars, many people are clueless as to where they are or where they are going. They have no point of reference and no absolutes in their lives.

{21} After the men had gone a long time without food, Paul stood up before them and said: "Men, you should have taken my advice not to sail from Crete; then you would have spared yourselves this damage and loss. {22} But now I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed.

Unfortunately, human nature is such that we have to be totally at the end of our strength before we will listen to God. The men aboard the ship were at such a point. Paul reminded them of the advice he had given them earlier (not to say “I told you so”) but to give validity to the advice he was about to give to them.

{23} Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me {24} and said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.' {25} So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me. {26} Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island."

We cannot know if the men who heard Paul believed that he had actually been visited by an angel. People were much more open to the supernatural then as compared to many people today. The potential skepticism did not keep Paul from sharing the information with those who needed to hear it. Our lack of boldness perhaps comes from our lack of belief that God will do what He has said He would.

In the midst of despair, there can be hope. Of the 276 people on that ship, four were Christians (Paul and his three traveling companions Luke, Aristarchus, and Trophimus). The world should be able to look to those who know God for hope when all seems lost. We in the church are the salt and the light when decay and darkness are the only alternatives. We must learn from Paul and speak out regarding an alternative to just going down with the ship. Some people are in such desperation that they will listen to a message of hope. Unfortunately, the church is not always there with the message of the truth and those in desperation are likely to follow anyone who will speak with authority. The times in which we live are perilous times and many are listening for direction and some sense of what to do and where to turn. We must be careful to guard our personal witness and the witness of the church corporate so that when we speak, the message will be clear and not confounded because what we do and what we say do not send the same message.

{27} On the fourteenth night we were still being driven across the Adriatic Sea, when about midnight the sailors sensed they were approaching land. {28} They took soundings and found that the water was a hundred and twenty feet deep. A short time later they took soundings again and found it was ninety feet deep. {29} Fearing that we would be dashed against the rocks, they dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight.

Many people live their lives in a manner similar to what was happening to the ship. The winds of the world drive them and toss them about and they have no idea where they are going or even where they are. It is a frightful situation in which to be. The irony of such a life is that it is difficult to change it. Landing and coming to a more secure situation could be like crashing into the rocks along the shore. When a person is in such a condition, he truly needs the light of God’s word to shine in his life to lessen the impact of transition.

{30} In an attempt to escape from the ship, the sailors let the lifeboat down into the sea, pretending they were going to lower some

anchors from the bow. {31} Then Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved." {32} So the soldiers cut the ropes that held the lifeboat and let it fall away.

God had provided a message of salvation to the people on the ship. All had heard the message from Paul that they would be saved, however, all did not believe. They may have thought that what Paul said could happen and it might be true but they did not have faith in what he said. Their actions prove they did not believe. As James wrote in his epistle, "Faith without the works of faith is dead." All they needed to do was to trust. But even while the salvation was being worked out, many wanted to try to save themselves. As people attempt to save themselves by what may appear to be "natural means" it puts other in jeopardy.

{33} Just before dawn Paul urged them all to eat. "For the last fourteen days," he said, "you have been in constant suspense and have gone without food--you haven't eaten anything. {34} Now I urge you to take some food. You need it to survive. Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head." {35} After he said this, he took some bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke it and began to eat. {36} They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves. {37} Altogether there were 276 of us on board. {38} When they had eaten as much as they wanted, they lightened the ship by throwing the grain into the sea.

Many responsible people have a great tendency to hold back something for emergency situations. As they neared the end of their ordeal, it was time to use the provision to provide the needed strength to finish the job. Many Christians have resources they are holding for "a rainy day" which need to be used to strengthen the church in these last days. My guess is that even now the time is so short that some of what we have stocked will not be used but will wind up going down with the ship.

{39} When daylight came, they did not recognize the land, but they saw a bay with a sandy beach, where they decided to run the ship aground if they could. {40} Cutting loose the anchors, they left them in the sea and at the same time untied the ropes that held the rudders. Then they hoisted the foresail to the wind and made for the beach. {41} But the ship struck a sandbar and ran aground. The bow stuck fast and would not move, and the stern was broken to pieces by the pounding of the surf.

The people aboard the ship did not know anything about the island on which they were to land. However, they had come to the conclusion that "the unknown" was better than being on a sinking ship. Many people find themselves in such a situation in their lives and in times of great crises will make life-changing decisions. If the church is there for them, then those whose ship are breaking up will have a choice of a safe haven.

{42} The soldiers planned to kill the prisoners to prevent any of them from swimming away and escaping. {43} But the centurion wanted to spare Paul's life and kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and get to land. {44} The rest were to get there on planks or on pieces of the ship. In this way everyone reached land in safety.

In the eyes of the world, life is cheap. We see this in wars, drive-by shootings, and in the abortion of unborn children. Just as the centurion's intervention to spare the life of Paul enriched the world, our intervention in saving lives can enhance the quality of our world in the future.

Chapter 28

{28:1} Once safely on shore, we found out that the island was called Malta. {2} The islanders showed us unusual kindness. They built a fire and welcomed us all because it was raining and cold.

The traditions of hospitality are strong in the middle east and Mediterranean areas of the world. Most people will respond in a similar manner to other people in crisis situations.

{3} Paul gathered a pile of brushwood and, as he put it on the fire, a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. {4} When the islanders saw the snake hanging from his hand, they said to each other, "This man must be a murderer; for though he escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live." {5} But Paul shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects.

This incident of the viper on the hand of Paul is cited as fulfillment of one of the signs that will follow those who believe in Jesus as mentioned in Mark 16. Most will read this passage and conclude that the viper **bit** Paul (and certainly the implication is that Paul was bitten), but the passage does not state that. The Greek word is *kathapto* and can be translated to fasten to or bind on. John Gill's commentary suggests that the viper simply wrapped itself around the hand of Paul. While I would do nothing to cause doubts in the miracle working power of God, I do not think we need to go beyond the word given to us to make a better story than the one God has already provided for us.

{6} The people expected him to swell up or suddenly fall dead, but after waiting a long time and seeing nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and said he was a god.

The islanders obviously assumed that the viper bit Paul and they expected the natural thing to happen. When the expected does not occur we then seek to find a different basis so that what we see makes sense. Without knowing all the possibilities, then the islanders came to an erroneous conclusion. We must be on guard to not jump to conclusion without having all the facts of the matter.

{7} There was an estate nearby that belonged to Publius, the chief official of the island. He welcomed us to his home and for three days entertained us hospitably. {8} His father was sick in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him and, after prayer, placed his hands on him and healed him. {9} When this had happened, the rest of the sick on the island came and were cured. {10} They honored us in many ways and when we were ready to sail, they furnished us with the supplies we needed.

The influence of Rome was on this island and the hospitality traditions were observed by the Roman official. The kindness they showed to God's representatives was rewarded. God sent healing by the hand of Paul to many on the island. God wants to bless the world He created and the people He made. His blessings come through

His people but only if His people act in faith to reach out to those who do not believe with the love of God that can flow through us.

Christian compassion reaches out to others in need even when our own need is great. When we realize that God's power to heal and minister through His servants is not hampered by physical constraints (even being a prisoner as was Paul), then we can be used regardless of physical circumstances.

{11} After three months we put out to sea in a ship that had wintered in the island. It was an Alexandrian ship with the figurehead of the twin gods Castor and Pollux. {12} We put in at Syracuse and stayed there three days. {13} From there we set sail and arrived at Rhegium. The next day the south wind came up, and on the following day we reached Puteoli. {14} There we found some brothers who invited us to spend a week with them. And so we came to Rome.

In our fast paced living, the idea of spending three months on an island with nothing to do and no where to go would bother us. However, such an idle period might give us all a chance to draw closer to God and to know His will for our lives.

In those days of poor communication and difficult travel, Paul found Christians in the port of Puteoli. The rest of the journey would be overland and the group likely needed to regain their strength before continuing on.

{15} The brothers there had heard that we were coming, and they traveled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. At the sight of these men Paul thanked God and was encouraged.

Paul was a great man of God and yet he needed to be encouraged. The encouragement and support Paul received from Christians along the way was a great witness to the Roman soldiers and others who were traveling with them. There are many ways for us to witness and support of our fellow Christians is a significant one.

{16} When we got to Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him.

Since Paul was not a criminal he was not sent to jail. He was obliged to appear before Caesar and confined to ensure that did. This provision may have been stipulated by Festus who sent him to Rome or could have been at the recommendation of Julius who brought him to Rome.

{17} Three days later he called together the leaders of the Jews. When they had assembled, Paul said to them: "My brothers, although I have done nothing against our people or against the customs of our ancestors, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans. {18} They examined me and wanted to release me, because I was not guilty of any crime deserving death. {19} But when the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar--not that I had any charge to bring against my own people. {20} For this reason I have asked to see you and talk with you. It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain."

Though Paul was chained to a Roman soldier and was under house arrest he was not deterred in reaching out to the Jews where ever he went.

Paul's explanation of why he was there did not include the purpose of God in delivering the truth of the Gospel to Caesar himself. The political and military leader of that part of the world would be left without an excuse when he would stand before Almighty God on the Day of Judgment.

{21} They replied, "We have not received any letters from Judea concerning you, and none of the brothers who have come from there has reported or said anything bad about you. {22} But we want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect."

The controversy over Paul was more of a "Jerusalem thing" than of a real concern to most of the Jews in other parts of the world.

{23} They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.

Many people are serious about their "religion" and they will turn out in large numbers to address or challenge new ideas that may threaten what they believe. Those who are zealous may be the most difficult to convince of any new truth. The fact that the eternal destiny of people is at stake caused Paul to work diligently to convince these Jews of the truth of Jesus.

{24} Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe. {25} They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement: "The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your forefathers when he said through Isaiah the prophet: {26} "Go to this people and say, "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving." {27} For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them."

We often wonder why people respond to the Gospel message in different ways. Many times a person will reject truth when it would cause them to give up some sin in his or her life that they are not willing to relinquish. It comes down to priorities in what a person thinks (believes) is most important. We saw this failure to make the right choice in Esau when he traded his birthright for a bowl of beans. When a person drifts too far away from the Light of God, then they do not have enough light to see the truth. The Psalmist said, "In your light we shall see light."

{28} "Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!" {29} {30} For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. {31} Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.

God had chosen the physical nation of Israel as the stewards of His Plan of Salvation. When they rejected it time and time again, He gave them one more chance in promising them 70 weeks of years to come back to Him. This time was culminated in their ultimate rejection of Jesus during the middle of the seventieth week. After that the stewardship was given to the church which would largely be made up of Gentiles.

The Acts of the Apostles

