

# ACTS...

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*Ingimar DeRidder*

# Act One

## *Authority*

### The Church's Vision

When Christ left this world He left his vision behind so we could see. Without a vision the people perish, but give a man a vision or a dream and then nothing will stop him. A man with a vision is like a candle that cannot be put under a bushel. Let a man “dream a dream,” and he will be able to go on when all others want to give up.

When Christ arose from the dead and escaped the tomb, truth also came forth triumphant. Truth can be crucified a thousand times and it will rise again and again. The message of the resurrection and of the One who came to save cannot be stopped.

John's gospel begins by saying “in the beginning was the Word.” So it is with the birth of the Church. It begins with a “word” or we might say it begins with a vision. “Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in Judea, and in Samaria and unto the uttermost part of the earth” Acts 1:8.

A church without a vision is not a church at all. A Christian without a vision is a body without life. “Without a vision, the people perish” means without a message or revelation from God the people will not know what to do. God has not left the Church without direction. God began with a vision.

An important part of Acts 1:8 was left out when it was quoted. Without this important aspect the Christian's vision would never be more than a Polly-Anna pipe dream. “But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you...” The believers had a vision, but they must not hurry out into the world without God.

Wait for the promise. We do not wait well, yet that was Christ's command. “And being assembled together with them, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which ye have heard of me” Acts 1:4. Isaiah said, “they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint” If we fail to mount up and catch the wind, if we become weary in the running, and if we fall fainting in the way, it is because we first failed to wait

This waiting does not mean indolence, indifference, or idleness. It is a waiting that anticipates the arrival of a promise, not unlike awaiting a promised package from the post office, or awaiting an important phone call from a friend.

Chapter one of Acts is the waiting room or the vestibule of Christianity. A risen and resurrected Christ has not only “showed himself alive” He has told them to wait for the Promise. Many rush out with excitement and enthusiasm to tell the Gospel story only to see that zeal molt like an eagle instead of mount like an eagle. Many weary and breathless believers gasp for air along the running tracks of Christian service. Many fall and faint along the way without strength to even walk for God in this world simply because they failed to first wait for the promise.

While there was only one Pentecost and one coming of the Holy Spirit, there is a sense in which we must be careful not to rush out into the world without God's power. Each believer must “wait” on God at the birth of each new day and be endowed with strength from on high. He who “wait[s] for the Promise,” shall receive power.

Principles are timeless, history is history. When we read Scripture we are to learn from, follow, and apply the principles, but we should not attempt to duplicate events that were unique for the moment. It would be foolish to suggest we all walk on water, because we saw Peter do it. It would be presumptuous for us to try to call down fire from heaven because Elijah did so on Mt. Carmel. Many sects, orders, and denominations were born after seizing the experience of another. David did not attempt to fight in Saul's armor. Some well-meaning disciple will always be tempted to capture the moment and institutionalize it as Peter did when he suggested they make three tabernacles "one for thee, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." A whole denomination or group of denominations have attempted to recreate or recapture Acts One and Two by creating what is commonly known as the Pentecostal movement.

We should no more pray for another Pentecost than we should pray that Christ would again be born in Bethlehem. When we study these events we should learn the lessons, and take up the principles, but to canonize the circumstances of the moment is dangerously close to idolatry. Any attempt to re-cast the coin of a heavenly mint can only produce a counterfeit. Pentecost is our heritage. The Holy Spirit is our birthright. Every born-again believer has "the Promise" doctrinally and positionally. . Whether we enjoy or employ our birthright is another matter altogether.

God gives power for a purpose. Jesus had the disciples to gather up the fragments that remained after the feeding of the five thousand. Twelve baskets full were not to be wasted or hoarded. Likewise God does not waste His Spirit. The power of the church was to be the fuel of missionary witness. "and you shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." He who knows God's power is he whom God can trust with that power. The one who will not walk across the street to share his faith will never know the power of God that can change the world, though he prays for it forever.

The book of Acts is the story of the Church that confronts the world with the message of the sin atoning, ever-living, life changing person of Jesus Christ. What began in a lonely stable in an obscure village called Bethlehem is about to be reborn in the body of a church and then catapulted out of the terrified weakness of the upper room into the streets, crossroads, markets, and theaters of humanity in strength and boldness. "And ye shall receive power."

Forty days passed between the cross and Pentecost. During that time the Lord taught his followers about many things. One theme reintroduced to the disciples was a familiar one. Jesus spoke to them of the kingdom of God. Their vision was as small as their faith. They were still thinking about Israel. Christ was for the world. "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel" Acts 1:6 Some believers are still obsessed with this question. Their whole Christian life revolves around discovering the answer to this question. Books, conferences, seminars, and lectures on this subject attract the curious. While we should be sensitive to immanency of Christ's return and be certain He will keep all His promises, the task and attention of the church should be directed into other areas. "It is not for you to know." Some things are not for us to know, no matter how much we study. How much better it would be if we concentrated on what we do know rather than on what is not for us to know. We should beware specializing in speculations. While some are fascinated with such puzzles, let us concentrate on God's plan and mission for the Church. "Ye shall be witnesses unto me, both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."

The Kingdom of God is large enough for Jew and Gentile. It comes without “observation” Lk. 17:20,21. It is not of meat and drink (Rom. 14:17), rites, ranks, and rituals. Israel will once again have her day, but the kingdom we enter and proclaim is spiritual. It was not until the Ascension that the disciples understood that God’s ultimate goal was not that Jesus be king of the Jews, but King of Kings. Those who long for the rebuilding of the temple on the holy mount in Jerusalem would do well to ponder the words of the Master in John 4:21 to see how much greater God’s plan is for the world. This spiritual kingdom and message was to be carried into Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth. In Acts chapter one we are about to embark upon this “Trail of Faith.”

When Christ finally ascended up into heaven the disciples were found searching the skies. God’s messengers ask “why stand ye here gazing up into heaven?” The church is often guilty of two extremes, one is gazing and the other is grazing. While we are to look for Christ’s return we must look to our task and heavenly mission. The second extreme is that of gorging ourselves again and again while neglecting our mission to proclaim “this same Jesus [who] shall come in like manner as [we] have seen him go into heaven.”

There are many questions about Judas that may never be answered. Those who believe a Christian can become a non-Christian point to Judas as an example of one falling from Grace. Those who believe such a fall is impossible point to Judas as an example of an unsaved church member. So the debate goes on and on. There are other questions as well. What of his office or as it is called his “bishopric?” What of the disciple’s choice of Matthias?

Given that the experience of the early church is not gospel (but history) it is quite evident that mistakes could have been made by these well meaning but fallible saints. Compelled by a desire to fulfill scripture and to complete the brokenness caused by Judas’ treason they set out to fill his office with another apostle. Did they rush to judgment? There are four reasons I believe this first attempt at church government was flawed. Polity has always been a cause of weakness and division among believers. First, it should be noted that Christ told them to wait, not to vote. They did not yet have the filling of the Holy Spirit, nor the wisdom necessary to make such an important choice. This is obvious from the second fact that they were uncertain enough to have two candidates without knowing which one to choose. Thirdly, they appointed two before any mention of praying about it. It appears that they appointed first and prayed second. This always causes us to err. Pray first. They employed the throw of the dice (or Urim) which seems a mechanical means to make such a spiritual choice. The fourth reason is the obscurity of their choice. It seems that God would have confirmed his pleasure and guidance in such a decision with some mention of this apostle, born out of season, but he does not. Later we see a choice that God makes on the Damascus road when Saul is chosen to be the apostle to the Gentiles. If I am wrong, I feel I am wrong on the side of caution. If I am wrong, I owe an apology to Matthias which I shall gladly give. When men ordain men the result is never greater than man, but when a man is ordained of God he is one to be reckoned with and his influence and impact on the world is not a candle hid under a bushel.

## A Voice

First comes the vision, then comes the voice. The church had a message to deliver and a story to tell. The early church was without the modern technological trinkets, without which we seem to think our job of reaching the world impossible. Today we have Gospel films, microphones, radio, television, computers, and fax machines just to name a few, yet none have proven more effective than the single tool employed by the first century church: the human voice.

“Parthians, Medes, Elamites...we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God.” The tongue is an instrument of speech. A tongue is a vehicle that carries, (on the wheels of language) an idea or thought. Communication begins with a picture in our mind. The challenge is to reconstruct that picture with as much exactness as possible in someone else’s mind. Language (or the tongue) carries our idea of our thought, word by word, and hopefully reassembles it in the hearer’s mind exactly as it was in ours. If I say “book” you immediately get a picture in your mind of a book. If I say “libros” you may see a question mark. In fact the idea and meaning is the same. What is different is the language or the tongue.

Now which is more important, the message or the means of transporting the message? Which is more important, the idea or the instrument? This is not to say that both are not important. They are, however the word is designed to carry the more important thought. If a word changes the original thought, it fails in its purpose.

Much of the argument today about pentecostal tongues is in support and defense of the instrument and vehicle, when what is of real importance is the thought or idea. A good principle of priorities to follow in interpretation of Scripture is to remember that the miracle is never more important than the message. Jesus opened blinded eyes only that men might see that He is the light of the world. Too often, people are obsessed with the miracle and miss the message. The tongues of Acts 2 are indeed a miracle. But then as now, the tongue is a tool used to communicate a truth. “We do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God” Acts 2: 11. The tongues are different, the message is the same. The tongues are temporal, the truth is eternal. Paul was correct when he said in his letter to the Corinthians, “tongues shall cease,” or pass away. Many of the languages of Acts 2 are dead in that they are no longer spoken languages, as is New Testament Greek. The languages may be dead, and the tongues may have ceased, but the message of God’s Word is eternal. “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” Jesus spoke those words in ancient Aramaic. They were recorded in the Holy Bible in Greek; and today in our churches we read them in English. But those same words are read in German in the churches of Berlin. The languages may be different, but the message is always the same. Instead of debating and arguing about tongues, we should focus on the message (the wonderful words of God) which brings us together. The tongues or the miracles may vary and be forgotten. The truth (or the message) is the same yesterday, today and forever. The tongues of first century church was the tongue that simply told the story of Jesus and His great sacrifice for our sins. We can only repeat the words of the songwriter who said “Oh for a thousand tongues to sing, our great Redeemer’s praise.”

PS

One more word about tongues

I met a new believer the other day. He was fellowshipping with a particular group of Christians. I encouraged him to continue in the things he had learned and to read his Bible for it was the Word of God. At this point he qualified my statement by adding “The King James Bible is the Word of God.” As if we believers do not have enough to do just to fight the world, the flesh, and the devil; we seem to be always ready to do battle with each other.

Add a new tongue to the list: Parthians, Medes, Elamites and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judea, and Cappadocia, and Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia . . .” add King James English. King James English is just another tongue. If God himself, through a miracle of providence, guided the translators as some suggest, it is no more a miracle than the one that took place on Pentecost when men from the farthest corners of the Roman empire heard unlearned Galileans preach in languages they had never learned. The language is not more important than the lesson. The tongue is not more important than the truth. The miracle is always subordinate to the message.

ACTS...

# Act Two

## *Integrity*

The fifth chapter of acts describes an ugly incident that should remind us just how serious God is when it comes to building His church in holiness. It should be clear from this sad episode that with God, the end never justifies the means. Situation ethics are as good as no ethics at all. God Deals with Falsehood. Few ministries today would turn down any donation or financial contribution. If the truth were known many a church steeple has been purchased with blood money given in an effort to soothe a sore conscience. Let us remember that God keeps the books. The widow's two mites were recorded and welcomed because they were given out of a heart of devotion to God. On the other hand, the rich young ruler was invited to give his money away to other causes (that is, to the poor) and then to follow Christ. Christ and His true church do not need our money. Jesus could never be accused of having a conflict of interest. The rich young ruler went away sorrowing because he loved riches more than eternal life. Giving is a test of our hearts devotion and faithfulness to God. It is a mark of what or who is first in our lives. Obviously, Christ was not first in the lives of Ananias and his wife Sapphira. Giving is also a test of the integrity of a ministry. The church at Jerusalem demonstrated that they were more concerned with truth than treasures. Must it not be an embarrassment to God's reputation that ministers are pleading for and soliciting money? Peter and John went into the temple to pray and encountered a beggar at the beautiful gate. "Silver and gold have I none" said Peter "but such as I have, I give unto thee. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk." The apostles appeared poor by the world's standards, but they were rich in the grace and the power of God. Today, all too often, it is the church that seems to be doing the begging. While she does not hold out a tin cup, she holds out too many offering plates, and makes too many televised appeals for support. She often offers some trinket and incentive or inducement to give and is not too far removed from the comparison to that of a beggar holding out a cup full of pencils at the train station. The above is not a parenthetical diversion for it helps us to see the seriousness of the challenge afforded the church in the first days of its infancy. Barnabas and others were making contributions of funds to be used for the common good and relief of the poor. What difference did it make if the apostles accepted the gift of Ananias and Sapphira? It was never a question of money. It was a question of integrity. It was a question of hypocrisy. These had conspired to misrepresent themselves as being sacrificial, and benevolent, charitable and fully committed to the cause of Christ. One Judas was enough for such a short history. Peter had just dealt with the vacancy of this empty bishopric. Satan had put it in Judas' heart to betray Christ and be untrue. Satan seeks to refill his vacancies also. Satan knows who is "for sale." I believe it was the "half-heartedness" of this couple that condemned them. It was their pretension and duplicity that sealed their doom. Satan attempted to make his move upon the chessboard of circumstances, and thought he had two promising pawns in Ananias and Sapphira. The same Holy Spirit that was lied to gave discernment to the under-shepherds to check the moves of darkness. Satan knows that his best strategy often is not to fight the church as much as to join it. He never misses a service. If he can get a foothold in the business and organization of things he can foil well-meaning efforts and spoil the fellowship of believers. This sorry couple was lying and conspired to lie. How can the church, which is the body of the One who called himself the truth, tolerate being built upon a bedrock of lies? The answer is: it cannot. The sin had little to do with money from God's point of view. Peter touched the heart of the sin: "thou hast not lied unto men, but to God." A great fear came upon all the church (v 11). Let us all remember when we approach God, that we are approaching the God of truth. It is a foolish thing to lie to God.

When Jesus began his ministry, he began with a cleansing of the temple. He drove out the oxen and overturned the money changer's tables. "My Father's house is a house of prayer, and you have made it a den of thieves." God cleaned house then, and once again when some were attempting to assume the posture of generous givers when they were not. God keeps the books. Woe to one who has a thief's heart and hopes to use the church for personal gain. Remember Ananias, remember Achan, remember Judas who was a thief, and his field of blood. The modern church would do well to return to the sterling integrity of the first century church. Truth must be the material with which it is built. To build on anything less is to build a house upon the sand. The apostles had integrity when it came to preaching the truth. When they were threatened by the religious authorities in an attempt to silence the voice of truth and manipulate the message, they refused. There is often a temptation to dull the edge of a sharp message so as not to offend those to whom one owes their livelihood. It is because of this very reason that a true minister of God's Word should work for God alone. Error is often institutionalized taking the form of a religious order or system that perpetuates itself by feeding on the applause of its own constituents. In other words, they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears. Beware, for if the blind lead the blind, they all fall in the ditch. Men should give out of love for God, and a love for truth. They should not give in an attempt to gain advantage. We shall probably never know the reasons behind the pretentious offering placed at the disciple's feet. Poor Ananias was fooled. Then he was filled, foiled, and felled. The bedrock of the church is the Truth, and her brick and mortar is her integrity.

**God Finds Godly Men** The next test of integrity came when the apostles continued to preach in the forbidden name of Jesus. The church had no choice but to continue its mission and proclaim its message. "We ought to obey God rather than man," said Peter. This is the very heart of integrity. Faith is manifested in obedience. The leadership was arrested a second time and after being delivered from prison through a miracle. Integrity took again to teaching about Jesus in the temple. The only reward these dedicated servants of God received was a beating. Their response to such ill treatment so soon after the crucifixion of their master was one of praise, for they were soon "rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name." The first test of the church's integrity had to do with its message. The second had to do with motives. A third test was a question of methods. How would those of Jewish background treat those of Grecian background? Would there be favoritism within the assembly? Would certain ones gain an advantage because of their place or position? In answer to this new challenge to the harmony and fellowship of believers, a call was issued to enlist godly men into the ministry of service. There is a ministry of the Word and there is a ministry of helps. The church must have its Marys who sit at the feet of teaching and learn. The church must also have its Marthas who work behind the scenes and keep the tables. Peter called for the assembly to search out honest men full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom to see to the temporal matters of administration. There were many needs within the community. Widows were the responsibility of the local synagogue, and now those needs were inherited by the church. How we treat those in need is a test of integrity. Jesus said, "as you do it unto one of the least of these, ye do it unto me." If integrity is the brick and mortar of the Church, then kindness is the window that allows the light of heaven to shine in.

### **The First Martyr**

Stephen lived up to his name. Stephen means crown. He received the first martyr's crown. He took up the ministry which involved many signs and wonders. His success drew the attention of the enemy, spiritual success always does. A new candle that begins to burn is never unnoticed by the forces of darkness. "All those who live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution



Stephen was called upon to defend the claims of Christianity. His words and wisdom were more than the enemy could bear so they resorted to distortion and lies. They charged him with blasphemy and brought him before the religious council. The servant of the Lord must not strive. He would answer their charges with a measured response, but he was under control and at peace with God. He traced the rebellious history of a stiff-necked people reminding them that they had a habit of resisting the leading of the Holy Spirit, rejecting God's servants, and disobeying God's word. He reminded them that God was bigger than the temple and that Jehovah did not live in buildings made with hands. He preached an excellent sermon and his last sermon may have been his first. He was faithful to the truth. People will not always welcome the truth nor the bearer of that truth. Stephen was taken out and stoned to death. Yet he saw the Lord Jesus in his final moments, not unlike the Hebrew children who were cast into the fiery furnace, he was joined by "one like unto the son of God." Stephen commended his spirit to the keeping of God and the Bible then says that he "fell asleep," which is a comforting euphemism for a Christian's death. The garments of the murderers were laid at the feet of one Saul of Tarsus. Although there is no indication that he participated in the actual stoning, we see how callous was the heart of the some day apostle. Bigotry is still one of the most heinous of crimes for it commits acts of cruelty in the name of heaven. May we rather take the blows than give them. Jesus said, "If my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight." Stephen gazed beyond the glares of his persecutors and saw the king in His kingdom. He prayed for them that despitefully used him and were killing him. May God so fill us with his Spirit that we too will be faithful witnesses.

### **Dark Africa**

While the forces of darkness were trying to extinguish a light that burned in Stephen's heart, God was kindling a flame in another. An Ethiopian eunuch was leaving Jerusalem in a chariot. Philip, another of the ministers chosen in the sixth chapter was busy proclaiming the message of Christ. Philip joined himself to this august company by the prompting of the Holy Spirit and found the African reading from the book of Isaiah. Beginning with this prospect at the point at which he found him, he gracefully led him to a knowledge of Jesus Christ. The entourage was called to a halt long enough for the convert to be baptized in obedience to Christ's command.

The last time we see the Eunuch he was said to be "rejoicing." It seemed that God had gotten himself another little light. For with every flame that flickers under the winds of persecution, God ignites another. For every drop of blood that falls there sprouts up another witness. For every stone that is hurled at a martyr, God builds another church. God's truth is marching on.

# Act Three

## *Liberty*

Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty. Liberty is the standard left behind by the conquering armies of God. If the Son shall make us free, we are free indeed. In chapter 9 a Pharisee is set free from the shackles of blind religious dogma and pride of spirit. There too, one is set free from the bands of sickness and another from the bonds of death. In Chapter 10 a man is released from the chambers of ceremonial law and tradition; and the doors of the kingdom are opened to the Gentiles in Caesarea.

Liberty spread to the city of Antioch, which became the home of foreign missions. In chapter twelve an apostle is arrested, but through the miraculous intervention of God, is set free from his prison cell. If there is a single lesson in these first Acts of the Apostles, it is this: there is liberty in Jesus Christ. Who would want anything else?

James became the first of the apostles to be martyred for the faith. He once asked if he might not drink from the same cup and receive the same baptism as Jesus. Here he got his wish (Matt. 20:23; Acts 12:2) for the same wicked authorities that condemned the Master now turned upon him. Herod continued the tradition of his fathers. Christianity is not only liberating, it makes the soul much larger. The New Testament Church was a life changing church. The thing all religions have in common is they are too rigid. The New Testament Church was something new.

### **Of a Pharisee**

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus is perhaps the most famous and dramatic of all church history. The Lord who once changed water into wine now changed a violent antagonist into one of the most stalwart defenders of the faith.

Everyone's conversion is precious and every soul is equally important, yet Saul's salvation was most unusual and unexpected. A solemn study of what happened on that Damascus road should convince the student of soteriology that salvation is not of man, but of God. Saul's conversion could not be attributed to eloquent sermons, or persuasive evangelism, or human logic. Saul was fully in control of the situation until the very minute he encountered Christ on the highway. Saul's fall to the ground and temporary blinding put an end to his belligerence against Christ and his church and turned him from darkness unto light. Saul was set free from ignorance, arrogance, and violence. He was set free from the powers of an ironic form of bigotry that left a trail of sorrow in its wake. Originally the word bigotry meant "by God." It meant that a man took a stand or held a position that was commanded by God or authorized by heaven. But like so many other things it began to be misused by man. Men once persecuted, now began to persecute others. Zealots who would easily burn others at the stake are no friends of God. Such men would do well to read the words of the Savior who warned Peter to put up his sword for "those who live by the sword, shall die by the sword."

Saul thought he was defending God and the Faith of God. He left a trail of blood and broken lives and families in his wake. Although he was eventually converted, the memory of such a misdirected life was a continual reminder of the Apostle's unworthiness and the magnificence of God's grace. Jesus warned his disciples of the coming storm. He said "But take heed to yourselves: for they shall deliver you up to councils; and in the synagogues ye shall be beaten: and ye shall be brought before rulers and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them" Mk. 13:9. No doubt, these very words were brought to the mind of this one-time persecutor of the saints as he himself sat bruised and bleeding in some dark, damp prison cell.

There are many lessons to ponder, but here are just two. The first is that we always reap what we sow. Be careful

never to be unkind. Foolish is the one who attempts to advance or defend God's kingdom using carnal or worldly methods. The second lesson is that God is even working in persecution. He used the wrath of man to further his cause. "And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem: and they were scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles" Acts 8:1 Saul would become a champion of the very cause he was determined to crush. God's plans cannot be thwarted. The church could not be stopped.

### **From Dietary laws**

The second person to be liberated was Peter. There are many different kinds of prisons. The very rites and ceremonies that were intended to broaden man's understanding of God and the nature of his holiness had become chains and prison cells of religious ritual. God was about to set Peter free from the ceremonial law of Judaism. Peter had kept "kosher" all his life. Being "kosher" meant something was ritually fit for use. It was God's way of preserving the purity of Israel until the fullness of times. Kosher was a wall that separated the Jew from the Gentile. This wall had to be removed if salvation (which was of the Jews according to John 4) was to go freely into all the world.

The freedom to eat whatever was set before them liberated the Apostles and gave them to the Gentiles. A ritually clean Jew would not even enter a non-kosher home for fear of being contaminated. After this vision was given to Peter and his encounter with Cornelius, he was better able to understand the words of the Lord who said, "it is not what goes into a man, that defiles him, but what comes out" (Matt. 15: 11). Religion entraps. Christianity sets us free.

### **From Provincialism**

The third liberation came when Barnabas sought out Saul and welcomed him into the ministry at Antioch. Antioch was outside of Israel proper and the first step into world missions which began to complete the fourth part of the church's vision "unto the uttermost part of the earth." If there is any hope for the world to be set free from the darkness that engulfs it, it is only in the light. The gospel light would be carried like a triumphant torch from this city that coined the very word "Christians."

### **From Prison**

The final liberation we are to consider is a deliverance from prison. There are no means the world can employ to stop the Church of Jesus Christ. The hand of persecution had reached out and arrested Peter for the crime of preaching. Again, evil attempted to contain the servants of God and restrain the truth of God for it learns slowly that no tomb can hold the Lord Jesus and no stone is large enough to seal the saints in graves of silence.

If God must send his angels to unlock the doors in order to continue his work, He will. God might just as well have had opened another door which would lead to heaven. It mattered not to Peter. Let God open the doors. If we find ourselves in some dungeon for doing good, let us resign ourselves to wait on God who can send an angel to lead us to heaven or to the marketplace. We trust not chance, but providence.

# Act Four

## *Activity*

Churches are active communities. They are communities of believers. They are communions and unions of men and women bound by the common faith in and experience of new-life in Christ. These new assemblies needed guidance and nurturing if they were to grow and prosper. They needed instruction and wise council. They needed discipleship.

A church without proper discipleship is ever vulnerable to a “subversion” by the enemies of truth. The apostles wrote authoritative letters to the gentile believers to clarify the message of the gospel of grace. “Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to who we gave no such commandment” Acts 15:24.

New believers always have many questions. Their enthusiasm makes them susceptible to extremists who would take advantage of their zeal and openness. New believers are anxious to absorb and assimilate all the things God has for them and need to be given guidelines for growth and survival.

Discipleship is a clarification of truth and instruction in righteousness. The church at Jerusalem sent out ministers to counsel (23), comfort (24), and to confirm the new Christians (32). We are not told how long the teachers remained at Antioch beyond what is called a “space.” Silas, who was one of the two visiting teachers, remained at Antioch with Paul and Barnabas while Barsabas apparently returned to Jerusalem to report to the Apostles of the progress among the gentiles. After “some days” Paul and Barnabas decided it was time to pay another visit to the newly established assemblies to “conform the saints,” and to do follow-up and discipleship among the believers that resulted from their first missionary adventure, so thus begins the second.

### Mission Activity

#### THE SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

The second journey almost never began. A division broke the unique partnership of Paul and Barnabas. Barnabas wanted to take his nephew John Mark along once again. Paul refused to allow him to be part of the team, obviously because of his previous failure in faithfulness. The contention was so “sharp” that they “departed asunder one from the other.”

It is always sad when God’s servants cannot agree and “get along.” We have those who will always take sides in an issue like this. There are those who stand with Paul and those who support Barnabas. There are those who, like the son of consolation, quickly forgive and forget, and who not only welcome any prodigal home, but are quick to “kill the fatted calf and make merry.”

Others feel that the standards of the ministry are higher, more holy, and serious. Paul was human. Paul was of like passions as us. Paul may have been right. He may have been wrong. It should also be remembered that Paul was the one who was stoned, not Barnabas. Perhaps Paul still bore in his body the marks of the attack in Lystra. Perhaps, he still felt great pain as a result of the violence upon his person and thought more like a general choosing faithful soldiers who were going to be called upon to endure hardship. Perhaps his letter to Timothy (Mark’s replacement) expressed how Paul felt about any would-be servant of God or missionary as he challenged the young minister to “endure hardness, as a good soldier” (1Tim2:3), (something Barnabas’ nephew failed to do). Paul also mentions in another place “Persecutions, afflictions, which came unto [him] at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra,” (3: 11). These are places John Mark, Paul’s footmen should have been. It was in these places that the Apostle needed someone to wipe the blood from his bleeding head, and to bind up his wounds. God calls faithful men. And Timothy is encouraged to find and commit eternal truths and responsibilities to “faithful men.” Nevertheless, God works all things together for good. He has a way of making beauty come from ashes.

Two missionary teams instead of one left the city of Antioch. Barnabas took Mark, and Paul took Silas as partners and went separate ways.

The beginning of this second term involved a confirmation of the churches already established. Paul revisited Derbe and Lystra the cities that inflicted so much pain upon him. Why would anyone want to return to a city in which he had been stoned and left for dead? Missionary work must be a Spirit and not feeling-led. In Derbe Paul would add a new worker to the ranks of Christianity and subsequently two books to the Bible by enlisting Timothy into God's service. After Timothy was joined to the party, the Holy Spirit stirred Paul's heart to carry the Gospel into new and untried territory. The church has its explorers, its pioneers, and its settlers. Paul was a pioneer.

The very same Spirit who opens doors also closes them. Wise is the saint who knows the difference. Paul tried to go to Mysia and Asia. This should not seem strange to us. It should encourage us to know that God does not have simply a general, or genetic will for our lives, but rather a specific one. God cares about the details as well as the directions of our lives and service. Doors close in different ways. Exactly what "suffered them not" means we are not sure, but we know that Paul was sensitive to the leading and guidance of God. Perhaps it was as simple as a warning, or a report of the day that made it obvious that "now was not a good time to visit that region." It may have been a lack of peace or a doubt that troubled his heart. God's will is not found without some soul searching, and much prayer. Paul was guided by a holy hand.

Eventually the Apostle found himself at Troas not far from the water's edge. Not only was Paul praying, but there was another praying (or at least imploring that someone to) "come over and help us." This famous Macedonian vision has been the catalyst used to call thousands of men and women to leave the comforts of home in order to proclaim the gospel to the nations.

When Paul set out on his second journey he had no idea of going into Macedonia. God leads his children one step at a time. We are safe when we follow the counsel to just "do the next thing." Don't worry about God's will for next year. Just do God's will today.

#### Action in Europe

This is the real beginning of the second missionary journey. There are no letters to the church at Lystra, or Antioch, but there are letters to the churches of Philippi and Thessalonica. Paul always began in or near a synagogue. Perhaps because of a lack of Jews, there was no synagogue in Philippi. For this reason Paul chose the next best thing; he sought out a place of prayer. Everything of real spiritual consequence and value begins with prayer. Every great work begins when someone pauses to pray. Prayer was the beginning of the church in Europe.

The very first convert in Philippi was a woman named Lydia who was a seller of purple. Perhaps Paul preached to her from Isaiah and used as his text "come now let us reason together saith the Lord, though your sins be as scarlet they shall be as white as snow, though they be red like crimson they shall be as wool." We don't know what was his text, but we do know what was his topic. The favorite topic of this missionary was Christ. The one who came to shed His blood, to wash our sins away. Whatever the chapter and verse might have been, God used it to "open" her heart. Conversion is not as much a head thing as it is a heart thing. Paul would later unsuccessfully attempt to reach the heads of men in Athens. No one is converted in their head without first being convicted in their heart.

## Confronting Demon Activity

Paul soon met another woman who was possessed with an evil spirit. The doors to her heart had been barred shut from within. What deal she made with the devil we do not know, but she somehow crossed a line and became a servant of darkness. She followed the Apostles, shouting out declarations about their presence and purpose in such a way that it grieved Paul. Whether she had a mocking tone, or an hysterical manner, or was summoning other forces of darkness is unknown, but finally Paul turned and addressed, not the woman, but the spirit to “come out of her.” This demon must have fought violently, for the Scriptures do not say it came out “immediately” but within the hour. As God opened the heart of Lydia, He now emptied the heart of this poor woman and hopefully she allowed Christ to fill the void and replace darkness with light.

Suddenly those who took advantage of this woman and the demon of divination were out of business. Nothing will anger the forces of darkness more than someone lighting a candle. No bartender wants to lose his customers through conversion. There is a large industry marketing and trading in evil. Fortunes are made in the trade of darkness and in feeding the appetites of depraved hearts. Vice, superstition, and religion are still big business.

Paul was arrested and charged with being a trouble maker. Perhaps the exorcism created a scene as the demon fought to remain where it was. Perhaps the poor woman who had been the hysterical herald had first attracted a crowd and then was seemingly thrown into convulsions by Paul’s verbal confrontation. Paul and Silas were beaten and thrown into the “inner” prison. Sometimes doing God’s will and doing “right” results in our being beaten and cast into what seems to be the very bowels of hell. The “inner” prison was reserved for the worst offenders and was the scene of the most untold sorrow.

### Acting right when treated wrong

With feet fast in stocks the helpless were not hopeless. They began to sing. The world can take away our sunlight, but not our song. It can take away our liberty, but not our love. It can take away our pulpit, but not our prayer. It can take away our place, but not our power. The church in Europe began with pray and it survived through prayer. Prayer gives us access to the God of all power. It prevents the spirit of the saint from being a prisoner though he be in stocks. Praise allows the heart to soar even while the servant is in leg irons.

The famous conversion of the Philippian jailor is well known. It will suffice here to point out that salvation is possible for the most ardent antagonist of truth. The temperament of a jailer is not typically one of tenderness and kindness. More often than not the holder of prison keys was calloused of heart and cruel. If the Philippian jailer could be converted, no one is hopeless. The message is the same today as it was in the earthquake damaged prison in Philippi “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.” We should pray for our antagonists and praise God even if we find ourselves in some inner prison.

After Paul was released from prison he returned to Lydia’s house. It was probably in her house that the first church in Europe was started. A church is not a building, but (as we shall see in the next section) it is a community of people.

From Philippi the missionary team traveled to the city of Thessalonica and again followed the principle of “to the Jew first.” It was only natural for “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” The Jews had the Scriptures, so it was the logical and the spiritual place to begin. Paul is said to have “reasoned with them out of the scriptures.” His text might have always been different but his topic was the same, “Christ.” He spoke of how Christ had fulfilled all the biblical prophecies and satisfied all the requirements of the Messiah, how he was crucified, and how he rose from the dead. The result of his first effort was that “some believed.” Those who “believed not” ( 17: 5) were moved with envy and caused an uproar. A crowd of ruffians were enlisted to attack the house of Jason who was charged with sedition and treason against Caesar, the same charge used by the

enemies of Christ in Jerusalem. The result of this attack was the swift departure of Paul and Silas to Berea. The Jews of this city were said to be “more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.” Apparently the leaders of the synagogue in Thessalonica were less interested in truth as much as in maintaining the status quo. We learn from these experiences of others of the importance of comparing any teaching carefully with the inspired Word of God. The New Testament Church was active. They were engaged in spiritual work and warfare. They were being used of God to change the world, one soul at a time.

The history of the New Testament Church is called the Book of Acts. It was an active community interacting with a needy and unbelieving world. Many are satisfied gathering around and guarding the “facts.” Our life will be measured by our acts. I did not say that salvation is the result of our acts. Salvation is the result of faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ. Real faith rest on the fact of the death and resurrection of Jesus. But real faith follows the resurrected Christ, and acts consistent with a transformed and resurrected life.

ACTS...

# Act Five

## *Community*

The church is a community. It is in the world but not of the world. Called the *ekklesia* it is a called-out assembly. But it is more. It is also a *koinonia*, which has been translated “association” “communion,” and “fellowship.” The church is a group of people drawn around one Lord, one faith, and one common experience. The Greeks invented the polis. Christ invented the church. Cities come and go, the church is the Bride eternal.

Like Christ, it does not hide, but must needs go through Samaria, and Athens, and Rome, and cities, towns and villages in the uttermost parts of the earth. Unlike Alexander and Caesar the church comes not with swords of death, but words of life. How the New Testament Church acted and reacted in the first century is recorded in these chapters. It was a growing, living, thriving community. To be a New Testament Church we must continue to act in faith, and hope, and love. We must declare from the mountain tops and across the table tops, that there is a new testament and a new age and a new day coming.

### Athens

Classical Athens was the center of scholarship and philosophic speculations. Some might judge Paul's efforts on Mars Hill to have been useless in as much as the intelligentsia responded with mocking. We must remember that the results of any preaching endeavor must be left with God. It is the preacher's job to preach. Who is to say that the harvest (of vs. 34) was not a bumper crop and the cause for celebration and jubilation in heaven? These precious souls believed in spite of the rejection and ridicule of others. Perhaps the rain is more precious when it falls in a few drops than when it falls in torrents. It is also interesting to note the name of the place where the Athenians were confronted with the Gospel message. Mars was the Roman god of war. What better place to hear the story of the Prince of Peace?

### Corinth

Corinth was a community of commerce. The term as a “Corinthian” was analogous to our saying “like a drunken sailor.” To be sure, every and not even most sailors are drunken, but a few have a way of spoiling it for all. Corinth, nonetheless, was a wicked town. Here Paul would demonstrate through his efforts that Christ is for everyone. It is one thing to appeal to the religious, and another to address those given to intelligent considerations; here Paul would preach in the meanest streets the message of Christ and of him crucified. The results were dramatic and a community of believers came out of the world to gather in the name of the Lord Jesus. Two letters survive and are included in the Holy Scriptures giving us a window of observation into the life of believers in the first century.

Here the chief ruler of the synagogue believed and was converted along with his house. He along with Paul was brought before the magistrate where he was beaten by the Jews because of his faith in Jesus Christ. The price of becoming a believer in the first century was often painful and exacting. It only testifies to the genuineness of their faith for no man is beaten for something he only pretends to. Persecution has a way of culling out the insincere and cleansing the ranks of hypocrisy. Blessed persecution!

### Ephesus

With his head shaven as a symbol and seal of some unknown vow, Paul came to the city of Ephesus and once again took up the work of declaring the message of Christ. Paul's second journey ended in this city.



Ephesian Ministry.

What is commonly referred to as the third journey begins the chapter 18:23. Again it was his desire to “strengthen,” the brethren. The events of these efforts are not recorded and Luke’s story picks up the trail at Ephesus. There was at Ephesus a group of believers who had never been baptized in the name of Jesus. Baptism is an outward and public declaration of faith and allegiance to Christ. John the Baptist had baptized multitudes in the Jordon as a public act of contrition and sign of repentance. John’s ministry was that of preparation for the coming of the king who was to set up a righteous kingdom. Many of those who experienced that baptism anticipated the soon coming of a new kingdom age and communicated that message to countless others.

A group of these resided in Ephesus. While they accepted the fact that Jesus was that promised one John spoke of, they had very little knowledge of the teachings of Christ and had never been baptized in his name. Paul seemed to sense that these Ephesians were missing something and inquired as to whether or not they had received the Holy Spirit. Some point to this as the standard of spiritual development and an example of what has been commonly called the “second blessing.” We must not allow the experience of others (twelve men) become the Gospel for us. These Ephesians were not only unique in their experience; they were without the instruction and discipleship others enjoyed. “Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God.” The word about the Holy Spirit had not reached everyone and how could there be the believing (for all must be done by faith) without the preaching? Paul is simply bringing God’s Word to the Ephesians.

Paul picked up the same theme our Lord entertained prior to Pentecost, the kingdom of God. He tried to persuade the Jews for three months using the synagogue as his classroom. He was forced to leave that arena and teach in the house of one named Tyrannus which he did for two years.

News that Paul had re-baptized believers in the name of Jesus and was instrumental in the baptism of the Holy Spirit came to the attention of certain “vagabond” Jews. These saw the miraculous powers that Paul seemed to possess and sought to procure it for themselves. These did not even come to Paul as Simon the sorcerer did with Peter in Acts 8. These decided to invoke the name of Jesus and use it as some sort of talisman or charm of exorcism. The results of such attempts was disastrous. The demons said “Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are ye” Whereupon the evil spirits leaped on them causing great pain and havoc. Such a spectacle must have been frightfully alarming, but the result was that a great fear fell on all.

The result was that “many who used curious arts brought their books together, and burned them.” Have we burned the books (wrong ideas) or bridges that may tempt us to cross back into the old life? Perhaps we do not experience first century results, because we do not have the first century seriousness of what it means to follow Jesus Christ with all our heart. Paul’s ministry in Ephesus was powerful and productive. Again, the Spirit was stirring Paul’s heart. He wanted to again visit Jerusalem before traveling to Rome (19:21) Little did Paul realize that he would visit Rome, but not without much difficulty.

While remaining at Ephesus for a “season” he sent Timothy to Macedonia. Another storm of controversy arose when a silversmith named Demetrius saw his business falling off as a result of conversions to Christianity. “By this craft we have our wealth” (25), he told his fellow idol-makers. He appealed to their selfish interests and caused a great stir. He gives his personal rendition of Paul’s theology by reporting “Moreover ye see and hear, that not alone at Ephesus, but almost throughout all Asia, this Paul hath persuaded and turned away much people, saying that they be no gods, which are made with hands.” A riot resulted in which the people began to chant, “Great is Diana of the Ephesians”

## Tyre

The ship stopped to unload at the port city of Tyre. The believers fellowshipped with Paul for seven days after which time men, women and children followed the preacher down to the shore where they all knelt down to pray (21:5). The trail of faith is paved with prayer. The church of Jesus Christ finds its power upon her knees. It is a wonder we do not pray more. Our lack of such an occupation could prove to be the reason we do not see the power the early church knew.

Religious wars are the worst. While we contend that Christianity is a personal relationship with Christ more than a religion, it is usually attacked and resisted by religious prejudice. The whole city was said to be “filled with confusion.” A member of the church was taken into the theater by the mob and when he attempted to explain the Christian position he was shouted down by the crowd. Religious prejudice often stops its ears so as not to even hear the truth. The keeper of the arena (thought to be a representative if not a deity himself: Apollo) reminds the multitudes that their belief is in Diana and that the image they worshiped in their temple had fallen from heaven.

His words had a calming effect. He, like Gamaliel in Acts 5:34, appealed to reason. “If these men have done something wrong let the craftsmen use the proper legal channels to see that justice is done” was his counsel. With that, the assembly was dismissed and bloodshed was averted.

When things settled down Paul finally said farewell to the Ephesians and left for Greece (most probably Corinth) where he stayed for three months. His plan of sailing back to Troas where a company of missionaries were awaiting him was changed because of a Jewish plot against him, he decided to return to Philippi (3,6).

## Troas

On the first day of the week the disciples gathered to “break bread.” The breaking of bread was the Lord’s Supper instituted as the living memorial feast given to the church as an ordinance to remember the Savior’s sacrifice. After the breaking of bread, which probably took place in the evening after a working day, Paul preached to the believers continuing his speech “until midnight.” The crowded, oxygen depleted atmosphere was too much for Eutychus who “fell into a deep sleep.” Eutychus’ rest was fatal. He fell from the third loft and was “taken up dead.” How distraught Paul was we are not told, but he fell on the lad and embraced him announcing that he would live. Eutychus did revive and Paul and the believers continued to fellowship until day break upon which time Paul set out for the southern seaport of Assos where Luke had been sent to secure passage on a ship.

When the vessel finally arrived at the port of Miletus Paul disembarked and called for the elders of the church at Ephesus and gave a moving final farewell speech. Through various prophets Paul is convinced that something is going to happen on this final visit to Jerusalem, yet he is adamant on going. His words to the elders were emotion filled and enlightening. They give us additional insights into the heart, work and ministry of Paul. He told them he “kept back nothing,” and that he testified to all both publicly and from house to house. He also reviewed the content of his message which is important to us. He preached

“repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.” There is enough theology in that statement to keep a theologian busy for a lifetime.

If a church only preaches faith toward Jesus Christ it is failing to bring the convicting message of sin and the very need for salvation in the first place. Jesus Christ is God’s remedy for sin. To fail in calling for repentance the church merely inoculates its hearers and produces a congregation of unconverted followers. Jesus said it himself, “except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish” Lk. 13:3.

Another aspect of the ministry and message of Paul is seen in Acts 20:25, the kingdom of God. There are some who actually teach that the message of the kingdom and what they refer to as “Kingdom theology” is not for the church but only for the Jew. They go so far as to say the letter like Matthew’s is filled with

“Kingdom theology” and has no bearing for Christians. Paul’s teaching, both public and private included teaching about the kingdom as well as the king.

Kneeling down to pray Paul commended the believers to the care of God. After a season of prayer and with much hugging and tears the Apostle bade them adieu.

### **Caesarea**

At Caesarea Paul’s company visited with Philip the evangelist, who was “one of the seven.” Years had passed since Philip preached to the Samaritans and the eunuch. By this time Philip had a family. The idea that ministers of the Gospel were to be eunuchs did not set well with the convert-er of eunuchs: Philip. Such ideas came much later and have heaped untold havoc upon the holi-ness of the church with its unnecessary vows to celibacy. It seems that each step of the way back to Jerusalem God is either warning or preparing Paul for stormy weather. A prophet named Agabus graphically demonstrates with a belt that Paul is to become a prisoner delivered, like Jesus, into the hands of the Gentiles. All these warning were enough to bring the Apostle to tears and to de-clare that he was very willing to “die for the name of the Lord Jesus.” Finally when all saw that no amount of persuasion would alter Paul’s intentions the believers rested upon providence and said, “the will of the Lord be done” 21:14).

Paul had some clarifying to do among the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. Many Jews had believed in Jesus and yet continued in the ways of Judaism. It was one thing to tell the Gentile that becom-ing a Jew was not necessary nor was it incumbent upon them to practice the rites of the Jew. It was another to tell Jews to forsake Moses. James asked Paul to calm the passions of his brethren by taking a vow according to the Jewish custom as a way of demonstrating that he was not repudi-ating the faith of his fathers.

This is a very controversial chapter in the life of Paul. Biblical scholars try to point out failures and inconsistencies in the apostle’s behavior. Some go so far as to say he experienced a spiritual “relapse.” Paul’s position was always “to the Jew first.” As he knew that eating meat once offered to idols was nothing, he must have also known that he was not trusting in any vow, rite, or cer-emony, to merit favor with God. What he did was consistent with his historic practice which he explained in another place by saying “to the Jew I became as a Jew.”

It should also be pointed out that Jesus never renounced Judaism, but fulfilled it. Judaism will experience a renewal during the Millennium, howbeit a refined version with a risen victorious Savior, Jesus Christ. Here Paul is simply practicing a rite of purification, which will enable him to preach the truth in love. Some insist that the confusion and arrest of the apostle proves that he was mistaken to do what he did. Not so. Providence proves that Paul was in the will of God.

The book of Hebrews is an appeal to the Jewish sensibilities and an apologetic which clearly estab-lishes the superiority of Jesus and his kingdom over the temple and priesthood which were merely shadows of greater things to come. Many say Paul did not write Hebrews because his name does not appear on this epistle like the others. His name would have been a stumbling block to many in Jerusalem who questioned his relationship with the gentiles and prevented them from reading it. This is all speculation. What we do know is that Paul was arrested and entered time of testing. Being part of a loving community is no proof of fidelity. How we act when we are alone in the sand of the arena within the sound of the lions’ roar, is a better indicator of genuine faith, than when we are sitting in crowd stadium seats cheering for our team. There is time for community, then there is a time of testing.

# Act Six

## *Captivity*

Paul's captivity actually is the result of the hostility real faith will encounter in a sin-filled world. The Lord warned His disciples that "in this world you will have tribulation." How the world treated our Master is how the world will treat those who truly seek to follow the Master. Those who compromise can find their Christianity very comfortable. Those who act as God would have them will suffer persecution. This world is not only not our home, it is hostile territory. Many think that Paul made a great mistake in returning to Jerusalem that last time. Many feel that he ignored good and wise counsel. Many argue that his arrest was proof that he was wrong in compromising and in consenting to participate in ceremonial vows in the temple. It is the historian's luxury to sit in an armchair and pass judgment on the choices made by those who were in the heat of battle.

Paul was being swept away by the currents of providence and he was privy to the counsels of God that stirred his innermost being. He felt winds that would barely stir the canvas of less sensitive souls. He knew he would stand before kings, and he did. He knew he would come to the very foot stool of Caesar, and he did. He knew Jesus would reign eternal and he does.

Many tried to stop Paul from going to his end. "What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus" Acts 21:13. "And when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, The will of the Lord be done." said Luke. Paul was not easily persuaded by men or circumstances. Like Jesus, Paul fixed his face like a flint to do the will of God. He had the determination, tenacity, and assurance of one who had seen God. Once one has had a heavenly vision and calling, not only has the world lost its glitter, but their heart is little affected by the gravitational pull of its worldliness. .

Paul's arrest afforded the opportunity to once again tell of his conversion experience. The story of the encounter he had on the Damascus road was a favorite with Paul. When he was accused in the temple by Jews from Asia who recognized him from his previous confrontations with them, he spoke in Greek to the guard. The surprised guard allowed him to address the crowd. To them he spoke in Hebrew. At last, when he was being led away to be scourged he identified himself as a Roman. First he identified himself with the Greeks, then the Jews, and now the Romans. He belonged to the world and used what means were available to be a witness for Christ.

Paul never lost his reason. He was not a fanatic rushing to his death. He used all the faculties at his disposal to further the cause of Christ and to tell the largest number of people about Christ and His kingdom. He addressed the Gentiles in the pagan cities of Asia. He reasoned with the Jews in their own synagogues on many a Sabbath. He preached on Mars Hill and now in the temple at Jerusalem. Finally Paul stood before the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of Judaism where he made an impassioned defense of the message of the cross. He appealed to the very body which was directly responsible for the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus. This was a hostile crowd.

His defense in interrupted by a blow to his mouth by order of the high priest. How unlike our Great High Priest the Lord Jesus. They did not understand the heavenly logic written by James in his epistle "the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God." Paul's first reaction was one of self defense "God shall smite thee, thou whited wall." When he realized that it was the High Priest who commanded he be thusly treated, he humbled himself and quoted Scripture as if to bring control to a situation that seemed out of control. "I wist not, brethren, that he was the high priest: for it is written, Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people."

The ill treatment had not damaged Paul's quickness of mind. He "perceived that the one part were Sadducees

and the other Pharisees” and took advantage of their weakness. Enemies had come together to devour their prey. Paul would turn their carnivorous appetites upon themselves. Paul explained that all the confusion had to do with whether or not there was indeed a resurrection. The Sadducees rejected the idea of the supernatural, including heaven, spirits and angels. Paul pointed out that he was a Pharisee, and thus against the Sadducees brought them to his defense. While they did not endorse his message they left open the door of possibility by saying “We find no evil in this man: but if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him, let us not fight against God.” A dispute among the opposing factions became so intense that the temple guard entered the court and rescued Paul bringing him to the castle.

As men argued around the Apostle, (both his friends and his enemies) over policies, doctrines, and choices, Paul was continually listening for the still small voice of God’s leading. That voice of assurance came the following night when the Lord himself encouraged his servant with the words, “Be of good cheer, Paul; for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome.” (23: 11)

Plots, conspiracy, and intrigue would not thwart the plans and promises of God. A plot developed by a band of fanatics who vowed to assassinate Paul. God will always send an army or an angel to deliver his saints if it is necessary to complete some mission undertaken. Paul’s nephew overheard the conspirator and reported the matter to Paul and the Captain of the guard. Two hundred soldiers, sixty horsemen, and ten spearmen escorted God’s missionary to Caesarea by night. Thus Paul found himself, just as the Lord had promised Ananias in Damascus, standing before kings.

Paul was brought before King Felix and placed in prison to await his accusers. Five days passed before they arrived with an orator named Tertullus. This spokesman used the same old arguments against Paul as others had done: sedition, and profaning the temple, etc. Paul’s defense was masterful. He reasoned that he simply believed the law and the prophets and that he has hope in the resurrection of the dead, both just and unjust (24: 15). Felix deferred and postponed making any decision, continued to hold Paul under pretense of gathering more information. He invited him to talk more of Christ several days later which resulted in causing the king to “tremble.” This appears to be the closest the king ever came to conversion. But the conscience that first trembles at the sound of the God’s word is too soon hardened and more dangerously comfortable with that same message if heard again. Putting off the decision to believe and trust Christ is usually disastrous (24:26).

Paul’s life was carried by conviction and purpose. He stated his feelings about the dangers and troubles that surrounded him when he said, “none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself that I might finish my course with joy and the ministry I received of the Lord Jesus to testify the gospel of the grace of God” Acts 20:24 In other words, Paul was guided by an all consuming desire to do God’s will. He could have very well have prayed the prayer of our Lord: “Not my will, but thine be done.”

Paul had an assurance that nothing can destroy the plans of God. The safest place in the world is the center of God’s will. I would rather be in the most dangerous place in the world in the will of God, than to be in the safest spot on earth outside His will.

He was willing to go anywhere God should direct regardless of the consequences which he always seemed to leave in the hands of God. He was never reckless or foolish. He did not unnecessarily provoke or antagonize his detractors, yet he never trimmed his sails in the face of man-made squalls or opposition. He made full use of his civil liberties yet resigned himself with humbleness of spirit should those liberties be denied.

He was ready to give an answer to every man who asked him of the hope that was in him, whether it was a pagan king or his kinsmen. He spoke the language of the people he was trying to reach and avoided stirring their prejudices if at all possible. He never allowed his light or freedom to cause those with lesser light to stumble over it.

which the church would be built. Hostility must never be met with hostility. An eye for an eye was the Old Testament way. The New Testament Church must act better when offered what is bitter.

ACTS...

# Act Seven

## *Fidelity*

Paul was in prison. Felix was replaced by Festus. Men were taking political appointments and climbing their ladders of success. Felix was in no hurry to decide the Paul question. He was in no hurry to release a prisoner that might afford him a ransom and handsome profit. Waiting for providence, release, or for selfish men to make their moves and play their game is a test of faith. If nothing else, real faith is faithful. We must leave to others to decide if they count us as being successful. God is concerned with one thing only. Are we faithful? Waiting is often the greatest test of all.

Paul's enemies used the regime change to request that the apostle be remanded to them for trial. When Festus, for purely selfish reasons, was about to deliver Paul to the Jewish Authorities he declared, "I appeal to Caesar." This was a stroke of genius and also would procure passage to the wolf's lire. Paul was to bring his message to the very heart of the Roman Empire. Paul was faithful to his calling and mission. It is no sin to use the facilities and functions of government to gain the greater good. Paul was willing to look Rome in the eye and speak of the One they attempted to destroy on a cross.

Paul was brought before Herod and Bernice. These grand children of the Herod who tried to kill the Christ child were a perfect picture of all that is wrong in the world. When given the opportunity to speak Paul rose to the occasion and gave a powerful testimony of his salvation and call to preach Christ. "I think myself happy.." (26:2). Only a faithful heart could remain so resolute in such cross currents of political and religious chaos.

Real faith is faithful. The Book of Acts begins with "vision." Faith always does. In each genesis God calls for light. Without light, there can be no vision. Now at the end of an apostle's life and at the end of this sacred volume of church history Paul sums it all up eloquently. "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision" 26:19. The Christian life is a call to obedience. God tell us how to act, and then God empowers us to act. The question is, how did we act? How did we act when we were stoned? How did we act when sorcerers tried to solicit us and buy into the work of God? How did we act when Satan sent evil men to flatter and praise us in an attempt to poison us with pride? How did we act when we were prevented by the Holy Spirit from going to our own Phygia or the mission field of our choice? Paul could say, "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision." Then faithfulness gives its own testimony with the words "I continue unto this day, having obtained help from God" (26:22).

The twenty-seventh chapter describes a horrific storm. It is more than a nautical history. It is what lies between us and heaven. It is the forecast for our faith. Every pilgrim will have storms enough on the journey to heaven. The Christian life cannot moor forever at "Fairhaven" (v.8). We must go. Paul's prediction is as true for our Christian life as it was for his journey: "This voyage will be with much hurt" (10). Don't be surprised. Sailors know that it is impossible to "out run" the wind. They learn early that, while we cannot change the wind, we can adjust our sails to make the most of it. Then there are time when the wind is just too strong. There will be times when we must strike our sails and just "let her drive."

There will be times when “neither sun nor stars [will] appear” (27:20) and we will have no external sign or guidance. There will be times when faith will have to held together with the unseen arms of God, not unlike the “helps” (v.17) that kept Paul’s ship from breaking apart. There will be times when others will abandon ship and us and leave us to the elements. These last chapters record Paul sanding before kings, and standing near angels (27:23). They witness faith standing before enemy fire and upon the rolling deck of a Roman frigate on a storm tossed sea. They show faith that is drown-proof until it fulfills its mission. “Fear not, Paul; thou must be brought before Caesar.” Paul’s faith was not the rose-colored glass variety, nor going through life with a positive disposition. A messenger from Heaven told him he would see Rome. And that was enough. There was not a storm on earth great enough to swamp God’s plan. Paul had God’s word. That is the ballast of faith. When the old ship of Zion finally makes its last port and slips to its moorings we may very well read on her stern, high above the water line, somewhere near the forecastle, her name gilded in gold “Faithful.”



# ACTS... 1

## The Appointed Church (v.8)

The disciples had an appointment to keep. They were told to meet Jesus in Jerusalem. First things first. The Book of Acts begins with the believers gathering around the risen Christ. He taught them. He took them to the Mt. of Olives and ascended into heaven right before their eyes. They were instructed to wait to be endued with power from on high (Lk. 24:49). They were told to “tarry.” The early church kept that appointment. What happened in that upper room in Jerusalem transformed timid disciples into dynamic and determined witnesses. They gathered in an appointed place. The upper room was the cradle that indeed would rock the world.

It is up to each believer and “lover of God,” (Theophilus) to find a meeting place where not only other disciples gather, but where Christ is in the midst. Just where that upper room was we do not know. That is not the important thing. A church on the move does not invest too deeply in real estate. Beautiful buildings give us a comfortable place to meet and worship, but sometimes can be too comfortable. Beautiful buildings also give us an air of respectability. Building tabernacles on mountain tops of transfiguration was never God’s will. When we do we may be caretakers of religious real estate forgetting that the church is never a building, but a body of believers. Massive Cathedrals were man’s, not God’s idea. We would do well to remember that our Lord lived simply and humbly. Builders beware. Just about the time the stained glass windows are being unpacked and the saints are settling in, God is likely to be on the move.

The important thing is to keep our appointment to meet with the resurrected Savior first. We should, as He said “tarry.” We must “tarry” long enough each morning to be ready for the coming day. It is important to keep our divine appointment with the risen Christ to be instructed by Him. In appointed places and times He will teach us, and appoint us and prepare us before He sends us into Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

# ACTS. 2

## Anointed Church (v.4)

If we are appointed we will be anointed. When God places an order, He gladly pays the bill. There was a time when the church was “all with one accord and in one place.” The “default” position of the church was one of unity. The opposite of accord is “discord.” It is important that when we gather in one place we are in one accord.

The Holy Spirit is the only one who can “tune our hearts to sing His grace.” Suddenly a sound came from heaven (2:2). Earthly tuning forks will not do. We must hear the sound that comes from heaven. Different groups, camps, sects have their own tuning forks. When they “pitch” the music it is always somewhat “off key” and less than God intended it to be.

A church that must face a hostile world must be anointed. It must be filled by the Holy Spirit. Some think the Holy Spirit will live in any heart. Think again. God gives grace to the humble.

The anointed church spilled out into the street (the anointing is for a purpose) and the believers began, with great boldness to “speak.” Here the church has been fascinated by the “tongues.” The tongue is never more important than the words. While there were many tongues there was one word. “We do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God.” The miracle is never more important than the message.

If our preaching, testifying, witnessing is to have any effect on the hearers it must be anointed. It must speak, not of our works, but of the works of God. It must not speak of “us,” but of Him. It must be aimed at men’s “hearts” (v. 37) as much as their heads. Should it find a humble, broken heart, the same Holy Spirit that anointed the preaching will do the reaching and God will get all the glory.

Did you speak to some lost sinner about the “wonderful works of God” today? How about yesterday? A New Testament Church have a vision, but it also has a voice.

# ACTS...3

## Active Church (v.1)

The New Testament Church was on the move. The thing about movements is they move. What sometimes starts out as a movement is institutionalized into a monument. Monuments are only appreciated by patriots and pigeons. In chapter three of Acts, Peter and John are going to the temple to pray. Someone might ask them “why are you going to that church?” They were going to pray not stay. There is a difference.

Just outside the beautiful gate a beggar asked for alms, “expecting to receive something.” I don’t know about you, but when I go to a church, I expect to receive something. It is sad when people come and go and receive nothing. It is sadder when people “think” they have received something, when in fact, they have received much less than God intended. A lot of church work involves giving people what they want instead of what they need. The beggar would have been happy with a few coins. He ended up with so much more.

The early church did not have much of a budget. As a matter of fact, Peter said, “silver and gold have I none.” It is true that “silver and gold” can really come in handy if we want to do something and have things, but God wants us to have more, and sometimes that might mean having less.

That “such as I have” was worth more than all the gold in Egypt or King Tut’s tomb. When we talk of “blessings” today we often mean one thing, God means another. The secret of the New Testament church was not in its pocket book. It was in its message. Peter preached the name of Jesus. “Unto you first God, having raised up his Son Jesus, sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities.” 3:26

# ACTS... 4

## Attacked Church (w/o) (v.3)

The evil forces that attacked our Savior will attack His church. Like it or not, we are at war. Every conflict, battle and world war is simply a reflection of the battle between God's good and sin's evil. The greatest battle field is in the heart of man. Having said that, in the fourth chapter of Acts we see the church under fire.

The message of the church is not accommodating but exclusive. "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." These are fighting words. Peter and the first century New Testament Church did not attempt to "sugar coat" this. Their message was clear.

Today we are more diplomatic. I am not suggesting that we should be offensive, arrogant, or rude. I am suggesting that our message must be clear. "Ye must be born again." If we think the boat we are on has got a little leak we might or might not mention it to our fellow passengers. If we know the hull have been torn open and the bulkheads are collapsing and the ocean is rushing in, we are not likely to sign up for shuffleboard that afternoon. These are extreme examples, but the point is the New Testament church had a sense of urgency in the delivery of their message.

Religious people are deeply offended at any suggestion that they are not "good enough" for God. As a matter of fact, nothing will raise the ire of the irreverent more than to suggest that without faith in Christ they will perish. The offended will do everything in their power to stop such talk.

The religious authorities tried to shut Peter down for preaching without a permit (4:7). Peter and John made it clear that silence was not an option. "For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard" (v. 20). The problem with our generation is that our churches are filled with people who have not seen or heard anything.

The fact is the world hates the message of Christ and the messenger. "The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ." (4:26).

# ACTS... 5

## Attacked Church (w/i) (v.4)

If you can't beat them, join them. That is the devil's strategy. Many a church has been built with tobacco money. Some people may be offended by that statement. Sorry, you may not see it, but beware of second hand smoke.

The fifth chapter of Acts is the sad story of a necessary house cleaning. What Ananias and Sapphira did may seem like a little thing compared to all the evil done in the world. Eating a fruit in a garden might seem like a little thing as well to these same people. God is holy. This is a truth often forgotten in what we like to call an age of Grace. If anyone thinks God winks at sin, think again. Watch as these two are carried out feet first. The New Testament Church was serious about commitment to the One who called Himself the Truth.

To all who think the end justifies the means, think again. "A great fear came upon all the church..." 5:11. There is not much of this thing called "fear" these days. Any study of what church historians label as real revival shows that revival is always accompanied with a renewed awareness of the holiness of God. Moses, take off your shoes. You are standing on holy ground.

It is important that the church be kept honest. Church history is replete with stories of the selling of snake oil and indulgences. Modern hucksters are selling phony grace off the back of welcome wagons. The sad thing is that these appear, by the world's standards, to be so successful.

The church is being attacked from without and from within. There is a great temptation to listen to the polls and to the politicians. There is a great temptation to compromise to the world on the one hand, and cater to our constituency on the other. Peter, a true leader in the New Testament Church, set a precedent for every Biblical elder when he said, "We ought to obey God rather than men." 5:29. May it be so.

# ACTS...6

## Organized Church (v.3)

The New Testament Church is an organized church. Paul wrote in another place “Let all things be done decently and in order.” Disorder is a good sign that God is not in something. Just look at a snowflake. What do you see? You see order; you see a pattern. God has a pattern for the church as well.

“Look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business, But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.” Whatever this means, it means that some are involved in certain aspects of the work and others to another. As with the order of authority in a home or marriage, it is not a case of the man being more important than his partner. Just as Christ being the Second Person of the Trinity does not make Him any less than God. There must be order. There is Summer, Fall, Winter, Spring. There is Sunday and then Monday.

Whatever the government in your local autonomous assembly of believers, hopefully there are some recognized and assigned to care for the tables, the widows, and the parking lot, and there are some who are giving themselves (continually) to prayer and the ministry of the word.

In the context of the experience of the Jerusalem church, it should be pointed out that nothing should get in the way of prayer and the ministry of the word and yet nothing should be neglected.

What you call Stephen or Philip may depend on the tradition you have been taught, but it should be pointed out that the Bible calls them “honest,” “full of the Holy Ghost,” and “wise.” Call them what you wish, but let those who follow in their footsteps be nothing less than they.

# ACTS...7

## Church Assailed (v.58)

Good sermons are not always measured by smiles and handshakes. Stephens' first sermon may have been his last. It was also his best. The name Stephen means crown. If his mother named him thinking he would be a king she was sadly mistaken. However, there is no kingly crown as beautiful as a martyr's crown. Stephen had something precious to throw at his Savior's feet.

Good preaching should be more clear than clever. Stephen could not have been more clear. There were no minced words for this minister. Stephen began with Abraham and led his hearers to one greater than Abraham. He took them to Moses and then led them to one greater than Moses. He took Israel back to their "golden calf" and made them drink the bitter waters all over again. He took them to their temple and pointed out that God was greater than any temple. By this time any self-righteous person would be indignant, and they were. Then Stephen spoke to the "stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart" (51). It seemed to be too much.

A good preacher fills his barrel with facts, but always aims for the heart. Stephen hit their heart, but instead of being broken hearted, they gnashed their teeth. Next they "stopped their ears" and stopped listening. There is not much a preacher can do when people "stop listening."

Stephen's congregation cast him out of the city and stoned him to death. He was not the last preacher to be driven out, because he spoke too plainly. There is a time for parables and there is a time for plain talk. This was a time to be direct. As he died, he knelt down and prayed for those who were killing him. Then the Bible says, "he fell asleep."

Could it be that the best sermons and the best speakers are not the ones who always make us feel good? No sinner should leave our meetings feeling good. No believer should sit under the sound of the Word and not, on occasion, feel growing pains.

If the truth be told, there was one in the service that day, that was not left unchanged. His name was Saul. This sermon and the sight of a dying saint was the first blow of God's mighty hammer that would eventually break his heart into many pieces. We should preach the truth in love and leave the results with God.

# ACTS...8

## Church Scattered (v. 1)

The church must stand, but it must not stand still. The only way to “keep the faith” is to give it away. What happened in Acts 8 amounts to God turning the salt shaker upside down. Nothing is more wonderful than the love and comfort of home. If we are not careful we might begin to act like our home church is home.

The great commission was to go into all the world. It seems that even the early Christians needed a little push. Sometimes persecution is just the push we need. Perhaps you know that nature uses its forest fires to thin out the stand of trees as well as to explode pinecones to plant new stock. Sometimes, as well, birds carry seed in their stomachs for many miles and then discharge them in new and virgin fields. Sometimes the Spirit of God will use hardship to get us to our next duty station or to break the inertia that has frozen us time and space.

Look at the word “scattered” and think of what that meant. History has witnessed great migrations of the masses. None of those migrations took place because people were satisfied or fulfilled where they were. It was persecution that brought the Pilgrims to the New World. They left England and then Holland and then settled in America. America owes a debt of gratitude to these separatists who abandoned everything to set up a city on a hill.

David, the Psalmist said, “it is good that I was afflicted.” It is usually not until many years have passed that we realize that the “scattering” was for our good and the good of others. It is never pleasant to experience persecution, but it is often the fires of persecution that keep the church pure and that proves the saint sincere.

Some Samaritan or Ethiopian may come to faith in Christ because we were driven out of some Jerusalem. Philip is a wonderful example of a witness. He was soul sensitive. God only knows how many Ethiopian eunuchs have crossed our path while we were too dull to feel his need.

The next time we feel a little bit scattered, or flustered by the whirl wind of circumstances which stir up the status quo, let us look around for some soul to whom we can speak of Jesus. Then let us be “caught up” less by the circumstances and more by the Spirit seeking only to be an instrument of His will (39).



# ACTS. 9

## Life Changing Church

The church is about changing people. Religion attempts to change people from the outside in. Christ changes people from the inside out. If the new birth is not life changing, what is it? “Old things are pass away, behold all things become new,” is the way Paul put it. No one touched by grace is ever the same. To think any less, is to think too much of self, while failing to see how serious sin is.

No one was more sincere than Saul of Tarsus. He was commissioned by the High Priest (there was not higher office) to arrest the followers of Jesus (9:2). He was conservative, fundamental, and passionate about his faith. He saw his life as a holy errand, but he was wrong. Later, Paul called himself the “chief of sinners.” Compared to others, he was better than they. Compared to the truth he considered himself the worst. When we look at others we are likely to think ourselves better than most. If we look at ourselves in light of the truth, we are more likely to see Saul was wrong again, and that “we” not “he”, be the chief of sinners.

In verse three of Acts 9 there is a “light from heaven.” Every salvation experience begins the same way. “Let there be light.” Light allows us to see. This light from heaven was brilliant. Saul saw who he was, and who Jesus Christ was. For some people the light comes like a dawn and gradual day-break. For others, like Saul, it is “suddenly” high noon.

While each salvation experience is different, and not all are on their way to Damascus; we are all startled to discover we were all on our way to hell. Had God not intervened and interrupted Saul’s and our “so called” good intentions, we would have continued on the wrong road and perished.

How has your life changed because you “saw the light from heaven?” How is you life different when compared to the “before” you met the risen Christ? What new orders, what new mission, what new direction have you taken?

# ACTS... 10

## Church for All

The conversion of Cornelius was more gradual than Saul's, but no less important. He too needed to know Jesus Christ and the "remission of sins" (43). He too needed to know the "peace" that only comes by Jesus Christ (36). The light of Cornelius' conversion illuminated the whole church.

God is not a "respector of persons." Salvation is for the whole world, if it would come. Cornelius was a centurion, and Italian, a gentile. The New Testament Church was one church. Now we have our Korean, Chinese, Black, Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Methodist congregations. Today we are very much "respector of persons." We do not keep "kosher," the same way the Hebrews did, but if someone does not share our religious "taste buds" we will not allow them to break bread with us. We do not hold to the dietary restrictions of the Old Testament, but too often we only welcome into our house, those who do it like we do.

The experience of Acts 10 was to show Peter and us that the church is larger than our custom, tradition, preference, or past experience. This is not to say that "anything goes." Peter did not easily abandon what he clearly saw his Bible. God just showed him that his "proof texts" were larger than he imagined. "God so loved the world....," really means "God so loved the world...." "No respector of persons," means everyone who believes is welcome.

The message is that we are all going to be judged by the one who "went about doing good" (38), and that He alone is the judge of the quick and the dead. The message is that if we bow in faith before Jesus our sins will be forgiven.

Had Peter permitted Cornelius to remain "bowed," the first denomination would have been born. Peter knew better. There is too much bowing to men. There was a day when the church bowed to Christ only. Such was the New Testament church which was a church for all.

# ACTS... 11

## Church Christened

I like christening boats better than babies. While neither boats nor babies have much to say about it, boats remain boats, babies grow up to be sinners. People need to be born again. Having said that, it is in this chapter and in Antioch that the believers are first called “Christians.” We have been called Christians ever since.

There is a baptism of water that ceremonially marks our salvation, but that is no substitute for the baptism of the Holy Spirit (v. 16) that is from above and necessary to become part of the true and invisible church. There is the local church and then there is the universal church. One might enter the local church and never be part of the other. Just because our name is recorded in the baptismal records of some sect or synod does not insure salvation. There is a book of life in heaven that records the names of those who have truly repented of sin and have truly bowed in their hearts before the name that is above every name.

When we see evidence of the “grace of God” (v. 23) we should be glad. This is the gracious spirit of the New Testament Church. The believers discovered that they were not the only ones experiencing the blessing and grace of God. Do we rejoice when we hear that God is moving, working in, or blessing the “other group” down the street or across town? Nothing less than grace will make that possible. The temptation is to be less than excited. The temptation is to qualify the name Christian or take another.

The New Testament Church is made up of Christians. Anyone who has been born-again by faith in Jesus Christ alone is a Christian. No one could ever be more, and woe to that man on judgment day who is less.

# ACTS... 12

## Church Tested (1)

There must be a test to every testimony. The faith of the early believers was about to be put through fire. James was about to be slain by Herod. James was one of the two who wanted to sit on thrones beside the Lord in His kingdom. When their mother made that request she had no idea of how closely James would follow Jesus. James was the first to die, John the last. Sometimes the test comes in losing our life with grace and sometimes in living it. The obituary notice for James' death is short. It mentions a sword. That is all. Then the text goes on to talk of the living.

Peter had every reason to believe that he was to be the next to the chopping block. We find him incarcerated in verse three. He is released from prison in verse nine, where it says "and he went out." What we do in prison is the Christians bar exam. The whole church was praying for Peter "without ceasing." Not only was Peter in prison, but he was held with two chains. A guard was stationed at the door. One might say, it did not look good for Peter.

The church was very concerned to say the least. Peter did not appear worried. As a matter of fact he slept so soundly that the angel sent by God had more trouble waking him from his sleep than springing him from jail. The angel "smote" him on the side.

The fact that the church was "astonished" (16) is telling. Sometimes we pray with little faith. Sometimes we "ask" but neither "seek," nor "find," and it is not God's fault. The church was being tested in more ways than one. This was an opportunity for the early church to give their prayer meeting a "test flight." James was not released. This is not to say that no one prayed for him. John the Baptist was beheaded. Stephen experienced a shower of stones. The lesson is found in the calm and peace of Peter as much as in the prayers. Nothing can happen to us until God is finished. It important thing is not that we are released from prison. The important thing is that "The word of God grew and multiplied." (24).

# ACTS... 13

## Missionary Church (3)

The church at Antioch was the one from which God would send out the first missionaries. One of the members of this assembly had been “brought up” with Herod. Never was there an example of two so close and yet so far apart. How we were “brought up” is not as important as in what we allow ourselves to be “caught up.” Manaen was found in church. Herod was lost. We are either a missionary or a mission field. There are only two races.

The best way to “keep the faith” is to give it away. The church, being guided and led by the Holy Spirit, “separated” Barnabas and Saul. This is one of the last times Saul would be called by that name. From this time forward he would be known as Paul. Saul means great, Paul means little. Sometimes we need to become little before we can become great.

Not sooner did these missionaries land on foreign soil but what they were confronted by spiritual forces of darkness. Missionary work is not a vacation. It is not a chance to see the world. Missionary work is no game. First they confronted a sorcerer named Bar (son of) Jesus. This is an interesting name. There are many who have a name that is a derivative of the Name which is above ever name, but a closer look reveals a charlatan.

There are as many who will try to turn people “away” as “to” Jesus Christ. They will try to convince people that they are alright just the way they are. They might say, “I’m not a Christian, but I am spiritual.” Then there are those religious people who will denigrate the message of salvation as being false or unnecessary when in fact they oppose the church for the same reason the religious leaders opposed the Lord Jesus: envy. (13:45, Mt. 27:17). There are two forces standing against the missionary: supernatural evil, and natural envy. It is hard to determine which is more awful. Many missionaries have returned broken from the mission field wounded by envy as much as by evil. Feelings are hurt. If Satan cannot wound us one way, he will try to strike at us other way.

For this reason missionary work must be seriously considered and only prayerfully undertaken. Short term mission trips may be the thing today. The forces of darkness can tell the difference between a man on a vacation and one with a vocation. If God calls, go. If He does not, please stay home.

# ACTS... 14

## Church with an Open Door (27)

God is the God of Doors. John on Patmos would later write that no man can shut the door that God opens and no one can open the door that God shuts. That should be good enough for us who follow the One who called himself the “door.” We are simple to go through the open doors of God. Should one close, we are permitted to “knock,” on another, but we had better not try to “knock it down.”

Paul and Barnabas are greeted with great enthusiasm by people who thought them to be something they were not. Having witnessed the power these apostles had in healing a lame man, they thought they were being visited by the gods of their imagination. When these servants of God prevented them from making offerings and sacrifices to them, the fickle congregation turned on them. Paul was stoned and left for dead.

Many think this was the occasion when Paul was lifted up into the third heaven and saw visions and wonders that were indescribable. If it was, it is a good example to us of how our most painful experiences may be the very portals of greater vision and grace.

It is also a comfort to any who have been counted out by others as “supposing to be dead.” Even Lazarus was not done until Jesus said he was done. When Paul got up, he “encouraged the disciples to continue.” Then with fasting and prayer he ordained elders in every church. The chapter concludes with a gathering of the church where the believers “rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how He had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles.”  
When God shuts one door, He opens another.

# ACTS... 15

## Church in Conflict (24)

The fifteenth chapter was played out in the year 50AD. Less than twenty years after the resurrection, the church faced a grave crisis. There were those who had trouble letting go of the past. There were others who had trouble appreciating the past. The New Testament had to find a place for the Old. We know that the Old is fulfilled in the New. We know that the Law and the Prophets are the underpinnings of the New Testament Church.

There came a time when there needed to be a clarification about what it meant to be a Christian. Did the new Christians have to be Jews first? Did they have to observe the rites, rituals, ceremonies cherished by their Hebrew brethren. Were the Jewish Christians more Christian than the Gentile Christians? Did not new believers have to do this thing or that thing in order to be authentic?

The question was settled at the Jerusalem council in 50AD, or was it. The spirit that would love to cause schisms is still at work. While the circumcision question seems to have been settled, it has been replaced by a hundred other “so called” litmus tests. There are those who insist that unless a convert do this, that, or the other thing, their faith is suspect at best and spurious at worst.

The Apostles in Jerusalem spoke to the need for purity and simply left it at that. The concern was not to “trouble” the gentiles with things that would not add to grace. We wish it was as simple as this, but it is not. Another schism developed between Paul and Barnabas over a relative. Barnabas wanted to take his nephew on the second missionary journey, Paul refused. It seems that grace could not keep the church from being broken. This is the first church “split.” The Bible says that the contention was “so sharp.”

Chalk it up to temperament if you like. Barnabas seemed to have the gift of encouragement, Paul of prophecy. In the end Mark is welcomed back and we find that grace wins in the end. Should we find ourselves in the middle of a Jerusalem council or having problems with men who fall short of the Bench Mark you believe is a minimal, pray for grace and pray you will be gracious.

# ACTS... 16

## Spirit-led Church (6)

Christ is the Head of the church, but the Holy Spirit is the Spirit all other spirits must obey. No other spirit should be allowed to lead, not team spirit, party spirit, or patriotic spirit. Even the willing spirits, humble spirits, and joyful spirit must be in obedience to the Third Person of the Trinity. Paul was sensitive to the leading of the Spirit. Such is the Spirit of the New Testament Church. How do we know we have found a New Testament Church? Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is peace, love, and joy. Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty. Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is order and not confusion. This is clearly taught in the Epistles.

Here we see the Holy Spirit leading, guiding, nudging, constraining, and restraining Paul and his team of missionaries. The word “forbidden” is foreboding. Just because we want to go to Phrygia or Bithynia does not mean that it is God’s will. Many a man is “in the ministry” that has no business being there. Many have set sail without having been sent. It may not be so much that God does not want them as God does not want them “there.” If we learn anything in Acts 16, let us learn that God has a manifest and an itinerary, as well as tickets to specific destinations for His disciples. God is not fooled when a Prophet buys a ticket of Tarshish when God has made reservations in Nineveh. We must go where God sends us.

Paul’s sensitivity brought him to the place where he received the famous Macedonian Call. Answering that call led to Lydia and to a Philippian Jailor and the opening of Europe, and brought the Gospel to many of our ancestors. Could it be that the Holy Spirit is blocking some desired move or path? Could it be that God is sending out a call, but we are not listening? Could it be that someone’s world is crashing down around them and they need to hear our voice and witness that answers their greatest question and need? “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.”



# ACTS... 17

## Bible Church (2)

A New Testament Church is a Bible Church. Not every church is. Some churches are known for their music, others for their charismatic leaders or their liturgy. The early church had the words of God. That was all they needed. “Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and ...reasoned with them out of the Scriptures.” This was a very simple program. What does it say? What does it mean? What are we going to do about it? That is the heart of a Bible Church.

They told people how Jesus Christ fulfilled the promises and plans of God in suffering for sin, and rising from the dead. They preached Jesus, and “some of them believed” (v.4). It was that simple. Today we may be tempted to “throw in a toaster,” or the right to use the church gymnasium for our family reunion, or membership in our world famous hand bell choir.

When Paul visited Mars Hill he was stirred in his spirit at the sight of so much idolatry. Men had fashioned idols and altars which reflected the imaginations of their heart. While what the Athenians did is telling, so is what we have in Western Civilization. We need only go to Hollywood to see what is coming out of our imaginations or to Wall Street to see what is in our heart.

Perhaps if we were as “stirred” as Paul, we would be less comfortable with American idols. Paul’s message called for repentance. “God...hath called upon all men everywhere to repent.” This was met with mocking by some, but others wanted to hear more. A New Testament Church is a Bible Church.

The Athenians wanted to “hear some new thing.” Today many ministries are coming up with some “new thing,” or “exciting thing,” or “novel thing.” The world needs one thing. The world needs to hear the word of God, clearly, plainly, consistently, and repeatedly.

# ACTS... 18

## Preaching Church (9)

“Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace.” God gave the winds a mighty voice in the church. Peter said he “could not help but speak the things he had seen and heard.” The church could not be silent. Its mission was to proclaim the message of salvation.

Preaching is a spiritual exercise. It is something that should not be taken or taken up lightly. Preaching is an affront to the principalities and powers of darkness. An “insurrection” was made against Paul. Real preaching, not only has the potential of awakening the dead, it is as likely to awaken the demons of darkness. The evil forces that were directed against Christ will certainly turn on those disciples that speak against them. The church is involved in a spiritual struggle for the souls of men.

In fulfilling its mission to “Preach the Word,” the church must do more than enlist their best speakers and most eloquent men. It should be pointed out that (in Old Testament times) Aaron was the one who could “speak well,” not Moses.

Aquilla and Pricilla heard Apollos speak. He was an “eloquent man,” and even “mighty in Scriptures.” These are the tools taught and honed in seminary. Unless God endues eloquence with the power of the Holy Spirit, it is something less than what God calls preaching. The baptism of John is not enough to face the forces of darkness and the fires of persecution. They expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly. Just what was missing from Apollos’ ministry is not clear to us. It may be have been Jesus and that “Jesus was the Christ.”

Is there something missing from our preaching today? Is there some point, some power, or some presence absent? The Preaching of the New Testament church had a dramatic impact on those who heard it. Preaching is not just “talking about God.” Preaching is talking “for God.” There is a big difference.

# ACTS... 19

## Powerful Church (20)

“So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed.” Once again, Paul encountered believers who lacked the power and presence of God in their life and ministry. The point is clear, the ministry is spiritual work. Let us remember that the Lord told Nichodemus, “that which is flesh is flesh, and that which is Spirit is Spirit.” This is very important. Samson was powerless when the Spirit of God left him to his own wits and devices. The best intentions of Moses led to failure and to murder. Jesus said “without me, ye can do nothing.” A church without the powerful and presiding presence of God is a pathetic and impotent “glee club.” Positive thinking is not the same as being fully persuaded that God’s Word is true and in preaching repentance and faith.

“God wrought special miracles by the hands of Paul.” Then like now, many are more impressed with the miracles than the message. Then like now, many wanted the power in order to be “power brokers,” and the focal point of other people’s faith.

There were some who desired to take up the name and message of Jesus only to be confronted by evil spirits who asked a sobering question. “And the evil spirit answered and said, Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are ye?” First, let us be reminded that there are evil spirits everywhere. Woe to the church or would-be churchmen who tinker with holy work. “Who are you?” Should a demon ever fix its gaze on a make-believer, woe to that pretender. We may be able to fool a multitude and tickle their itching ears with eloquence with entertaining stories, but evil spirits will not be impressed. They may in fact leap upon the impostor.

Powerful preaching results in changed hearts. No greater evidence of effective preaching was ever demonstrated than in the burning of books at Ephesus. Cleaning up dirty hearts and lives is always the proof of powerful preaching. People hearing the truth do not always burn their books of curious arts, sometimes they burn with rage and anger. Instead of a revival, sometimes the result is a riot. When our preaching has no effect it is probably proof that we were alone in the pulpit.

# ACTS... 20

## Paul as Pastor

These last chapters find Paul a main character. Here we see him as a pastor. Sheep need shepherds. We are not talking about popes or potentates, but pastors. One of the most important aspects of this gift and ministry is one of “exhortation” (v.2). There is not a single person in the flock that would not benefit from exhortation at this very moment. This is the ministry of encouragement. Discouragement is not only an element in Satan’s Periodic Table, it is one of his favorite weapons. Encouragement trumps discouragement. Find a group of discouraged believers and you have found sheep without a shepherd.

We need courage to face the challenges of the enemy. Bad things happen. The accident with Eutychus was tragic. Paul met it with as much grace as he did faith. It is in such times that the saints need those with maturity of faith who encourage us to “trouble not yourselves.”

A pastor is one who “serves the Lord with humility of mind,” and sometimes with many tears (19). A pastor is someone who “keeps back nothing.” The hireling or the popular guest speaker will rarely rebuke, correct, or scold the children of God. That is for parents and for pastors to do. A parent will tell a child to “mind your manners,” and a pastor will admonish one to “mend his ways.” A pastor-less flock is as alarming as a parentless home.

We are not talking about “clergy.” We are talking about someone loving, caring, and tending the flock because God asked him to. Every flock needs shepherds or “overseers.”

A real pastor never seeks to have a following more than he desires people to follow the Lord Jesus who “purchased” the church with His own blood. A real pastor warns as much as warms the lambs. He is aware and vigilant to the fact that there are “wolves” everywhere. More than his own life, the pastor cares for the sheep.

# ACTS... 21

## Paul in Bonds (13)

The Old Testament prophets used to speak about having a “burden.” Paul spoke of being in bounds. Paul was captured and conquered by Jesus Christ. Serving God was no “hobby,” fad, or fashion with this Apostle. He was caught in the deeper current of God’s will for his life and lesser affected by the weather conditions on the surface of his circumstances. The major part of an iceberg is hidden beneath the waves. The wind might be blowing in one direction and the mountain of ice moving in another, because of deeper currents. Holy men of God move by “deeper currents.”

Paul’s friends tried everything they could to get him to changes his plans and idea of going to Jerusalem. They knew that he was so hated by the Jews that his very life would be in danger. He was a man caught in the gravitational force that caused him to orbit around the Son. He put danger in perspective by saying “The will of the Lord be done.”

Paul was taken in the temple by those who considered him a traitor and a turn-coat. Even in this, he used the opportunity to speak of Christ. He spoke in Greek to the Chief captain and got permission to address the multitude. Then he spoke to the multitude in their own language. There is a lesson here. We must speak in language that people understand. Paul was bound up in the will of God, but he was not bound to single methods or ways of doing things in order to minister the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He was not bound by tradition, nor by the expectations of others, or by fear of what his critics would say. He was not bound by one language, custom, or way of dress.

It might be said of Paul that in any given situation or circumstance Paul was bound to minister the gospel of the grace of God. We should not allow anyone or any thing to “put us in a box.”

# ACTS... 22

## Paul a Witness (15)

A witness can give testimony in a court of law. A witness can give credible evidence to aid the defense or prosecution of a case. An expert witness is not as good as an eye witness. We do not have to be “experts.” A court of law or a Gospel testimony is no place for “here say.” A believer must be believable. Paul had a dramatic story to tell. Not every believer shares the excitement of a Damascus Road experience, but every believer must be able to tell about the time and place they personally saw “the light” (v.6) saw that they were sinners and Jesus Christ as the only Savior of sinners. Jesus is called the “Just One.” There is just one Just One. As Paul would later write, “The Just died for the unjust, just once.”

People are not saved in groups (v.9). People come to faith, one by one. And everyone who has a personal faith experience is a witness. “Thou shalt be His witness unto all men of what thou hast seen and heard.”

There are times when testifying for Christ amounts to testifying against ourselves, as in an enemy’s court of law we will convict our self of being a Christian. Today unfortunately, for many, there is precious little evidence or proof to convince a jury that we are actually followers of Jesus Christ. Our life should give clear evidence that we hate the sin that Christ had to die for, and love Him as Savior and Lord. Every testimony should include three parts. What we were before we were a believer. How we came to see that Christ was the only Savior. Lastly what we are now because of Christ came into our life. Paul confessed to being a man who “persecuted” the believers to his shame, and in so doing was actually attacking Christ Himself.

Likewise, when people visit our assembly it should be absolutely clear that we believe in the necessity of the new birth and a life that is consistent with being born from above.

# ACTS... 23

## Paul and Providence (11)

God has a plan. Some call it providence. Providence is the outworking of God's good plan. We are told elsewhere that God is "working all things together for good..." Exactly how God does this is beyond us. How God has programmed our DNA is just being discovered by science. How enzymes and amino acids form proteins and how proteins form cells and cells fashion themselves into thousands of parts and organs is a marvel. Likewise, for the believer, God is doing a great work in our salvation in making us conformed to the image of Jesus Christ.

There is science and then there is conscience. While one need not be against the other, conscience is more important. Conscience is the "still small voice" God has left as a remnant in the midst of man's sin-ruined soul. Conscience cannot save, but like the Law, it can warn us about moral dangers that lurk all around us.

Conscience and religion can both be corrupted. Paul stood before the High Priest and was smitten in the mouth for speaking of his conscience. Only God should be above our conscience. We should never give our conscience to religious leaders, governments, cults or causes. Only Christ has the right to be Lord of conscience.

Having said that, Paul was conscious of God's providential leading. Paul's awareness of God's plan and will for his life gave him immeasurable courage. Paul was visited by the Lord the night before he was to be arraigned by his enemies. Paul was the subject of a vast conspiracy to have him killed. It is sufficient here to say that no one, no thing, no weapon formed against God's servant will prosper in thwarting the plans of God. As David put it. "A thousand shall fall at thy side and ten thousand at thy right hand, but it shall not come neigh thee." If God told Paul he would be a "witness at Rome also," nothing could stop that. Woe to the man or army that would try to stand in the way of the chariot wheels of God's providence.

# ACTS... 24

## Paul as Preacher (16)

The enemies of Paul hired a great “orator” to speak against him. A silver tongue was sent to seal his doom. Tertullus employed all the tricks of his trade. He used flattery and appealed to the governor’s pride. He stroked the official’s ego. Paul appeared to be a little pawn on a political chessboard. He called Paul a “pestilent fellow” and called him “seditious.” The word sedition would get any governor’s attention. It was the crime of Barabbas.

Finally, it was Paul’s turn. He would not rely on “oratory,” as much as plain truth. He plainly pointed out that he believed there was to be a resurrection of the dead, both just and unjust (15). When Paul had a second audience, we are told what Felix and Drusilla heard. He heard him concerning the faith in Christ. Paul spoke of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come. Paul was a faithful preacher. His congregation of two “trembled.”

When people hear us, what do they hear? Do they hear us speak of ourselves, our church, our traditions. We must preach and teach the whole counsel of God, but Jesus must be the centerpiece of every sermon. Everything else must be connected to and related to Him. The Bible is the Christian’s Him Book. It’s all about Him.

Felix, like many, decided to not decide. He said “when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee.” Salvation is supernatural. Saying “no” to God may prove fatal. There may be no second chance or “convenient season.” There may be some soul listening to us who is about to enter into an eternal winter from which there will be no spring. Their heart may grow cold to God and never thaw until they feel the fires of Hell. Then it will be too late.

A second motive fixed his fate. He hoped to make money by keeping Paul. The love of money is indeed the root of all evil. Felix means “happy.” Everyone wants to be “happy.” God wants us to be “holy.” Only those who are made “holy” by faith in Jesus Christ will know what real happiness is. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled.”

The job of preachers is not to make people happy. Neither is it to “show [them] pleasure.” The New Testament Church is not a pleasure cruise. The ship of Zion is supposed to be more a fishing trawler. We are crew not tourists. There is work to be done. There are souls to rescue, there are souls to save.



# ACTS... 25

## Paul's Appeal (11b)

"I appeal to Caesar." Some think this was a mistake. Others think Paul was counting on "connections" some of his friends had in Rome with Seneca. I think both ideas are wrong. Paul never tried to "pull strings" to accomplish the plans and will of God. He was simply knocking on the door he found before him. Jesus said "ask and it shall be given, seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you." It is no sin to ask, seek, or knock. My philosophy is to go through the open door. God is the God of doors.

Those who understand how to remain under authority without becoming despondent or bitter have learned the power of appeal. Instead of fighting with or struggling with the powers that be, why not simply appeal? There are times when we simply comply and then there are times when we "ask, seek, and knock." If a Roman conscripts us to walk a mile, we may not have many options. Refusing may result in the ending of a journey. Going with anger and resentment may cause our hearts to hurt more than our feet. A third option is to walk two miles. The first we walk as a slave, the second as a free man.

Paul spoke of a "license" he had as a Roman. Living with and using the laws of man need not violate the laws of God. If they do, then (of course) we must obey God. Paul asked that his case be brought to the seat of government responsible for the death of the Christ. Little did the "powers that be" realize that Paul worked for a higher power. Jesus told Pilate that he "had not power except that which was given him from above." How ironic it was that Paul was about to secure passage to the very heart of the empire, and there preach the Kingdom of God and Christ the King.

If your house is on fire you are free to call the fire department. If your pocket book is stolen you may call the police. If the Gauls burn your crops, you are free to appeal to Rome's legions and never betray your faith or calling. Government, Paul would later write, is for our good. Let us use it and every instrument for our good and God's glory, but let no thing or government ever use us, for we belong to God.

# ACTS... 26

## Paul's Testimony (19)

Our life is a story. Our life is the story of what we did with Jesus Christ and what He did with us. Jesus said, "without me ye can do nothing." A story without God is a story about nothing. Paul had a story to tell. His and ours are called a testimony.

Paul loved to tell his story. His, like that of every believer's story, has a before, a when, and a what or a since we met Christ part. Paul describes his early life as being part of "the most straitest sect of our religion." He said, "I live a Pharisee." The Pharisees thought that none were better than they were. Even if that were true, Paul found out that, that was just not good enough.

On the Damascus Road Paul (then known as Saul) discovered that Jesus Christ was very much alive and that He was the Lord of Life. What remained of Paul's life was to be dedicated to doing the will of the One who saved him.

That vision on the Road to Damascus was the beginning of a life of purpose and passion. Toward the end of his life he gave his testimony to king Agrippa (v. 19) and said "Whereupon, O king Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision." To be less than obedient is to miss the reason we were born. Then Paul went on to say, "Having therefore obtained help from God, I continue unto this day..." This is every faithful Christians goal: to find God's will and do it regardless of the cost, and regardless of the obstacles. The secret of Paul's and every obedient believer is found in the words, "Having obtained help from God."

When Paul finished, the king said "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian." To this Paul replied, "I wish."

The Bible says (in John 1) that the "Word became flesh." The Word is Jesus Christ. Two thousand years ago the Word of God came to our planet. What men did with and to that Word is the story of the New Testament. It is enough here to say that God shall have the last word in the story. Your life is a chapter in the larger story of the Word. The story of your life is the story of what you did with the Word of God. What have you done with the Word of God, and what have you allowed the Word to do with you?

# ACTS... 27

## Paul the Survivor (15)

Paul was a survivor. His life was one of surviving storms and contrary winds and contrary people. Paul was on a mission and so are we. The 27th Chapter of Acts gives witness to a horrific storm and to a faith that not only did not get sea sick, but refused to give up when everyone else lost hope.

First of all, let us admit that the life of faith is not always one of clear skies and calm seas. Paul's faith and ours will face hard winds and heavy seas. We will never get to where we are supposed to go if we stay forever moored at "Fair Haven" (v. 8). We must set sail. After setting out, Paul prophesied "I perceive that this voyage will be with hurt and much damage..." No one gets through this life without "getting hurt." How we deal with the "hurts" is a reflection of character and of our faith. Paul faced his trials with courage and in that we can all find encouragement.

Paul had good reason to be encouraged. God had revealed to him that he would witness in Rome also. Nothing can stop God's will for being fulfilled in the life of a faithful servant. When everyone else lost hope, and wanted to abandon ship, Paul said "Be of good cheer, for I believe God."

This was the same man who wrote in Romans "I know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to His purpose." There was a time when the storm was so ferocious that the sailors literally slipped cables around the hull of the ship to hold it together. These cables were called "helps" (v. 17). There are times when we cannot explain how our lives and hearts are held together and kept from breaking apart, except to say that God Himself wraps His arms around us in the middle of the storm. God is good.

Every believer is on his or her way to heaven. In this life we shall make many Ports of Call. Even if we must endure great storms and heavy seas, we know that faith always survives.

# ACTS... 28

## Paul the Faithful

When the ship is broken on the rocks, Paul is washed up on the shores of Malta, but he is not “all washed up.” There to greet him were barbarians who built a fire with which he warmed himself. God always sees to it that some will kindle a fire of kindness to take the chill out of some traumatic experience. Let us thank God for those who help us along the way.

Just when things look like they could not get worse, Paul is bitten by a snake. There are more ways than one to be snake-bit. Sometimes we are bitten by evil men who are cold blooded. Sometimes we feel the fangs of evil sink into our helping hands or our hearts. Paul just shook it off. Those who watched were amazed. What we do when someone tries to harm us speak volumes about our inner strength and faith in God. There is no poison strong enough to kill the spirit of the man or woman who loves God.

Even there on the isle of brokenness, Paul spoke of the goodness of God and of His kingdom. He spoke of Christ and “some believed.” The Book ends here but not the story. There are more than twenty eight chapters. The story continues with you and the story continues with me. The bottom line of Paul’s story was that Paul was faithful. That is because real faith is always faithful. The world may try to silence faith, imprison it, punish it, or crucify it, but faith is faithful. We are not on our way to Rome. We are on our way to the Heavenly Jerusalem. There may be some hurts, and storms along the way. There may be some prison cells, and some troubled waters, but be assured no one and no thing can prevent you from going to what the Lord Jesus called the Father’s house.

Jesus died on a cross to purchase a place in heaven for us. He rose on the third day as evidence to the success of his mission to pay for our sins. He empowers us with the presence of the Holy Spirit and employs us to proclaim His message of hope and salvation. He has instructed us to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and in the uttermost parts of the earth. In the Bible, the Gospels always come before Acts. In the world, how we Act is often more important than our Gospel. What we do today and tomorrow will be part of an eternal story of how we followed Jesus, how we acted and how we behaved on our way to heaven