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“Acts of the Apostles”

by

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About the Author



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FRIDAY, OCTOBER 1

ACTS 1:1

1 CORINTHIANS 1:19-31

*“...of all that Jesus began
both to do and teach ...”*

THE BOOK OF ACTS (I)

The Book of Acts is the great historical book of the New Testament. It shows how the history of the world was radically changed through the formation of the New Testament church. In this great unstoppable movement of the spread of the church, we see demons silenced, enemies overcome, converts multiplied, and churches springing up in the most unlikely of places. Acts shows how the great commission given in the 4 Gospels was carried out by the early church, especially to the Gentiles. It provides the link between the Gospels and the Epistles in the application of doctrinal truths.

One of the apparent paradoxes of this book is that God starts this church in an Upper Room with a group of insignificant people without any political or religious power. No one would have thought that the dismal picture of the disciples presented at the end of the Gospels could be used to start the church.

Many argue about the true title of this epistle. Some say it should be “The Acts of the Apostles,” others “The Acts of the Holy Spirit.” A third view is that it should be called “The Works and Acts of Jesus Christ Continuing.” This latter view is derived from the fact that Luke tells us, *“The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach”* (Acts 1:1).

The latter view is particularly appropriate as these works do continue on through the Holy Spirit. Acts is a continuation of the “Acts of the Risen Jesus” (cf. Phil 4:13; 2 Tim 4:17; Heb 7:25). It is, therefore, the continuation of the Lord’s actions, from glory through His church, by means of the Holy Spirit. These actions of the risen and glorified Christ are prominent throughout the narrative.

THOUGHT: Christianity is not a mere philosophy or ideal, but is tied up in the historical facts of the Person and Work of Jesus Christ.

PRAYER: Lord, use me to spread the gospel of Christ.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 2

ACTS 1:1

2 TIMOTHY 4:17

*“...Notwithstanding the
Lord stood with me.”*

THE BOOK OF ACTS (II)

The church is not a social society and the only explanation for her formation and preservation is rooted in God. The powers of Judaism, heathenism, idolatry, and contemptuous indifference would oppose the church, but each would be defeated by the power of the message of this despised group. All of these people were chosen, dedicated, prepared, praying people, Spirit-empowered, and with an evangelistic heart for all men. None of these things should be overlooked. Martyn Lloyd-Jones urges concerning Acts: “Live in that book, I exhort you: It is a tonic, the greatest tonic I know of in the realm of the Spirit.”

To evangelise the world, God had to provide the message in the gospel. This message would be the same for both Jews and Gentiles. Many religions and philosophies clamoured to be heard in Acts, but there was only one message that could transform men. This was given in Acts to the church and it was entirely Christ centred and God honouring. The points emphasized may be different throughout, but the central message of the life, death and resurrection of Christ dominates.

The apostolic period extends for about 70 years from the Day of Pentecost to the death of John (AD 30 to 100). The main field of apostolic activity is Palestine, and gradually extends over Syria, Asia Minor, Greece and Italy. The most prominent centres are Jerusalem, Antioch, and eventually Ephesus and Rome. The diverse nationalities reached by the gospel in the first century in the heroic march of Christianity from the capital of Judaism to the capital of heathenism were the Jews, the Greeks, and the Romans.

The Book of Acts and the Epistles give us an inerrant record of information up to the year AD 65. There are no accurate statistics as to the numerical strength of Christianity at the close of the first century, but it may have been as much as 10% of the Roman Empire. Despite this rapid spread, it was followed by an equally sharp decline.

THOUGHT: What will I be remembered for after I leave this earth?

PRAYER: Lord, keep me faithful.

LORD'S DAY, OCTOBER 3

ACTS 1:1-3

GALATIANS 1:11-24

“...the gospel which was preached
of me is not after man.”

A NEW BEGINNING

The Book of Acts takes up precisely where Luke's Gospel left off. The author is the same, as well as the recipient, Theophilus. The name Theophilus means “friend of God” or “beloved of God.” Some records indicate that he might have been a wealthy and influential official in Antioch. If Luke was from Antioch, this may explain why he knew Theophilus. Theophilus might also have been a high-ranking Roman official because Luke referred to him as “*most excellent Theophilus*” (Luke 1:3). This was a term used in reference to Felix and Festus, who were Roman governors (Acts 23:26, 26:25).

The apostles were “*chosen*” by the Lord. They did not even volunteer for the job. There are no self-appointed apostles. They were not to build their own empire, but were “sent ones” to preach what they were commanded to witness. The fact that Christ commanded “*through the Holy Ghost*” emphasizes that Christ always did the will of the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Christ appeared for 40 days after His resurrection before His ascension. Why did He wait? Why did He not go straight to heaven? There are probably six main reasons:

- (1) unite His disciples
- (2) instruct the disciples about the true nature of the Kingdom
- (3) wean them away from His presence
- (4) assure the disciples
- (5) prepare them for intelligent witnessing
- (6) inspire them to missionary witnessing

These disciples would now be used of God to plant churches in Jewish and Gentile cities. We see a sovereign God directing and empowering men and women saved by Jesus Christ and manifesting His life every day to reach lost souls.

THOUGHT: I am chosen by God for His service.

PRAYER: Lord, Thy will be done in my life.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 4

ACTS 1:5

GALATIANS 1:11-24

“... ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence.”

THE PROMISE OF THE SPIRIT

This is a controversial and much misunderstood passage. Christ promised that “*ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence.*” Despite some attempts to argue this away (to avoid the linking of *baptizo* with “pouring” of Acts 2:17-18), Christ said what He meant and meant what He said and fulfilled what He said He would do! This promise was fully fulfilled by a baptismal filling for service through the “pouring” of the Holy Spirit upon believers in Acts 2:4.

When we are saved, the Holy Spirit dwells within us (Rom 8:9) and gives us eternal life (John 4:14) and we receive the seal of the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:13). The Holy Spirit also baptizes us into the Body of Christ at the point of conversion (1 Cor 12:13).

However, the “*baptism*” mentioned here in verse 5 is not this act of conversion which is a singular experience only (1 Cor 12:13). Rather it refers to a “baptismal filling” where the fullness of the Spirit is poured out upon the saint in power. This fullness or filling of the Spirit is a repeatable experience of infilling for service. The fulfillment of this promise was in Acts 2:4. It should be noted that it was a sovereign act of God, as was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the Reformation, the three Great Awakenings, and the Singapore Pentecost under John Sung.

Rev Timothy Tow (founder of the Bible-Presbyterian Church in Singapore) explains that this baptismal filling of the Spirit was for power: “What is baptism of the Holy Spirit (verse 5)? It is spiritual power from God (verse 8) to enable us to witness both near (Jerusalem) and far (unto the uttermost part of the earth).”

THOUGHT: We need the filling of the Spirit for effective service.

PRAYER: Lord, pour out Thy Spirit upon Thy church again.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 5

ACTS 1:6-7

LUKE 22:29-30

*“It is not for you to know
the times or the seasons.”*

HISTORY IN GOD’S HANDS

Christ warned His disciples not to speculate on the dates of when He would set up His Kingdom. All of these things are in God’s sovereign authority. Christ did not reject their understanding of a literal Millennial Kingdom (Luke 22:29-30) but simply corrected their assumption that they could deduce the timing of it.

Even believers can be wrongly obsessed with prophetic date studies, while neglecting many other doctrines. According to Greek scholar, R. C. Trench, the word “*times*” can refer to any length of time, whereas “*seasons*” means opportune moments or critical, epoch-making periods. All movements such as the Reformation are seasons. What comfort it brings to know that all history is under God’s sovereign control and plan. The sovereignty of God as the uncontrolled and uncontrollable Ruler of this universe is the foundation to understanding all doctrines.

It is true that when we seek to discover any truth in Scripture, we must always begin with God. He is a God who plans, a God who intervenes, and a God who speaks. Therefore, He is a God to whom we can seek and cry for help. In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul wrote, “*ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God*” (1 Thess 1:9). This is the message throughout the Bible that the living God has revealed Himself to us through Scripture and His Son. Christians are people who are no longer seeking or uncertain – they are people who have been found.

It is truly amazing that while we recognize our ignorance about the universe, ourselves, life, death, and eternity, so many believers never turn to the only Book that can provide answers to these questions. The main factor in the lowering of the victorious life of saints has been the loss of the authority of the Bible. Sadly, the Christian church has been most responsible for this.

THOUGHT: The Bible is the Book of God.

PRAYER: Lord, give us a deeper understanding of Thyself.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 6

ACTS 1:8

ISAIAH 40:1-18

“... ye shall be
witnesses unto Me.”

THE PROGRAMME FOR THE CHURCH

In Acts 1:8, Christ sets forth the programme for the Church and the Book of Acts delineates its fulfillment – “*Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.*” God controls the plan, programme and message. He does not ask us to come up with our own “seeker-sensitive” programme.

This verse summarises a simple outline of the Book of Acts in the formation of the New Testament church:

- (1) The witness in Jerusalem (Chapters 1 – 7)
- (2) The witness in Samaria (Chapters 8 – 12)
- (3) The witness to the Gentiles (Chapters 13 – 28)

The disciples were to be “*witnesses*” unto Christ – not exercising their personal ministry and message. It needs to be noted that they were not simply to preach the teachings of Christ, as liberals argue. They must also preach the Work and Person of Christ. Rev Timothy Tow used to advise all his students to place a cross at the top of every sermon note as the cross is what they were to aim for. The apostles, as eyewitnesses of the saving events, were witnesses in a unique sense. Charles Spurgeon argues that our preaching as witnesses must be Christ-centred:

“A sermon without Christ as its beginning, middle, and end is a mistake in conception and a crime in execution.... [Let us] preach Christ to sinners if we cannot preach sinners to Christ.... I wish that our ministry - and mine especially - might be tied and tethered to the cross.”

The Greek word for “*witnesses*” is *martus* from which we get our word “martyr.” After so many Christians died giving testimony, it became synonymous with dying.

THOUGHT: My preaching must be Christ-centred.

PRAYER: Lord, help me to be Christ-centred.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 7

ACTS 1:9-11

ZECHARIAH 14:4

“... *this same Jesus.*”

CHRIST WILL RETURN

Luke confirmed this place was the Mount of Olives in Acts 1:12. It was near Bethany which was situated on the other side of the mountain. The manner of Christ’s exit was no doubt to show finality and to prevent any speculation that He had vanished away secretly, as they were to be witnesses.

This farewell, they were assured, was not permanent. “*This same Jesus*” means that in His glorified body He will literally return to earth at the same place (Zech 14:4). The great hope of the Church is Christ’s return. It is not some man, human organisation, or even a church. The thought of Christ’s coming produced great joy in their hearts and the desire to worship Christ (Luke 24:52). It also produced obedience to the commands of Christ as they immediately returned to Jerusalem to tarry for the empowering of the Spirit.

Knowing that Christ is coming back should stir all believers to greater service. Sometimes we can be caught up with focusing too much on the events of the second coming of Christ. However, the angels were reminding the disciples here that the doctrine of eschatology should always produce a practical Christianity. As Calvin puts it, “they must fight before they can triumph.”

The hope of Christ’s return runs like a thread throughout the whole Book of Acts, and throughout church history. Jesus warned that in the last days men’s hearts will be troubled by diverse crises in the world as, “*there shall be...distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; Men’s hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken*” (Luke 21:25-26). Christians should be ready to meet life and be prepared for every eventuality.

THOUGHT: Christ is coming back.

PRAYER: Lord, may I always be ready to meet Thee.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 8

ACTS 1:12-14

LUKE 24: 44-53

“... they worshipped Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.”

PERSEVERING PRAYER

After they worshipped Jesus (Luke 24:52), the disciples' immediate obedience in returning to Jerusalem is notable. The Upper Room may have been the same place in which they had eaten the Passover. The half-brothers of Christ, such as James and Jude who appeared to have rejected Him previously (John 7:3-5), were there. If so, the resurrection power of the Gospel was already on display.

Not only is their obedience noteworthy, but their unity and dedication in prayer too. They did not waste these ten days celebrating but continued on in prayer and supplication. These disciples all had occupations and some had families. They might have used the time in other ways. However, they followed the Lord's command and gave themselves to prayer, waiting for the full revelation of what God had promised to give them. As Charles Spurgeon said, “Prayer is that slender nerve that moves the muscles of omnipotence.”

The word “*continued*” denotes continuous persevering in unified prayer. Of the 500 brethren that saw Christ after His resurrection (1 Cor 15:6), it is interesting that only 120 were in the Upper Room when the Day of Pentecost came. Did some draw back or get weary in prayer? The apostolic injunction to us is to “*pray without ceasing,*” but too often believers seem to “cease without praying”!

When we have a Biblical view of life and of the cares of this world, we can be ready to face everything without shame or disappointment. Obedience to God alone is the answer to spiritual growth, and we must submit to His plan and His method for this. This is the duty of Christians at all times. Spiritual growth and power are not something that we assume automatically because we are Christians. They are by-products of humility and righteousness when we live in a right relationship in accordance with God's will.

THOUGHT: Obedience to God is the answer to spiritual growth.

PRAYER: Lord, help me to be obedient to Thy Word.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 9

ACTS 1:15-20

PSALM 69:25

*“Let their habitation
be desolate.”*

DIGNITY IN FAILURE

Peter’s profound understanding of Scripture shows a wisdom we did not often see in him before. Many commentators focus on the change in Peter on the Day of Pentecost, but a work of grace had already begun to change him during the interim between the resurrection and then.

Peter was speaking with maturity and deep insight into the Scripture. We do not read of Christ teaching him about the Old Testament prophecies of Judas although He may have taught Peter these things during the 40 days. Alternatively, it may have been that the Holy Spirit revealed these things directly to Peter. However it happened, Peter made the connection between Judas and the Old Testament prophecies in Psalm 41:9 and Psalm 69:25. This must have brought great confidence to them of the sovereignty of God in predicting such an event. History really is “His Story” as everything happens as part of God’s ordained purpose through Christ. This incident is suggestive that the disciples were also studying or meditating on the Scripture during the ten-day period after Jesus had ascended into heaven.

The dignity of how the disciples handled Judas’ betrayal is astounding. They simply dealt with it and moved on seemingly without a trace of bitterness. Even in Acts 2:23, Peter did not blame Judas publicly for the death of Christ but left at the door of the Jews. This does not absolve Judas from responsibility for his betrayal. As Barnes states, “A man will be just as free in wickedness if it be foretold that he will be wicked, as if it had never been known to any other being but himself.”

Peter knew he did not have much room to talk as he himself had denied Christ thrice. The apostles’ reliance on God’s Word is notable and they were keen to follow it by appointing another apostle.

THOUGHT: My own failures should lead me to be dignified and gracious in dealing with the failures of others.
PRAYER: Lord, help me to be gracious towards the failures of others.

LORD'S DAY, OCTOBER 10

ACTS 1:21-26

EPHESIANS 2:20

"... twelve apostles of the Lamb."

CHOOSING LEADERS

These early Christians believed what God said and made His Word the foundation for all they did. Before acting, they prayed first, and this would have been easier as they were constantly praying. No doubt, they also remembered the example of Christ in selecting His disciples (Luke 6:12-13). They then made it clear that Judas was never a believer as he went *"to his own place."* The one chosen had to fulfill strict criteria as a *"witness with us of his resurrection."* The Gospel account in the Scripture is not based upon myths or legends; it is based upon historical facts which the apostles had seen, felt, heard, and been involved in.

It is interesting that the vote in electing an apostle seems to have been by the entire company of saints. This, of course, fits the Presbyterian model. There is great debate by commentators over whether they made the wrong choice. Certainly, there is no explicit evidence that the Holy Spirit told them to do this. Many argue that Paul as *"one born out of due time"* was the apostle chosen by God.

Others point out that Paul was not a constant companion of the Lord Jesus, *"from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us"* and was not chosen as one *"who did eat and drink with him after he rose from the dead"* (Acts 10:41). Certainly there is no hint in the context that they were mistaken over Matthias. It is true that we read nothing more of Matthias, but, except for Peter and John, none of the original twelve are mentioned again after Acts 1. The Apostle Paul never objects explicitly to the selection of Matthias. Notwithstanding this argument, Revelation 21:14 tells us that each of the twelve foundations of the New Jerusalem has the name of one of the *"twelve apostles of the Lamb."* This would surely seem to fit Paul as he was the one on whom God built most of the New Testament Church and writings (Eph 2:20).

THOUGHT: The church must always have the mind of Christ when appointing leaders.

PRAYER: Lord, teach me to pray in my decision-making.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 11

ACTS 2:1-2

EXODUS 34:22-27

*“These all continued with one accord
in prayer and supplication.”*

THE DAY OF PENTECOST

In the twentieth century, this Day of Pentecost has become a source of confusion, embarrassment or division for believers. Many erroneously claim that the meaning of Pentecost for us today is that we are to seek to replicate the identical experiences of the disciples, namely speaking in tongues.

Ten days had passed and yet the promised Comforter had not come. *“Not many days hence”* was all that the Lord had said. Therefore, they prayed on in united and persevering prayer meetings. The word “Pentecost” is a Greek word that signifies the 50th part of a thing, or the 50th in order. The Jews used it to describe one of their three great feasts. The Day of Pentecost began on the 50th day after the Passover. Luke noted the arrival of the day of Pentecost. He marked it as a key event in salvation history.

Pentecost, as the Feast of the Firstfruits, was an apt time for the Spirit to come as it celebrated the firstfruits of the Promised Land’s produce. The pouring out of the Spirit would be the “firstfruits” of the blessings of salvation to the Church. Albert Barnes explains,

“The paschal lamb was slain on the 14th of the month at evening, Lev 23:5; on the 15th day of the month was a holy convocation - the proper beginning of the feast; on the 16th day was the offering of the firstfruits of harvest, and from that day they were to reckon seven weeks, that is, 49 days, to the feast called the Feast of Pentecost, so that it occurred 50 days after the first day of the Feast of the Passover. This feast was also called the Feast of Weeks, from the circumstance that it followed a succession of weeks, Exod 34:22; Num 28:26; Deut 16:10. It was also a harvest festival, and was accordingly called the Feast of Harvest; and it was for this reason that two loaves made of new meal were offered on this occasion as firstfruits, Lev 23:17, Lev 23:20; Num 28:27-31.”

THOUGHT: I must persevere in prayer.

PRAYER: Lord, teach me to persevere in prayer.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 12

ACTS 2:2-11

1 CORINTHIANS 14:10

“... tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe.”

TONGUES

The Bible forever stands as the unchanging standard by which all experiences must be measured. The speakers and listeners fully understood the tongues in Acts 2:4, which were an incidental convenience, albeit a miraculous one of sixteen known languages, to the real purpose of leading three thousand to salvation. If genuine tongues speaking were truly existent today, it would be supernatural manifestations of other known languages.

Biblical tongues were not a prayer language and Paul cites Isaiah 28: 11-15 to explain that *“tongues are for a sign, not to them that believe, but to them that believe not”* (1 Cor 14:22), namely apostate Jews who had made a covenant with death by rebelliously rejecting the Word of God. It was not bestowed on any for mere display or self-glory. It should be noted that when Paul cited Old Testament precedent here, he appealed both in the actual Old Testament context and, by his choice of words, he was referring to human languages. There is no indication that they did not engage their minds, as bypassing the mind is thoroughly unbiblical (Mark 12:30; John 4:23; 1 Cor 14:10). Such an existential leap will only surrender one’s faculties to dangerous and evil influences.

Many of these people who witnessed these tongues were part of the Jewish dispersion or proselytes and were in Jerusalem, where Aramaic was the common language of the ordinary people and Greek the language of commerce. Now, miraculously, they could hear voices which addressed them in their own mother tongue. It was not babbling or gibberish, but intelligent language, which some of that multitude could attest was their own vernacular. The miraculous signs manifested in Acts 2 must be seen as a special historical event, signifying a new period in God’s dealings with His people.

THOUGHT: The greatest miracle at Pentecost was not the tongues but the salvation of three thousand souls.

PRAYER: Lord, send us another Pentecost of revival power in our churches.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 13

ACTS 2:12-20

JOEL 2:28-32

*“I will pour out of my Spirit
upon all flesh.”*

PETER’S SERMON (I)

The world has never been able to understand spiritual things and it judges them by the flesh. The charge of drunkenness was easily refuted and God had provided a Spirit-filled preacher to remove the confusion. The privilege of preaching the first Christian sermon was given to the Apostle to the Jews, Peter, who had three times denied his Master. The history of the Book of Acts and Church History record the preaching of the Word of God. Sermons make up one-fifth of this Book. They are not selected arbitrarily but are meant to emphasize the homiletic style of the New Testament church. Evident features in the messages are that they are based on the Word of God and the life, death, work and teachings of Christ.

This sermon by Peter heralded the new dawn of the New Testament church and is pivotal in explaining all that follows in Acts. Peter began by announcing the news that the “*last days*” of this eschatological age had begun, as was prophesized by Joel. This was especially important to the Jews as they associated the coming of the Messiah with the end of the age.

Charismatics love to use this passage as evidence that today, at the end of the age, God promises to send a mighty manifestation of the sign gifts in the church. However, this prophecy of Joel 2:28-32, approximately nine centuries before was fulfilled at Pentecost as Peter said “*this is that*” (Acts 2:16). Peter also used Joel’s prophecy not only to explain the phenomena of tongues the Jews had just witnessed but also to herald the ending of exclusivity of salvation primarily for the Jews. This moment was also the opening up for the Gentiles or “*all flesh*” into the blessings of the family of God and the Spirit-filled life.

THOUGHT: God is gracious to use the frailest of human instruments.

PRAYER: Lord, thank You for not casting me off.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 14

ACTS 2:21-22

1 CORINTHIANS 1:10-31

“Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you.”

PETER’S SERMON (II)

Peter made it clear that Christ never came to teach us how to save ourselves. Up to verse 22, Peter had not dealt with the name of Jesus yet. After he dealt with an explanation of the signs, he immediately turned to his main subject – Jesus Christ.

Peter used the title “*Jesus of Nazareth*” probably because this was the title of Christ they knew best. Often the name of the city is associated with the name of the person in Bible times. The *kerugma* or essence of the gospel is built upon certain foundational truths. John MacArthur explains these in his commentary:

“The *kerugma* in the New Testament was made up always of the same things. First of all, it centered in Jesus Christ, always. And throughout the book of Acts it involves the fact, number one, that Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecy. It was always tied into the Old Testament prophecy. Secondly, it always indicated that Jesus was God in human flesh. Thirdly, it centered on his life and work particularly death and resurrection. Fourthly, it always talked about his second coming and fifth, it always ended with the fact that salvation was alone in Him and anybody who rejected it was lost forever ... Now as we come to this sermon, it falls into four parts and really all sermons do. So it’s a perfect pattern of preaching, a good one to teach preaching from. It has an introduction. It has a proclamation or a body. It has an appeal and then a result. And all good preaching, incidentally has a result. The introduction explaining Pentecost, the proclamation exalting Christ, the appeal exhorting people, and the results examining effects.”

THOUGHT: Christ alone is the object of salvation.

PRAYER: Lord, teach me to preach the Apostolic Message.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 15

ACTS 2:23

JOB 11:1-9

*“... as many as were ordained
to eternal life believed.”*

PETER’S SERMON (III)

Peter was very clear that Christ was crucified by the predetermined sovereignty of God and by the action of wicked hands of human responsibility. God knows how to make the wrath of man to praise Him and accomplish His designs without diminishing man’s responsibility in his sin. So in one and the same event, God was operating with good intentions while the Jews were operating with evil intentions. This verse proves how the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man do not clash. We must humbly bow and acknowledge our intelligent ignorance (Job 11:7-9). The doctrines of Grace should never lead us to ignore one of these or to preach an unbalanced gospel. As John Gill comments,

“God not only foreknew that it would be, but determined that it should be, who does all things after the counsel of his own will; and this for the salvation of his people, and for the glorifying of his divine perfections: though this fixed resolution, settled purpose, and wise determination of God, did not in the least excuse the sin of Judas in betraying him, or of Pilate in condemning him, or of the Jews in crucifying him; nor did it at all infringe the liberty of their wills in acting, who did what they did, not by force, but voluntarily.”

The fact that they understood that *“as many as were ordained to eternal life believed”* (Acts 13:48) gave them the faith to preach in all places to all kinds of people. They knew the power of salvation was not of them, but rather the instrument ordained by God was them. The New Testament church preached knowing that God has elected a people to believe, that God has ordained the instrument to preach through, and that God has given the message to be preached to sinners. Therefore, they knew that their preaching cannot fail because God cannot fail. So when God did a great work, they did not glorify man (Acts 3:12, 13:48).

THOUGHT: God is sovereign.

PRAYER: Lord, Thou alone get all the glory in salvation.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 16

ACTS 2:24-36

PSALM 16:1-11

*“Whom God
hath raised up.”*

PETER’S SERMON (IV)

Peter’s whole approach in this message was to exalt Christ from the Scripture. He drew from Psalm 16:8-11, which ten centuries previously had predicted David’s Greater Son. No doubt, many in the audience were acquainted with it. Peter unfolded the application of the passage to Jesus of Nazareth. The basis of the Christian faith lies in the historical facts of Christ in the gospels fulfilling Old Testament prophecy.

Peter deliberately and logically set forth the facts, and pointed to Christ as the only explanation. He did not base his faith merely on his experiences or personal theories but on the Word. Peter also emphasized that they were “*witnesses.*” We never read of any one who contradicted it, though the Jewish leaders had a strong incentive for doing so.

As in verse 24, Peter wanted us to see a Sovereign God at work in this aspect of the resurrection and ascension when he said, “*God hath raised up*” Christ. Death cannot stop the power of God. The resurrection is God’s stamp of approval on His Son. What a comfort this is to us as we all face the “*last enemy*” (1 Cor 15:26) that will be destroyed. Christ has taken the sting out of this event for believers.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is one of the key foundations of Christianity. Indeed, it is mentioned at least 104 times in the New Testament. Peter had it especially in focus as he set forth only one verse (v 22) on the life of Christ and one verse on the death of Christ (v 23), but nine verses (v 24 to 32) to focus on the resurrection. Peter logically demonstrated that Psalm 16:1-11 could not refer to David who had died 1,000 years earlier, and yet had not risen from the dead or ascended to heaven. This was an inspired illustration as every Jew knew where David was buried. Therefore, it must refer to the Messiah.

THOUGHT: The resurrection of Jesus Christ is one of the key foundations of Christianity.

PRAYER: Lord, we rejoice in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

LORD'S DAY, OCTOBER 17

ACTS 2:37

2 CORINTHIANS 2:1-16

*"...it shall not
return unto me void."*

PETER'S SERMON (V)

The reaction to this message was powerful and the hearers realised that they were in a very serious position before God. What pricked their hearts was not the eloquence of Peter's sermon, but the Scripture was expounded and how those two Psalms were applied by the Holy Spirit to the crucified One (Acts 2:36). As Spurgeon put it, "He gave his hearers a simple, well-reasoned, Scriptural discourse, sustained by the facts of experience; and every passage of it pointed to the Lord Jesus." There is where Christianity rests its case.

God's Word brings conviction. This conviction brought fear as they saw that they were fighting against God's eternal plan of redemption. His message was aimed, not simply at the head, but at the heart also. All sermons must reach the heart, not simply the head. The idea of this word "*pricked*" is to pierce thoroughly. It is used by the Greeks to describe war horses in a state of agitation before battle using their hooves to deeply imprint the ground. This is a deep digging of the Holy Spirit.

There will always be this dichotomous reaction to the gospel. There will be those whose hearts the Lord will open. These convicted souls know they need salvation. However, there are those who are dead in sin and the preaching will only make them more implacable (2 Cor 2:15-16).

When we say "*So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it*" (Isa 55:11), we need to be aware that it will have this twofold result.

THOUGHT: God's Word brings conviction.

PRAYER: Lord, may we witness to the hearts of individuals today.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 18

ACTS 2:38-39

MATTHEW 4:17

“... to all that are afar off.”

PETER’S SERMON (VI)

The greatest question a man can seek an answer to is to find out how he can have peace with God. These Jews suddenly realised their predicament through the conviction of the Holy Spirit through the words of a preacher who was preaching the Christ of the Scripture. The great instrument used by the Spirit for conviction is not telling entertaining stories, but the infallible and inerrant Word of God.

In Peter’s response, he said “*repent ... every one of you.*” Repentance was a work that would have to be done individually. The word “*repent*” is an aorist imperative verb showing that this is a demand of God for a decisive crisis action in the heart. Interestingly, the call to repentance characterised the first sermons of Jesus Christ (Matt 4:17) and John the Baptist (Matt 3:2) but is sadly absent from the cheap polluted gospels of today’s church.

The requirement of baptism in the name of Him whom they had crucified was a witness that they now believed on Him. It was not “baptismal regeneration” as the cults teach, but a vital public declaration to evidence their true repentance and faith in Christ, before they were received into fellowship into the church. This repentance was from the heart which shows that the whole personality is involved in salvation. Christianity does not bypass the mind.

God’s covenantal promise is not only to every Israelite and his children, but also “*to all that are afar off*” which includes the Gentiles and their children. This is the same covenant principle set forth in Genesis 17:7. The Bible teaches that circumcision and baptism share the same basic spiritual meaning (it even uses them interchangeably in Colossians 2:11). Therefore, the same objections that commonly argue against infant baptism must also apply against infant circumcision. However, God commanded infant circumcision!

THOUGHT: Repentance is a work that must be done individually.

PRAYER: Lord, teach me to witness effectively for Thee.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 19

ACTS 2:40-41

GALATIANS 1:1-4

“... that he might deliver us
from this present evil world.”

PETER’S SERMON (VII)

Peter continued his sermon – maybe for an hour or more. He exhorted them on the doctrine of biblical separation. Although sovereign election is the root cause of our salvation, a radical change is the outward evidence (Gal 1:4). This separation from the world is included in his gospel message. Peter was not going to sell a cheap grace to get a better response. Augustine pointed out, “If you believe what you like in the gospel and reject what you don’t like, it is not the gospel you believe, but yourself.”

By the identification of baptism, they would save themselves from identification with the generation that was guilty of the rejection and crucifixion of Christ. Peter, who had once been afraid of a woman (Matt 26:70), is now bold and uncompromising when filled with the Spirit of God. As you read his sermon, it is logically sound but there is nothing remarkable in it per se to account for the conviction and conversion of 3,000 persons.

It is notable that the ones who were saved followed the pattern of all believers in church history as they “*received his word.*” The word “*gladly*” means “freely” or “joyfully.” Christianity cannot be forced on someone by any man or law. New life immediately expresses itself. These new believers made no delay in willingly joining themselves to the church. A man who has no desire to be part of the church does not evidence faith in Christ.

We should note the pattern here of an inward work, then repentance, and then a public profession of baptism in Christ, which was required of them before they could be “*added unto them.*” These people had been totally changed and we see them first outside the church and then inside – they did not grow into their Christianity.

THOUGHT: Separation from our past life is part of the gospel.

PRAYER: Lord, keep me a holy and separated witness for Thee.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 20

ACTS 2:42-43

HEBREWS 2:4

“...they continued stedfastly
in the apostles’ doctrine.”

MARKS OF A DISCIPLE (I)

The word rendered “*continued stedfastly*” means “attending one, remaining by his side, not leaving or forsaking him.” Continuing is the sign of salvation. However, this was not simply patience or fidelity by self-endurance or stoicism, but it was rooted in the objective truth of “*the apostles’ doctrine.*” Doctrinal purity is central to the foundation of the church. A telling evidence of conversion is the desire to be instructed in the doctrines and responsibilities of Biblical Christianity. This was no transient emotional experience as adherents of cults are moved by. These people did not come together simply to share some ideas or to enjoy some common hobbies.

As a consequence of this unity of apostolic doctrine, they could have “*fellowship,*” “*breaking of bread*” in remembrance of Christ’s death, and continuance in “*prayers.*” It is interesting that “*prayers*” is in the plural indicating many times and types of prayer (note the prominence of this throughout Acts and all great revivals in church history). The first church was a praying church. As A. M. Fairbairn put it, “the man who does not believe that God can speak to him will not speak to God.” These four essential matters seen in the inception of the church are as fundamental today as they were then. It delineates that the body of Christ has full fellowship within it from all walks of life as these people were from diverse backgrounds. Who would have thought that the greatest mind of his generation, Paul, could have fellowship with the uneducated Peter or the pagan Corinthians.

When God moves in revival, outsiders are not unconcerned. Despite the fact that some had previously mocked the apostles, the power of God authenticating His apostles’ messages silenced them (Heb 2:4). As Barnes says, “The effect of a great work of God’s grace is commonly to produce an unusual seriousness and solemnity in a community, even among those who are not converted.”

THOUGHT: There are telling evidences of conversion.

PRAYER: Lord, let me have all the marks of conversion today.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 21

ACTS 2:44-45

EPHESIANS 4:1-3

“...continuing daily with
one accord in the temple.”

MARKS OF A DISCIPLE (II)

Jesus Christ not only built the Church, but He did it His way. He gives the blueprint of what a church should be and He gets the glory alone. John Wesley gave the funeral sermon on the occasion of Whitefield's death. He says of Whitefield: “His fundamental point was to give God all the glory of whatever is good in man. In the business of salvation he set Christ as high and man as low as possible.”

The New Testament church began with 3,120 members on the Day of Pentecost and soon it numbered over 5,000. They have received the Gospel and evidenced their repentance and separation by baptism. In doing so, they distanced themselves from those who continued to reject Christ and took their stand by the side of the original 120 (who by the work of the Holy Spirit had multiplied twenty-six times in one day). This was without any organised crusade, formal buildings, eloquent and educated oratory, finance, etc, but by a sudden move of God Himself.

This diverse group from all over the empire became a Christian community. The Day of Pentecost is the day in church history when the New Testament church was in its purest form. Later it became like the mixed multitude that came out of Egypt. They were, at this time, of “*one accord*” and one mind.

This action of sharing was not communism because it was done voluntarily and out of necessity. It was rooted in their love for one another because of their sense of family relationship in Christ. God made us as social creatures and none of us were created as islands. By doing so, it provided a wonderful example of the triumph of grace over selfish interests. When the doctrines of a Christian are right, his character and actions are also invariably right.

THOUGHT: Salvation should provide a wonderful example of the triumph of grace over selfish interests.

PRAYER: Lord, lead me to help some fellow saints today.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 22

ACTS 2:46-47

COLOSSIANS 3:16

*“Praising God, and having
favour with all the people.”*

MARKS OF A DISCIPLE (III)

They were at this time of “*one accord*” and one mind. A consequence of a church being unified doctrinally is that the church will be a praising church. This was not a charismatic laughing revival; but the joy of believers sharing in the love of God, partakers of divine grace, indwelt by the Holy Ghost, and consequently in happy fellowship with one another. Joy and singleness of heart are two characteristics of the true believer.

In a culture dominated by the god of individualism, personal taste is sacrosanct. There is a distinct trend to determine worship by autonomous man, thereby impugning as legalism any restriction the Scripture might place upon those abilities.

The Bible discusses music on more than 500 occasions. It is clearly a subject God wants us to think about carefully. In corporate worship, the music chosen makes a statement about our view of God. Worship is our highest calling as the Larger Catechism explains, “Man’s chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy Him for ever.”

Today, the chief end of man is to be entertained as the church has been influenced by the pervasive triviality of our man-centered and relativistic age. However, our worship music must speak first and foremost about the Lord (Exod 15:2) with its theme based on the Word of God (Ps 119:54, Col 3:16), bringing glory to God (Jer 13:16) by exalting Christ (Rev 5:9-14) from a Spirit-filled holy life (Eph 5:17-21).

Few are interested in knowing the character and works of God today, and that is the critical problem. Our music reveals whether we have a high and God-centred view, or a low and man-centred view of worship.

THOUGHT: Man’s chief and highest end is to glorify God.

PRAYER: Lord, teach me to glorify Thee in all things today.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 23

ACTS 3:1-5

MARK 10:46-52

“Look on us.”

A JOYFUL HEALING

In Acts 2:43, we were informed that *“many wonders and signs were done by the apostles,”* and now we are supplied with an outstanding example. This healing attests to the divine Messiahship of Jesus Christ continuing to work through His apostles.

The ninth hour, the hour of prayer, was about 3 p.m. Peter and John were frequently found together: entrusted by the Lord the service of making ready the upper room for the last supper (Luke 22:8); they ran together to His sepulchre (John 20:2-8). Together, also, they went at the request of the rest to visit the new converts in Samaria (Acts 8). Although they both had brothers among the twelve, these two were close. It may be because of John’s loving nature that he was more tender than the rest to Peter after Peter’s failures and repentance. God uses men of differing temperaments and abilities.

This was not a healing crusade as nothing was pre-planned by these apostles. The word for *“fastening”* used here has the idea “to look intently” or with “fixed attention.” The lame man was commanded to observe what type of men they were (no doubt to note how inadequate they were to do a miracle). This also brought the full attention of the man to himself and any change in him.

This man, who was an expert at reading body language by now, clearly expected to receive just alms from them. The world kills for gold, but this man acquired something much more precious. Some of the greatest blessings we receive from God come at the moment we least expect them. Within seconds, this lame man would be doing what he had never done before.

THOUGHT: Some of the greatest blessings I receive from God come at the moment I least expect them.

PRAYER: Lord, teach me patience to wait on Thy blessings for my life.

LORD'S DAY, OCTOBER 24

ACTS 3:6-11

PSALM 96

“... walking, and leaping,
and praising God.”

SILVER AND GOLD HAVE I NONE

Peter's poverty in his response is suggestive that he was not like many preachers today. It is related that Thomas Aquinas came to Rome and visited Pope Innocent IV. As he was showing Thomas the glories of the Vatican, the Pope remarked, “You see, Thomas, we cannot say as did St. Peter of old, ‘Silver and gold have I none.’” Aquinas nodded but wisely replied: “Nor can we say, ‘such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk.’” Regarding the formula the apostles used, Barnes points out,

“We are here struck with a remarkable difference between the manner in which the Lord Jesus performed miracles and that in which it was done by his apostles. He did it in his own name and by virtue of his own power. The apostles never attempted to perform a miracle by their own power. It was only in the name of Jesus; and this circumstance alone shows that there was a radical difference between Christ and all other prophets and teachers.”

The healed man began “*walking and leaping*” – this was no partial healing as he had fully functioning legs. What a thrill for this man to be able to do the movements he had long watched others do. While doing this, he was “*praising God*” as he clearly understood that this miracle was due solely to the power of God. Evidently a spiritual blessing accompanied the physical one, and the man was not unthankful. It may have been frowned upon to leap in the temple, but this man could not be restrained.

Today, as A. W. Tozer said, “we don't just need better worship; we need a better understanding of who God is, and the latter will go a long way in improving the former.” When we understand that God is “*great*” we will understand why He is also “*greatly to be praised*” (Ps 96:4).

THOUGHT: God is great!

PRAYER: Lord, I thank Thee for Thy blessings in my life.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 25

ACTS 3:12-36

LUKE 23:34

“... *why marvel ye at this?*”

ALL GLORY TO GOD

This sermon by Peter, like his first one, followed a miraculous manifestation of power. It repeats many of the key claims in his first message, draws heavily from Old Testament Scripture as evidence, and is centered on the person of Christ. It is amazing that the proud Jews from Jerusalem would listen to an ignorant fisherman.

Peter's sermon here was in abrupt Greek, which indicated great passion and fire. This was not some “sermonette for Christianettes.” It may have been even more intense than the sermon he preached on the Day of Pentecost. Spurgeon said, “Every time I stand to preach I empty the barrel to the last dark drop and then I bring my empty barrel to God and say, ‘Oh, God, fill it up again.’” There are many subjects that a man can die ignorant concerning such as quantum physics, where that ignorance and indifference is neither fatal nor tragic, but the facts concerning Jesus Christ are the most vital in the world. It should elicit a passion amongst us as witnesses to it.

Peter made it very clear from the beginning that this man was healed through no “*holiness*” or godliness inherent in them. No form of godliness can heal anyone – only God. They never promised this man they had the power to heal or that he needed to send money to them.

Peter immediately got into the subject – Jesus Christ. He used numerous titles that applied to Jesus such as the “*Son*” and personally again accused the Jews of crucifying Him. Peter then drew an expression from the prophet Isaiah that was used 31 times – that of the “*Holy One*.” Peter again laid the blame at the door of each individual Jew as those who had “*killed the Prince of life*,” only this time he added in verse 17 possibly a word of encouragement that they did so out of “*ignorance*.” Christ Himself affirmed this when dying (Luke 23:34).

THOUGHT: The facts concerning Jesus Christ are the most vital in the world.

PRAYER: Lord, give me a passion to speak for Thee.

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 26

ACTS 4:1-7

2 TIMOTHY 3:12

*“... all that will live godly in Christ
Jesus shall suffer persecution.”*

SATAN’S FIRST ASSAULT ON THE CHURCH

The temple captain’s job was to protect the temple. He and the Sadducees must have seen the commotion and it is obvious they at least heard the later part of Peter’s sermon as they were *“grieved that they taught the people, and preached through Jesus the resurrection from the dead.”* These were the men who had bought off the Roman guards at the tomb, so they were well aware of the fact that He had risen.

The Sadducees were religious liberals and had great power in the nation. They taught that there was no resurrection of the dead and hence would be particularly angered by the apostles for preaching it. Often the strongest opposition to the gospel in church history comes from organised apostate religion.

Satan’s attack on Christianity is seen early in this book. However, it can never hinder a sovereign God from working. Persecution is almost integral to our faith and can be political, personal or religious (2 Tim 3:12). The number of men was now 5,000. So there must have been women and children to add to this total. We cannot assume that 2,000 were saved on this day as the numbers were increasing daily from Pentecost onwards according to Acts 2:47. The price of direct preaching and confrontation of sin is worthwhile, as it allows God to work His sovereign purpose for good.

Peter and John were the first in the New Testament church to suffer imprisonment for the faith. A long history of saints would follow the same path. Their opponents questioned their authority, doubtless hoping to intimidate these fishermen. Throughout church history, God is in control. As historian Iain Murray reminds us, *“The history of the church at the time of the Reformation is a singular reminder to us of how God is in history. Christ is in the church and on the throne – directing and governing all persons and all events.”*

THOUGHT: Persecution can be political, personal or religious.

PRAYER: Lord, give me grace to endure persecution for Thee.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 27

ACTS 4:8

1 PETER 3:8-17

“... with meekness and fear.”

HANDLING PERSECUTION

Peter was “*filled with the Holy Ghost*” – this was very important as Christ had promised His disciples that God would assist when they were brought before rulers (Matt 10:18-20). Peter’s boldness can only be contrasted with the fear he demonstrated to a servant girl before the crucifixion.

Peter was very courteous in how he addressed the rulers. We need to note the Bible’s teaching concerning the spirit of handling contentions. Whilst we are commanded never to dilute the truth of the Word of God or reflect God as inconsistent (2 Tim 2:13), we are told to season our speech with salt. We can disagree with those of opposing viewpoints and even refuse to speak to them without being disagreeable (Gal 6:1-2). Peter told us to “*be courteous*” (1 Pet 3:8) and instructed us to engage in debate with proper attitudes toward both those with whom we are speaking and the Lord about whom we are speaking. We are to do so “*with meekness and fear*” (1 Pet 3:15). It is not wrong to be assertive or challenging, but we should avoid being abusive (Prov 25:11-12; Rom 14:19; Phil 1:27).

Since the beginning of the New Testament church, there has always been opposition to the preaching of the gospel and we must be prepared for this. There are always crucial moments in the Christian life that have far reaching implications:

(1) Anticipation of Persecution – this is the lot of Christians and will depend on how you prepare yourself.

(2) During the Persecution – how we will react. Will something spark something inside of us?

(3) Aftermath of Persecution – Now you have made it through and God was with you. Often there are as many dangers in victory as in the heat of the battle (e.g. Gideon).

THOUGHT: I must continue to stand “*for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ*” (Rev 1:9).

PRAYER: Lord, give me grace to stand for Thee.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 28

ACTS 4:9-22

PSALM 118:22

“...we cannot but speak the things
which we have seen and
heard.”

IGNORANT AND UNLEARNED

When you are filled with the Spirit you will not be intimidated but will be bold in your witness for Christ. Peter did not back off from confronting them with the claims of the gospel and their sin. Jesus had preached this message before, drawing from Psalm 118:22 (Matt 21:42-43). This time Peter used “*set at nought*” which is derived from the idea of a mason noting the correct stone to complete the construction yet deliberately rejecting it.

The men of the Sanhedrin were highly educated and although Peter and John were “*unlearned and ignorant,*” meaning without reputation and academic training, they were surprised at the depth and unequivocal clarity of their addresses. The Greek word for “*boldness*” here indicates “openness” or “confidence in speaking.” The word “*unlearned*” denotes “those who were not acquainted with letters, or who had not had the benefit of an education,” whereas “*ignorant*” means “those who live in private, in contradistinction from those who are engaged in public life or in office.”

The fact that the Sanhedrin admitted “*all men glorified God*” shows that Peter and John had successfully got the message across that the healing was God’s power, not man’s. The conclusion the Sanhedrin came to is most remarkable and demonstrates their depravity. They admit that this is a sign, and the reasonable, logical reaction to that kind of evidence would be to submit to the leading of God. However, they decide to oppose.

The apostles answered them carefully – Peter was not reckless here. He simply said, If God is greater than you – you judge. However, they were clear that the Great Commission was not the Great Suggestion. Sadly, few believers today need to be forbidden to speak of Christ as they so rarely do so.

THOUGHT: When I am filled with the Spirit, I will not be intimidated but be bold in my witness for Christ.

PRAYER: Lord, fill me with the Spirit of God that I may be bold for Thee.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 29

ACTS 4:23-30

PSALM 2

“...now, Lord, behold
their threatenings.”

A STIRRING PRAYER

After these threats, we find the apostles were in their “*own company*.” There is something uplifting about being with your own brethren in Christ when you face tribulation. The fervency of the disciples’ desire to honour Christ is only increased by the persecution. The apostles reported everything to the saints and then they “*with one accord*” prayed. This is the way to face persecution!

How did this prayer start out? Firstly, by acknowledging God as Creator (even in the Book of Revelation the saints laud God for creation first in Chapter 4, and then for redemption in Chapter 5). The following verses unfold the theme that God is a sovereign God – we must believe this in our trials. They acknowledged that God was behind all history and nature (v 26-28). They cited Psalm 2 which set for us the fact that God controls history. It is always good to let Scripture inspire and instruct our prayers. In verses 27 and 28, we see the will of man and the decrees of God interlocking in history. Their conclusion is similar to Peter’s in Acts 2:23 (cf. Job 2:3).

In verse 29, they use “*servants*” in plural as they all wanted this “*boldness*” or clarity. This is a good prayer to pray for ourselves. A dumb Christian is a dead Christian! Our greatest need is to be filled with the Spirit when we speak of Christ.

Spurgeon commented on the infilling of the Holy Spirit: “if Jesus Christ, the great founder of our religion, needed to be anointed of the Holy Spirit, how much more our ministers? And if God would always make the distinction even between his own Son as an instrument, and the Holy Spirit as the agent, how much more ought we to be careful to do that between poor puny men and the Holy Spirit?”

THOUGHT: It is always good to let Scripture inspire and instruct my prayers.

PRAYER: Lord, teach me to pray.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 30

ACTS 4:31

HABAKKUK 3:17-18

*“Yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will joy in the God of my salvation.”*

GOD’S REMNANT PEOPLE

Church history is replete with examples of God’s remnant people standing for His Word under the control of a sovereign God. There will always be a remnant who are willing to stand for the faith and God will bless such a people with power and boldness. Men like Abel, Enoch and Noah were early examples of men who made up the remnant. The few looking for the first advent, the 500 who saw Jesus after His resurrection, the Waldensians, the Reformers and the early Fundamentalists are other examples of the remnant.

Habakkuk had concerns in his generation when his experience appeared to conflict with his theology. God had to show him that He was in control of all things and that Habakkuk must simply live by faith. When he accepted this biblical principle, Habakkuk was able to testify, *“Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation”* (Hab 3:17-18).

Believers such as Abraham, Noah or the saints of the New Testament church never interpreted the will of God by the seemingly impossible nature of their circumstances. Hudson Taylor also stated, “I have found that there are three stages in every great work of God; first, it is impossible, then it is difficult, then it is done.”

There are two billion people on the earth who identify themselves as Christians, but only a remnant are really part of the body of Christ. God has this remnant people in the last days and our duty is to stand with them and live by faith, like Paul, Athanasius, Luther, Calvin et al. As John Flavel wrote, “O be not too quick to bury the Church before she is dead.”

THOUGHT: As William Carey observed, “All my friends are but one, but He is all sufficient.”

PRAYER: Lord, help me to stand with Thy remnant.

LORD'S DAY, OCTOBER 31

ACTS 4:31

EPHESIANS 6:12

*"... they spake the word
of God with boldness."*

PRAYER: OUR CHIEF WEAPON

When the world persecutes believers for preaching, the church goes to prayer for boldness to bear faithful witness. The New Testament church knew that this was a spiritual battle and that the Sanhedrin ultimately was not the real enemy. God has blessed us with many weapons in our spiritual conflict, but the chief one is prayer.

Satan's assault on the church by intimidation backfired. It simply drove the church to greater levels of prayer and this effect was not what Satan desired. They did not pray to avoid the persecution but for boldness to witness. In essence, they wanted to speak more for Christ despite the consequences. This is the apostolic pattern and we see the same throughout church history.

These praying saints had full confidence in God and they believed that the Scripture they cited in prayer applied to their situation. What was the outcome? They prayed for three specific things and God answered them all. The unity and reality of their prayer brought the striking response from God of shaking the building. The result was *"they spake the word of God with boldness."* This was the key thing they prayed for and they had a powerful answer. They did not pray for tongues or miracles as this not what the filling of the Holy Spirit was for. It should be noted that there is:

- (1) filling of the Holy Spirit; and
- (2) re-filling of the Holy Spirit

They had the Holy Spirit in them, and from this flowed *"great grace."* From this source, they kept on preaching and teaching these people. The devil cannot stop Spirit-filled Christians who refuse to be intimidated into silence.

THOUGHT: Prayer is my chief weapon when the world turns against me.

PRAYER: Lord, teach me to rely on Thee.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 1

ACTS 4:32-35

ROMANS 8:18

*“The LORD is on my side;
I will not fear: what
can man do unto me?”*

SNAPSHOT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

Luke gives us a snapshot of hearts that have been utterly transformed by salvation. This New Testament church was a praying, evangelizing and teaching church, and the saints shared with one another in practical ways. They did not simply see themselves as members of an organisation, but part of one united body with one heart and one soul. This was not a theoretical unity but one that expressed itself practically. We see here a loving, united, Christ-centred and selfless church in its purity. Calvin points out that unity of heart and soul is the root; whereas sharing of personal belongings is the fruit.

These saints did not begin a selling binge in verse 34 as the Greek indicates they “sold as they had need.” This was fully spontaneous, not a pre-arranged matter or as ordered by Peter. We need to keep a loose hand on our possessions. There is power in possessions and in Luke 12, Jesus Christ warned about possessions. We need to adopt a sacrificial attitude to our possessions that springs from a love for Christ. When a person is saved, his attitude to material things is loosened and his relationship to God’s people is strengthened.

Persecution and tribulation often remove our materialistic focus. The world economies can collapse, wars may come, disease and pestilence may ravage our lands, antichrist may arise; but we can rejoice that, “*if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens*” (2 Cor 5:1). The great message of the Bible is that God is not indifferent to our needs and has made a way to take us through them. The Psalmist cried, “*The LORD is on my side; I will not fear: what can man do unto me?*” (Ps 118:6). It is God’s desire that we would be free of anxiety and, even though man may fail us, the compassions of God will not fail because “*They are new every morning*” (Lam 3:23).

THOUGHT: The compassions of God will not fail.

PRAYER: Lord, give me grace not be anxious over this life.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 2

ACTS 4:36-37

ACTS 9:27

“... full of the
Holy Ghost and of faith.”

BARNABAS (I)

This incident of sharing is what introduces us to Barnabas – a man with a holy heartbeat. He set the tenor and tone that was to follow. Barnabas was the Apostle Paul’s first companion in the ministry. Although he came from Cyprus, he was a Jew of the Diaspora from the tribe of Levi. Cyprus, during the Dispersion, was a great centre for Jews and the Levites may have presided in the synagogue; hence Barnabas’ solid scriptural knowledge, as the Levites’ duty was to teach the “*good knowledge of the LORD*” (2 Chron 30:22).

His Hellenic Jewish parents originally called him Joseph (although Acts 4:36 calls him *Joses*, the Aramaic version of Joseph). However, when he sold some of his land, he took the money received and gave it to the apostles in Jerusalem for the relief of the poor in the church. Indeed, some have speculated that he was the first to do so and his example led many others to follow (Acts 4:34). The apostles, as a result of this, gave him a new name: Barnabas, which means “son of exhortation” or “son of encouragement” and connotes a prophet in the original sense of the word (see Acts 13:1). This triple meaning, as Campbell Morgan points out, was probably given to him because, “This man was a man gifted in speech, but it was speech that, while it was exhortative, was also full of comfort. If we follow his history through the book of the Acts, we shall see how true this was.”

Barnabas certainly lived up to his name. Not only was he a comforter of the poor by his generosity, Luke tells us in Acts 11:24 that he also “*was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith.*” One of the greatest acts of Barnabas was to bring the Apostle Paul into full fellowship at Jerusalem (Acts 9:27) with the other church leaders. Barnabas, as was typical, showed great faith in Paul and this must have encouraged Paul who was seeking entry into a fellowship he had hurt by his belligerent actions before he was converted.

THOUGHT: I need to live up to my name: Christian.

PRAYER: Lord, let me bring consolation to the saints today.

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 3

ACTS 4:36-37

ACTS 11:22-24

*“...had seen the grace of God,
was glad, and exhorted them all.”*

BARNABAS (II)

Barnabas was clearly recognized for his leadership qualities early on, and in Acts 11:22 we find that he was sent out to survey the revival in Antioch, Syria. He was sent likely because he was a Hellenistic Jew like the new converts, and also because of his character. This was aptly demonstrated by his reaction, for we are told in Acts 11:23 that when he *“had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord.”*

The result of Barnabas' stay was that *“much people was added unto the Lord.”* Barnabas clearly was a man of humility and discernment because he quickly realized that Paul was a *“chief speaker”* (Acts 14:12) who would be a more capable leader and teacher of these new converts.

It was at this point that Barnabas was officially recognised as a prophet and teacher by the church in Acts 13:1 and was sent by the Holy Spirit along with Paul to the Gentiles on a divine mission. It is notable at this time that Barnabas was named first and Paul last, but this order would soon be reversed as Paul became the *“chief speaker.”* So instead of *“Barnabas and Saul”* in Acts as heretofore (11:30; 12:25; 13:2, 7), we now read for most of the rest of Acts, *“Paul and Barnabas”* (13:43, 46, 50; 15:2, 22, 35).

After the council in Jerusalem, where according to Galatians 2:9-10 Paul and Barnabas made an agreement with Peter, James and John, they returned to Antioch. A dispute with Paul led to a parting of ways. Paul took Silas with him and travelled through Syria and Cilicia whereas Barnabas headed to Cyprus with John Mark (Acts 15:39). Church tradition teaches that he was stoned to death by Jews at Salamis in Cyprus. In Cyprus today, a monastery is named after him and he is venerated as the Patron Saint of Cyprus.

THOUGHT: Let me, like Barnabas, live for others.

PRAYER: Lord, give me a heart like Barnabas'.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 4

ACTS 5:1-10

HEBREWS 12:6-7

“My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord.”

HYPOCRISY WITHIN

Wherever the true church has gone throughout the world, counterfeit Christianity has gone right along with it. When God is working in blessing, the opposition of Satan soon becomes apparent. This opposition may have begun from without the church in the previous chapter but soon it permeates into the church itself.

Often sin begins within the church in an underhand manner with demonstrations of hypocrisy. Material wealth is never an indicator of spirituality. We must never assume we are better than we are simply because the providential Hand of God has been good to us. If that was the case, then Bill Gates and Donald Trump must be very spiritual men.

Barnabas, no doubt, was approved by the people for his action and this got carnal minds thinking. As the sacrificial and selfless character of Barnabas came into view, the devil began sowing seeds of sin and deceit.

No one forced Ananias and Sapphira to sell their land. They may have gotten more money than they had expected from it and this may have tempted them to keep part of it. Although they had complete power to give it or keep it, they wanted both the praise of men and the money, so they came up with a scheme to get both. Falsely claiming to be giving all was a lie not merely to men but to God also.

They evidently sought to profess their devotion to God by their act. Man may be fooled by hypocrisy but God never is. As Lewis Sperry Chafer says, “secret sin on earth is open scandal in heaven.” One of the great sins of this couple was that they had a low view of the sovereignty of God and His knowledge. They had forgotten that God is an omniscient God and He is also “*a consuming fire*” (Heb 12:29).

THOUGHT: All sin will be judged by God.

PRAYER: Lord, help me to guard my heart and my tongue.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 5

ACTS 5:11-16

ECCLESIASTES 5:5

*“Suffer not thy mouth
to cause thy flesh to sin.”*

GOD TAKES SIN SERIOUSLY

The judgment of God can be a very good thing. It weeds out the hypocrites and makes others reluctant to indulge in such behaviour. No doubt dishonest people would now think twice before associating themselves with the disciples. Within the church, members would also have been impressed with the truth and holiness of God. Now, they will not rush foolishly forward with gifts without thinking. The Throne of Grace is littered with a lot of unpaid vows. In a moment of blessing or crisis, we often speak impetuously (Eccl 5:5).

In the early days of the Tabernacle, God struck down Nadab and Abihu. On the first deliverance into the Promised Land, He struck down Achan. Now at the beginning of the New Testament church He did the same with this couple. We see God at the beginning of a great work establishing the principle that we cannot be reckless with strange fire, accursed things and vows. God did this to demonstrate His standards of purity for His people.

This episode in Acts 5 shows that God is very serious about the sins of the saints. All sins will be judged by God. Just because He does not put us to death every time we sin today, we should not mistake heaven's silence for heaven's consent. Barnabas is the model Luke is drawing for us to follow, and Ananias and Sapphira the model to avoid. This manifestation of God's holiness resulted in further manifestations of His power, true unity (as unbelievers dare not join themselves to them) and further glorious examples of great numbers of people being converted. As Barnes notes, “An effort to keep the church pure by wholesome discipline, and by cutting off unworthy members, however rich or honored, so far from weakening its true strength, has a tendency greatly to increase its numbers as well as its purity.”

THOUGHT: God hates sin and God punishes sin.

PRAYER: Lord, make my church pure.

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 6

ACTS 5:17-24

ACTS 23:8

*“We ought to obey God
rather than men.”*

JAIL CANNOT STOP THE GOSPEL

After the judgment of God on Ananias and Sapphira, we find the church in *“one accord.”* This pure church has God’s power and this led to great miracles being evident. Unlike the charismatic apostles today, all were healed, none departed disappointed.

Satan hates to see people saved from sin and he stirs up opposition through his disciples among the Jewish leaders. Just as the believers were filled with the Spirit, so these men were *“filled with indignation.”* The Greek word translated *“indignation”* speaks of a boiling anger. They seized the apostles and threw them in jail; foolishly imagining that this could stop the work of God.

Whatever Satan tries to do, God uses it for His own glory and the Lord released the apostles from jail. The Sadducees denied the future resurrection and the existence of angels (Acts 23:8). God taught them a lesson by utilizing a creature they denied existed, to free His disciples to preach a doctrine they denied.

The command of the angel to continue preaching in the temple does not appear to be the wisest of action. However, we are finite creatures of limited knowledge and when the infinite God commands we are simply to obey. The disciples fully obeyed the angel’s command and went *“early in the morning”* into the temple the next morning and taught. They knew that a Sovereign God controlled events and their lives so they could preach the message He gave them and leave the consequences to Him.

THOUGHT: God’s holiness and chastisement is a blessing not a curse.

PRAYER: Lord, make me pure.

LORD'S DAY, NOVEMBER 7

ACTS 5: 25-42

2 CORINTHIANS 6:2

“... behold, now
is the accepted time.”

BEARING SHAME FOR CHRIST

Peter exhibited a magnanimous spirit towards his accusers like the three young Hebrew men who were thrown into the fiery furnace (Dan 3:16). In Acts 4:19, the apostles put the burden on the Council to justify its supremacy over the Law of God, but here in verse 29 they answered the question. Peter raised the issue of the death of Christ again in verse 30 and still accused them of it. He was not willing to let this go. In verse 31 he went on to preach the full Gospel to them.

The witness was the Holy Spirit. The Council recognized, in verse 33, that they did not have this and it enraged them. When they heard Peter's message they were “*cut to the heart.*” The gospel will either convict or enrage. But most preaching today will do neither.

Gamaliel was not a believer and was a member of the Sanhedrin. He was also the leading Jewish scholar of his generation who trained the Apostle Paul. Despite what some say today, his counsel was not honourable. This is not a biblical approach to dealing with error. How many years should we wait for false religions and cults to be proven wrong? Some of them have been around for millennia. We are to rebuke false beliefs and take our stand.

At a crusade on the night of October 8, 1871, Dwight L. Moody was preaching in Chicago and told his audience to go home and think about what he had said. That night the Great Chicago Fire broke out and many in that congregation were killed. Through this tragedy Moody realised that his offer to the congregation was not biblical. He therefore never made such an offer again. 2 Corinthians 6:2 teaches that the unsaved must be challenged to repent and to receive Jesus, and not to wait.

We should rejoice to bear “*shame*” for Christ as we know He gets the glory in our sufferings. Most people do not like to be shamed. The apostles did not let any government or power stop them and went on preaching the glorious gospel.

THOUGHT: I must be prepared to bear “*shame*” for Jesus.

PRAYER: Lord, let me never be ashamed of the cause of Christ.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 8

ACTS 6:1

GENESIS 3:1-5

“...there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews.”

MURMURING WITHIN

The initial unity of the church had been threatened in Acts 5 by hypocrisy and now with internal murmuring. Satan again seeks to attack from within the church. Now he uses another method, but still using motives of selfishness concerning material things. Now, the church faces problems within and without. A church can split over practical issues as well as doctrinal issues.

At this time the church was made up of almost exclusively Jews, including some proselytes. However, the Jewish people were not a homogenous group. There were:

- 1) Orthodox Hebrew Jews
- 2) Grecian Jews – These were Jews of the *diaspora* who had grown up in Greek cities and colonies and were heavily influenced by Greek culture and language. Those widows who returned were poor as women had few legal rights.

At that time, the church may have conceivably number between 20,000 and 30,000. As the church grew, doubtless the sums given for distribution to the poor grew also. This would be taxing on the administration of the apostles and it gave rise to other offices (likely, deacons). There was “*murmuring*.” (This word indicates a secret complaining and is a mild form in Greek.) No matter how great the blessing of God is, we have the tendency to be discontented which is inherited from our first parents in Eden. Such discontentment may begin with murmuring but this can lead to outright division.

It was likely that there was some grounds for the Grecians’ belief that their widows were neglected (even if unintentional because of a language barrier). Such partiality would manifest itself all the way through Acts. There is always a tendency to favour certain types of people in the church.

THOUGHT: There is always a tendency to be discontented.

PRAYER: Lord, may I be contented with what Thou hast given me.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 9

ACTS 6:2-3

1 CORINTHIANS 6:1-5

“...men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom.”

HOW TO DEAL WITH CONFLICT IN THE CHURCH (I)

Satan had attacked the New Testament church with verbal intimidation, physical persecution, contamination, and now with internal divisions. The toleration of hypocrisy would have undermined the church's message and internal division would have weakened its strength. This episode shows that leaders need to be always careful to be impartial and to exhibit this attitude. There is always a danger in spiritual ministry of getting too involved in the cares of this world and physical duties. They knew *“it is not reason”* (i.e. it is not rational to put the physical over the spiritual), but they had to do something about this problem.

The church here sets a wonderful example of how do deal with conflicts. The circumstances here had the potential to be explosive and the apostles quickly discerned this. They approached this with spiritual discernment in a swift but orderly fashion. In verse 3 the Greek word is *“aner”* which can only mean “men.” Those to be selected to deal with this conflict were men from *“among you.”* Church disputes should never be settled by those from outside the Body of Christ (1 Cor 6:1-5). In addition to being saved male church members, they had to be:

- (1) men of honest report,
- (2) full of the Holy Ghost,
- (3) full of wisdom.

Too often we select leaders in our churches based on worldly criteria such as relationship, social status, academic achievements, wealth, public speaking abilities, etc. This has never been God's order and we would do well to follow the New Testament church. If not, we may end up agreeing with Charles Spurgeon who quipped, “Resist the Devil and he will flee from you; resist a deacon and he will fly at you.”

THOUGHT: Internal division weakens the strength of our witness.
PRAYER: Lord, give us men like Stephen for our leaders.

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 10

ACTS 6:4-7

EPHESIANS 4:11-12

“God is not the author of confusion.”

HOW TO DEAL WITH CONFLICT IN THE CHURCH (II)

It is clear that there was a subordinate office to that of preaching in which spiritual matters are excluded from their decision making. Not everyone has the same gifts and calling. The right of selecting “deacons” resides in the church, but the power of ordaining them was retained by the apostles. This is a biblical balance.

All pastors should give themselves primarily to the ministry of prayer and the Word. God calls these men to this activity as a priority over every other activity in the local church. The idea of “*continually*” in verse 4 is “intense and persevering” in Greek. It is notable how prayer is put before preaching, as success in the latter is always determined by the former.

This issue had to be resolved and a solution effected. God is a God of order as evidenced throughout Scripture in creation, temple worship, covenants, etc. Dis-organisation is contrary to the nature and character of God as “*God is not the author of confusion*” (1 Cor 14:33). It is interesting that the people chose Grecian deacons (with Greek names) who had spiritual qualifications. This is truly amazing as people often revert to their sectarian groups in the event of conflict. This is telling evidence of their prudence and desire to preserve unity.

When this crisis was met in a spirit of meekness and grace by the power of the Spirit of God, the blessing of the Word of God increased. The number of disciples multiplied greatly. Indeed, a large number of priests were converted to “*the faith*,” a striking proof of the power of preaching the Word. The church now was more unified and no doubt more sensitive than it was before the division. This is a classic biblical example of how to resolve church disputes.

THOUGHT: Not everyone has the same gifts and calling.

PRAYER: Lord, may I submit to Thy sovereign calling.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 11

ACTS 6:8-15

1TIMOTHY 4:15-16

*“it is hard for thee to kick
against the pricks.”*

MY LIFE IN GOD’S HANDS

Stephen may have begun his service in the church waiting on tables, but God can call such a man to higher service if he is faithful in the little things. He was never an apostle, but the Holy Spirit made him the main subject for a significant part of the sixth chapter and the entire seventh chapter. His ministry was primarily to Grecian Jews and his life and death in many ways were the catalyst that sent the gospel from Jerusalem into the Gentile world.

This first great martyrdom would unleash centuries of hatred and persecution against the church. In Jerusalem, the *diaspora* Jews would have Greek-speaking synagogues. Lightfoot estimates that there were four hundred and sixty synagogues in Jerusalem.

Like his Master, Stephen was disputed against by the Pharisees and scribes – Paul may have even been one of those. Like his Saviour, they only exposed their own ignorance compared to the wisdom and Spirit of God. The results are similar here as they determined he must be silenced by death.

Stephen is a classic example that God sovereignly permits bad things to happen to faithful and good men. This world is an unfair place. However, we should note that God allows these events simply to work together for the greatest good and purpose.

In Acts 7:58, a man named Saul heard Stephen’s sermon. Maybe God’s Word so disturbed Saul’s conscience that he went on a rampage to quell it. That is why Christ told him, *“it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks”* (Act 9:5). It is also interesting that the first sermon Paul preached (in Acts 13) was similar to Stephen’s. Paul never got away from that first sermon of Stephen’s.

THOUGHT: God can allow bad things to happen to me.

PRAYER: Lord, may I submit to Thy sovereign plan for my life.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 12

ACTS 7:1-53

1 CORINTHIANS 1:23-31

“The God of glory appeared.”

STEPHEN’S SERMON (I)

This is the longest chapter in this book and concludes the first section. Stephen had been accused of speaking against the temple, the law, Moses and against God – the most sacred things in the mind of any Jew. The devil stirred up opposition from the people and the rulers. Using false witnesses and accusations of blasphemies, he utilised the same approach as was seemingly so successful in the trial of Jesus Christ.

Stephen was a man who was not intimidated, but had the courage to do and say what he knew was right whatever the consequences. He was a man of faith who believed that God was the sovereign Ruler of the universe. So by a mixture of apologetics and teaching application notably from the Scripture, he answered these accusations before the Sanhedrin. Like all good preachers, he finished off at the Cross. He summarised the history of Israel, revealing Israel’s consistently stubborn refusal of God’s witnesses, culminating in their rejection of His Son.

Stephen wisely focused the argument on what the Jews were so proud about and knew intimately – their Jewish heritage. Paul will do the same in Romans 2. In Stephen’s sermon of defence, he reminded them of the perennial sin in Israelite history: they disobeyed, resisted the will of the Holy Ghost and persecuted the prophets (v 51-52). His speech covered different aspects of Israel’s history: the calling of Abraham (v 2-8); the Patriarchs in Egypt (v 9-16); the life of Moses (v 17-36); Moses and Israel in the wilderness (v 37-43); and the tabernacle of testimony (v 44-50). Stephen concluded with a solemn exposure of the sin of the nation and an uncompromising rebuke and accusation of the Sanhedrin of betraying and murdering Christ. The accused witness becomes the mouthpiece of the righteous Judge. This courageous stand led to Stephen’s immediate martyrdom.

THOUGHT: Jesus Christ must be the focal point of all messages.

PRAYER: Lord, may I always preach Christ.

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 13

ACTS 7:54-60

ACTS 2:37-41

*“And when he had said this,
he fell asleep.”*

STEPHEN’S SERMON (II)

Stephen was respectful to these men in his defence. We must always be orthodox and not use unorthodox methods to defend God’s Word. Stephen began with the glory of God. The glory of God as the sovereign uncontrolled and uncontrollable Ruler of this universe is the foundation to understanding. It is the key fact to bear in mind when we are on the witness stand for our lives.

The Bible is the book of God, the history of the activity of God for His creation and His creatures. It tells us that God not only made the world, He owns and controls it too. The gospel did not originate with religiously clever men thinking up how we can be reconciled with God. The religions of this world, however, are predicated on the basis that salvation is by human works or merit, thus giving glory to man.

This message shows that God sovereignly uses a sermon. Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost and 3,000 were saved, while Stephen was stoned for his. We have to be careful that we don’t attribute praise to one over the other. We need to study and pray and leave the results of faithful preaching to God. Stephen’s martyrdom proved his words true in the Sanhedrin’s treatment of yet another prophet of God.

In his dying moments, Stephen saw the glory of God. Despite the violence and surroundings, he could see this. He is being condemned by an earthly court but vindicated by a heavenly one. In verse 57 we see the people’s churlish response and then in verse 58 they cast him outside the city just like his Saviour. How are we going to die? John Wesley said of the old Methodists, “The world may find fault with our opinions, but the world cannot deny that our people die well.”

This is a great turning point in the book of Acts – Israel’s murderous rejection of Christ will now pave the way for the gospel to go to the Gentiles. The next phase, in Acts 8, begins at Samaria.

THOUGHT: The result of all preaching lies with a sovereign God.
PRAYER: Lord, may we submit to Thy sovereign will.

LORDS DAY, NOVEMBER 14

ACTS 8:1-3

GALATIANS 1:13-16

*“To reveal his Son in me,
that I might preach Him.”*

WIDESPREAD PERSECUTION

After getting a taste of murder by killing Stephen, the religious leaders in Jerusalem, now empowered, launched the first great persecution against the church. Prominent in this movement was the up and coming man in Jerusalem, Saul of Tarsus.

As godly men buried Stephen, Saul set about destroying the church. It seems that the church had been dealt a tremendous blow by the martyrdom of Stephen, but God would turn it around (in a manner no one on both sides could have imagined) by saving a greater than Stephen. Charles Wesley once said, “God buries His workmen, but carries on His work.”

Although in Acts 7:58 Saul was called a “*young man*,” the Greek word could refer to a man as old as forty. The idea of the Greek word “*consenting*” (v 1) signifies not a mere consent only, but consent with pleasure and delight. Saul had a passionate and determined hatred for the work of Jesus Christ.

Saul did not follow the advice of his teacher, Gamaliel, but believed that the only way to stop the spread of Christianity was to physically root it out by force. He ravaged the church like a wild beast. The expression “*havock*” is a Greek term commonly applied to wild beasts thus signifying the zeal and fury with which Saul attacked the church. The idea of “*haling*” is vivid in the Greek and means to “drag along.” Saul was the first one to introduce persecution against the ordinary church members, even women.

If the Bible ended at this point, we would never have imagined that Saul of Tarsus would be in heaven, but that is why salvation is all of God’s sovereign grace. It is no wonder that Paul never gets over dwelling on this doctrine in his writings.

THOUGHT: Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.

PRAYER: Lord, thank You for Thy sovereign grace.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 15

ACTS 8:4-8

JOHN 4:34-38

*“And there was
great joy in that city.”*

REVIVAL IN SAMARIA

God will always make man's wrath serve His purpose. Acts 8:1 tells us that the gospel actually spread to the Judean provinces and Samaria after Jerusalem (re: Acts 1:8). Persecution is the holy prompting of heaven to push the gospel out as “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”

The apostles fade temporarily out of the picture, but the work continues as the focus in Acts about the growth of the church is not on man but God. The first missionary move to extend the Gospel is directed not by the apostles but by the Lord. Although now there is a different messenger, it was the same message. The good news is not what Jesus can do for you but who He is and what He has done!

This harvest field of Samaria had been prepared by Christ who had declared that it was white for the harvest (John 4:35). We read that the true gospel produced “*great joy*” in the city. The gospel is not merely an intellectual exercise, but a spiritual response resulting from an objective work on the heart (Gal 4:6). Our emotions are an essential part of man planted there by God to be controlled through the objective truth on the heart. As Lloyd Jones states,

“Can a man see himself as a damned sinner without emotion? Can a man look into hell without emotion? Can a man listen to the thunderings of the Law and feel nothing? Or conversely, can a man really contemplate the love of God in Christ Jesus and feel no emotion? The whole position is utterly ridiculous. I fear that many people today in their reaction against excesses and emotionalism put themselves into a position in which, in the end, they are virtually denying the Truth. The Gospel of Jesus Christ takes up the whole man, and if what purports to be the Gospel does not do so it is not the Gospel. The Gospel is meant to do that, and it does that.”

THOUGHT: Can a man really contemplate the love of God in Christ Jesus and feel no emotion?

PRAYER: Lord, give me the joy of true salvation.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 16

ACTS 8:9-25

JAMES 2:19

“...I perceive that thou art
in the gall of bitterness.”

NON-SAVING FAITH

Two professions of faith in this chapter are going to illustrate what is saving and non-saving faith – Simon and the Ethiopian eunuch. As Calvin once wrote, it is difficult to pick out hypocrites in the church. There are many church legends about Simon. We even have the term “simony” to describe those who purchase offices by money.

The verb “*believe*” does not always mean saving faith in the New Testament (John 2:23; James 2:19). Simon’s actions clearly indicated that he was not a saved man. He only wanted the ability to do the manifestations rather than the Holy Spirit Himself. Previously, he had been regarded as “*some great one*” and no doubt his pride wanted to maintain his social status. He was a pragmatist who would simply join any group or system of thought that advanced his position. Many today are prepared to “take up Christianity” simply because they have been sold a false hope of what Jesus can do for them, such as supernatural manifestations, health, or wealth. The Scottish deistic philosopher, David Hume, was intrigued by the oratory of preachers and was said to have raced off at five in the morning to hear Whitefield preach. Asked if he believed what the preacher preached, he replied, “No, but he does!”

When confronted by Peter, Simon the sorcerer offered no prayer of repentance or confession. Like the Egyptian magicians, he recognised a greater power than what he possessed. He had no spiritual understanding of God’s sovereignty over spiritual gifts and thought he could buy it with money.

It is interesting that one of the early attacks on the church was the false profession of a man who sought to imitate the power of God through signs and wonders. Satan’s wiles are still evident in the church today.

THOUGHT: Not all who will profess faith possess saving faith.

PRAYER: Lord, fill my church with true believers.

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 17

ACTS 8:26-40

ISAIAH 53

“... *on his way rejoicing.*”

SAVING FAITH

This command by the angel may have seemed paradoxical to Philip who was in the midst of a great revival, but he obeyed without questioning the direction of God. A true servant of God will have a submissive will. As Andrew Bonar said, “We don’t have to feel that everything is working out for our good but we do have to believe it.” Indeed, in verse 30 Philip ran to do what the Spirit directed.

The Ethiopian eunuch had come more than a thousand miles to find the true God. He did not find it in the rituals of empty religion in Jerusalem. We need to see that God is sovereign in preparing hearts for salvation, as well as the means of getting the gospel to the searching heart. We need to see here the Lord’s sovereign leading (v 26-29), Philip’s concern for lost souls (v 30), Philip expounding the Scripture and pointing the man to Christ (v 31-35). These are the elements in a true evangelistic mission.

A true evangelist must know the Christ in the Scripture and be able to point to Him. All the elements that make up the doctrine of salvation are bound up in the Person, Work and Words of Jesus. Philip did not let himself be distracted and did not offer the Ethiopian a newer translation just because he did not understand the Masoretic Scroll! In contrast to Simon, the Ethiopian had a saving faith that was evidenced in his desire for the forgiveness of his sins. This was manifested in the fruits of salvation by his desire to be identified with Christ in baptism.

The eunuch was not grieved as he headed alone to Africa, after discovering that Philip had disappeared because his salvation was not in Philip. The fact that he now had his sins forgiven, had obtained peace with God, and had Christ living in him allowed him to go “*on his way rejoicing.*” Now the gospel is heading for Africa and this Ethiopian is the firstfruits of the Hamite Gentiles.

THOUGHT: God’s ways are not our ways.

PRAYER: Lord, I thank Thee for sins forgiven, peace with Thee, and Christ living in me.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 18

ACTS 9:1

PHILIPPIANS 3:5-6

“... laboured more abundantly than they all.”

APOSTLE PAUL

Saved for the Lord Jesus Christ, the Apostle Paul is the figure that dominates the New Testament and, indeed, figures in almost one-third of it. He wrote more books than any other apostle and stated that he “laboured more abundantly than they all” (1 Cor 15:10). The conversion of this great persecutor and his call is one of the highlights of this book as it would change world history. Saul of Tarsus personified the blindness, unbelief and hatred of Israel and only sovereign grace could save such a one. It evidences the fact that God can take the worst of enemies from man and make of them the choicest. The importance of this conversion is indicated by the fact that it is mentioned three times in the book of Acts.

Paul was a Roman citizen of the capital city of Cilicia, Tarsus. This city was a university city of pre-eminence along with the universities in Athens and Alexandria. He was from the tribe of Benjamin and a family of Pharisees (Acts 23:6; Phil 3:5-6). Paul was educated under the leading Jewish scholar of that time, Gamaliel, and might even have been a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin.

As a result of his multi-faceted background, Paul was providentially fitted with the three great nationalities of the ancient world and was thereby endowed with all the natural qualifications for a universal apostleship. He was thoroughly trained in the Old Testament text and theology, yet he understood Greek literature and culture; as his style, his dialectic method, his references to heathen religion and philosophy, and his occasional quotations from heathen poets show. He could debate with the Pharisees using their legalistic approach, yet address the Greeks in their own beautiful tongue and with the convincing force of their logic. Paul played a vital role in the growth and establishment of the church. He continues to minister to us through his thirteen books in the New Testament.

THOUGHT: Providence works before and after salvation.

PRAYER: Lord, thank You for saving sinners.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 19

ACTS 9:1-5

HEBREWS 4:15

“...breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord.”

SOVEREIGN GRACE

Philip's efforts fade out of the picture as the Holy Spirit does a work of another kind, using a most unexpected workman. Sometimes sinners have one last great struggle with God before surrender. The idea of *“breathing out threatenings and slaughter”* is a very strong one in Greek. Luke draws the picture of Saul as a rampaging wild beast in his vehement opposition to the disciples of Jesus.

Saul was consumed with the desire to crush Christianity out of existence and was not deterred by the fact that Syria was a foreign country. There were probably around a hundred and fifty thousand people in Damascus (of which at least twenty thousand were Jews). However, he had not accounted for a sovereign God in his plans. This is one of the most dramatic examples of sovereign grace in conversion in the Bible. This great vision was the great turning point of his life. The vision has baffled sceptics and infidels. The conversion of Saul is one of the great miracles and compelling evidences of Christianity.

It is true that when we seek to discover any doctrinal truth in Scripture such as sovereign grace, we must always begin with God. He is a God who plans, a God who intervenes, and a God who speaks. God always makes the first move in salvation. This is the message throughout the Bible that the living God has revealed Himself to us through Scripture and His Son.

The words which the Lord first addressed to Saul contain the truth of salvation. Every believer is a member of the body of Christ and is identified with Him and He with them (Heb 4:15). These words must have truly shocked this proud Pharisee who doubtless believed this Jesus was a fraudster. The last man to see the resurrected Christ before Saul was Stephen and one of his murderers was the next one to see His glory. That is sovereign grace.

THOUGHT: God always makes the first move in salvation.

PRAYER: Lord, I thank Thee for making the first move for me.

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 20

ACTS 9:6-9

ACTS 26:9-18

“... but I obtained mercy.”

A TRANSFORMED LIFE

True conversion is evidenced by brokenness and humble submission to Jesus as Lord. There will never be a transformed life without a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. Not all will be converted in such a dramatic fashion as Saul, but contrite repentance and a relationship with the Living Christ must occur. Saul was not only wonderfully forgiven of his sins, but immediately he surrendered his life to do what the Lord wanted him to do.

Saul's conversion experience is a historical event with third-party witnesses, but it is also a very personal event as conversion experiences are unique to the individual. Liberals try to explain Saul's conversion as some type of mental aberration, but as Spurgeon quipped, “O blessed epilepsy, if it effects a conversion like this!”

This proud Pharisee thought he was a highly enlightened man, so these three days of darkness must have really humbled and spoken to him. Doubtless, he was amazed at the grace of God to a murderer and blasphemer like him. Throughout all of his earthly life, he would never get over this grace or telling about it. In 1 Timothy 1:13 he attested, “*Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy ...*” Just as he thought he was going to execute his evil plan, God stopped him in his tracks.

The ninth chapter does not contain the full record of what happened on the road to Damascus. Later we read of further details in Acts 26:16-18. Another account in the twenty-second chapter was given by Paul in the Hebrew tongue to the Jews and the account in the twenty-sixth chapter was addressed to both Jews and Gentiles. He also mentions his conversion briefly in 1 Corinthians 15:8; Galatians 1:15-16 and 1 Timothy 1:12-13.

THOUGHT: True conversion is evidenced by brokenness and humble submission to Jesus as Lord.

PRAYER: Lord, let me see true repentance in my church.

LORD'S DAY, NOVEMBER 21

ACTS 9:10-17

PHILIPPIANS 3:4-8

"... for, behold, he prayeth."

EXPECT UNEXPECTED THINGS

Saul was absolutely, totally transformed – this was no superficial experience. He went to the exact place where Jesus told him to go. His submission was not just in word but in deed as well. Although his conversion was instant, the Lord providentially gave him three days to begin to fathom and meditate on what had happened to him.

Saul did not look for opportunities to boast about his experience, but gave himself to prayer to commune with the God he had just met. Martin Luther once said, "As is the business of tailors to make clothes and cobblers to make shoes, so it is the business of Christians to pray." Prayer is not just simply a duty, but a response to salvation. Saul did not have to be pleaded with by his pastor to pray. It was as much a part of him since conversion as breathing. This is a sign of a true believer.

It was appropriate that Saul had left Jerusalem expecting a great welcome at Damascus, but was helped by a very humble and insignificant disciple of Christ. Ananias also lived in communion with God, so when God spoke, he was ready and obedient. He never doubted that he was being instructed by the voice of God. Probably he was one of the leading believers at Damascus that Saul had come to imprison. Could Ananias had prayed against Saul's coming but not for his salvation?

Often we believe that our greatest enemies are beyond redemption. Andrew Murray warned, "Beware in your prayers, above everything else, of limiting God, not only by unbelief, but by fancying that you know what He can do. Expect unexpected things above all that we ask or think." What an important role this man Ananias had in church history – he is one of the forgotten heroes of Scripture.

THOUGHT: God has His disciples in the most unexpected places.

PRAYER: Lord, give me faith to pray for my enemies.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 22

ACTS 9:18-26

2 TIMOTHY 3:12

*“And straightway he preached
Christ in the synagogues.”*

TRANSFORMATION LEADS TO SERVICE

A new convert always seeks the fellowship of God’s people. There is real love in Christ with the fellowship of the saints. The church is the primary place for the edification and maturing of the new convert. The irony is that Saul’s former enemies that he used to hate he now loved. However, Saul did not relax in the church’s fellowship for long but knew he was saved to serve. A transformed life always requires service to Christ as a witness of this transformation.

Now the devil faced a formidable foe who is very clear about his Biblical proofs. Saul had a brilliant mind, coupled with an intimate knowledge of Scripture and a fearless passion to preach Christ. This was formidable evidence recounted here by Luke for Theophilus that Saul’s conversion was genuine. Doubtless, Saul was growing in his theology and understanding of Old Testament prophecy as he disputed with these Jews. His apologetic approach was to argue from Scripture by delineating the facts of Jesus’ life as fulfilling the Old Testament messianic prophecies side by side in order to prove that Jesus was indeed the Christ (Acts 9:22; cf 17:3; 18:5; 26:23).

Paul’s conversion was about AD 36, around 6 years after the ascension of Christ. It is likely that Paul never saw Christ personally save for meeting the glorified Christ at his conversion. In verse 25, he probably went to Arabia from AD 37 to AD 39. Between verses 25 and 26 after he had gone into Arabia, he then returned to Damascus. So it was at least three years before he went to Jerusalem (Gal 1:15-19).

Like Stephen, Saul’s preaching was so powerful that the Jews sought to kill him. They could not handle his brilliant, yet sanctified, mind which knew the Scripture. The proud Saul had hoped to enter Damascus as the representative of the Jewish hierarchy in Jerusalem, but instead entered as a humbled and blinded man and left in a most undignified fashion as a fugitive fleeing his former friends.

THOUGHT: A new convert will seek the fellowship of God’s people.

PRAYER: Lord, teach me to love my brethren.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 23

ACTS 9: 26-30

GALATIANS 1:18-19

“...he spake boldly in the name
of the Lord Jesus.”

A MINISTRY OF SUFFERING AND REJECTION

From the outset, the Apostle Paul had a ministry of suffering and rejection. His Christian brethren never really accepted him and the Jews wanted to kill him. When Saul entered Jerusalem he “*assayed*” to join himself to the disciples – this verb is in the imperfect indicating he kept on trying. Despite the fact that a number of years had now gone past since his conversion, his fearsome reputation still preceded him. They probably thought he was a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Often our past life before we are saved can still be a burden to us.

Barnabas lived up to his name as a “*son of consolation.*” It may have been that Saul’s persecuting zeal against the church prevented the news of his conversion and transformation getting back to the apostles. As Matthew Henry comments, “the introducing of a young convert into the communion of the faithful is a very good work, and one which, as we have opportunity, we should be ready to do.” Ananias did his duty from the Lord and Barnabas now did his.

Evidently Saul met only Peter and James during his fifteen days in Jerusalem (Gal.1:18-19). His testimony and calling was tested by the leaders of the church. This is biblical and proper.

The Grecians were Hellenistic Jews. The last man to preach to them was Stephen so Saul picked up from where his former enemy had left off. The gospel’s chief opponent had become it’s chief protagonist. Stephen had confounded them and Saul probably gave them an even more difficult time.

The biggest compliment the devil pays to an effective preacher is to try to silence him. Saul tasted for himself the very things he had inflicted upon others. He was sent back to Tarsus (in modern Turkey) which was far from where God was working geographically.

THOUGHT: My past sins can still be a burden to me.

PRAYER: Lord, keep me from sin.

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 24

ACTS 9:31

JOB 23:10

*“He knoweth
the way that I take.”*

BIBLICAL CHURCH GROWTH

When Saul departed for Tarsus, he spent the next number of years in obscurity. This may well have been up to a decade of isolation and testing for this man when *“God left him, to try him, that he might know all that was in his heart”* (2 Chron 32:31). If so, Saul could echo what Job said after his great trial, *“he knoweth the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold”* (Job 23:10). Saul never tried to manipulate God’s sovereign will but waited until God ushered him into the great Gentile missionary journeys.

Paul stated that his life’s ambition was *“in the regions beyond you, and not to boast in another man’s line of things made ready to our hand”* to preach the gospel (2 Cor 10:16). At Paul’s death, he was able to claim that the gospel had reached *“unto the ends of the world”* (Rom 10:18) and he was free *“from the blood of all men”* (Acts 20:26). In his homily on the book of Romans, John Chrysostom, the great church father, said that he loved the city of Rome best because, *“I would like to see the dust of Paul’s body that sowed the gospel everywhere; the dust of that mouth which lifted the truth on high, and through which Christ spoke; the dust of those feet that ran throughout the world and were not weary; the dust of those eyes which were blinded, but which recovered their sight again and saw the salvation of multitudes.”*

Five things came from this reprieve for the churches:

- (1) They had rest.
- (2) They were edified.
- (3) They were walking in the fear of the Lord.
- (4) They were walking in the comfort of the Holy Ghost.
- (5) They were multiplied.

When the saints are edified and walking in the fear of the Lord, then they will be multiplied. That is Biblical church growth!

THOUGHT: An edified saint will evangelise others.

PRAYER: Lord, edify me with Thy Word.

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 25

ACTS 9:32-43

1 TIMOTHY 2:10

*“Jesus Christ
maketh thee whole.”*

OPENING THE DOOR TO THE GENTILES

Now Luke draws the reader's attention back to Peter, who was last seen in Acts 8:25. In Chapter 8, we are told that Peter and John visited Samaria, but now Peter is travelling alone in Judæa. Probably, the rapid spread of the gospel necessitated such a mission.

He was called to Joppa because of the demise of a woman called Dorcas who did many *“good works.”* This word *“good”* here has the meaning of intrinsically good in character. She was like the women in 1 Timothy 2:10. It is always a blessing to have people like Dorcas in any local church. There was no government social security safety net to assist the poor. What joy there must be for all the saints when a church member like Dorcas was brought back to life.

Peter then resided in the home of Simon the tanner. This prepares us for what was to come as tanning was a trade regarded by the Jews as half unclean, and consequently disreputable, because of the contact with dead animals and blood. For this reason, even by other nations, it was usually carried out at some distance from towns. Accordingly, Simon's house was *“by the sea side”* (Acts 10:6). Tanners were ceremonially unclean so they could not participate in the religious practices of Judaism. Peter's lodging there showed him to be already above Jewish prejudice to some extent.

Everything is now in place for the church to take the gospel to the Gentiles, to the ends of the earth. God would choose Peter (Acts 15:7) to be the one through whom the Gentiles should first hear the Gospel of sovereign grace. Peter had accepted the Samaritans, which was a major transformation in his thinking. However, to go to the Gentiles would require a seismic shift. All believers have prejudices that God must remove if we are going to be effective in His service.

THOUGHT: I must always be ready to serve the Lord.

PRAYER: Lord, make me ready for Thy call.

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 26

ACTS 10:1

MATTHEW 28:18-20

*“...one that feared God
with all his house.”*

THE GOSPEL FOR ALL

The spread of the gospel surged on in Acts like a mighty river, resisting the futile efforts of man to stem its tide. Acts 10 records the historical account of the extension of the gospel to the Gentiles. Simeon had sung of the salvation hope of the Gentiles as part of the blessing from the Lord’s incarnation (Luke 2:32). Evangelising the Gentiles was also the clear mandate of Jesus Christ to the disciples (Matt 28:18-20).

Luke records three conversions in three chapters that delineate the universality of the gospel. The Ethiopian eunuch in chapter eight was the firstfruits of the Hamite Gentiles, Saul in chapter nine was a Shemite, and Cornelius in chapter ten was of the line of Japheth Gentiles.

God sovereignly prepares two people: a Gentile and a Jew. God is orchestrating the events to bring these two men together in a way they could never have envisaged. The unfolding drama of the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles shows that this was not a mere accident or chance.

When God is pleased to open the gospel to the Gentiles, He chooses a Gentile – a military commander from the occupying Roman forces – who visibly represents something that every proud Jew despised. The prepared preacher would meet the prepared soul in God’s appointed time and place. Salvation is initiated by God. This account evidences why the book of Acts is often called the Acts of the Holy Spirit.

If the Jews despised the Samaritans, then they doubly despised the Gentiles. So chapter ten is a key moment in church history. Some Jews taught that the Gentiles were only created by God as fuel for hell. Indeed, if a Jewish man married a Gentile, his family would hold a funeral for him! Now Peter is going to learn that “the ground is level at the foot of the cross.”

THOUGHT: The gospel is for all people.

PRAYER: Lord, send out Thy Light to all the world.

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 27

ACTS 10:1-2

ROMANS 1:19-20

*“...God also to the Gentiles
granted repentance unto life.”*

ALL MEN KNOW GOD

Cornelius is a Latin name and he was the head of a hundred men. Caesarea was dominated by Gentiles and was the location of a military garrison. We note that he was a devout man as it is stated that he:

- (1) gave much alms,
- (2) prayed always, and
- (3) feared God.

Cornelius was not a saved believer at this point in time (although probably he would pass for a Christian in most churches) when the angel told him to send for Peter, *“Who shall tell thee words, whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved”* (Acts 11:14). Cornelius could not have been saved without hearing the gospel or confessing the name of Christ as this would contradict the angelic message and Luke’s understanding of salvation (Acts 16:30-31). Also Acts 11:18 puts his conversion subsequent to this time as, *“Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.”*

Many Gentiles, like the Ethiopian eunuch and Cornelius, were attracted to Judaism as they could see the emptiness of pagan idolatry and the degradation of morals in Roman civil society. By contrast, the simplicity of Jewish monotheism coupled with the strong ethical and moral framework of the Jewish faith was attractive to disciplined minds. In a similar manner today, many unbelievers who attend fundamental churches may be attracted by the moral purpose and certitude of the Christian faith.

Man’s ability to think logically has been impaired but not erased by the Fall. Cornelius was a pagan without true salvation, but he feared God from the creation around him (Rom 1:19-20), from intuition (Eccl 3:11), and from the law written in his heart (Rom 2:14-15). Atheism is rooted in a heart problem, not a mere intellectual one.

THOUGHT: All men know God.

PRAYER: Lord, send out Thy Light to all the world.

LORD'S DAY, NOVEMBER 28

ACTS 10:1-2

ROMANS 3:10

*"...There is none righteous,
no, not one."*

PREPARED SOULS AND PREPARED PREACHER

The Bible is clear that none seeks after God (Rom 3:10). God's election always works in tandem with a willing, open heart. This is a divine mystery. Natural revelation is just as authoritative as Scripture, but we need the latter to correct and supplement our view of the world. This will occur only as we obey the Word.

Evidentialists believe that man can reason his way by natural revelation, independent of special revelation, to the knowledge of God's existence. This ignores the effects of depravity as Romans 1 tells us that man clearly sees and knows intuitively that God exists but actively suppresses the knowledge. Natural revelation also fails to specifically identify the God of Scripture. All it can do, at best, is delineate that God could be deistic, polytheistic, pantheistic or monotheistic. God has ordained the primary means of salvation as through preaching from the Word of God.

The Bible offers no proof for the existence of God, but asserts and assumes His existence (Gen 1:1). The evidence for order, design, morality and purpose can only be understood on the testimony of Scripture. Christ must be the ultimate authority over our theories of epistemology as we must "*sanctify the Lord God in your hearts*" (1 Pet 3:15). Paul also warns us that we must , cast down "*imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God,*" and then bring "*into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ*" (2 Cor 10:5).

In Acts 10, we will see God sovereignly preparing the recipient of the gospel (Cornelius) and the chosen messenger of the gospel (Peter). In His perfect and sovereign timing, God will orchestrate events for both to come together to fulfill God's redemptive plan.

THOUGHT: In His perfect and sovereign timing, God will orchestrate events to fulfill His redemptive plan.

PRAYER: Lord, I thank Thee that Thou art in control.

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 29

ACTS 10:3-33

EPHESIANS 1:4

*“... we all here present before God,
to hear all things...”*

GOD’S SOVEREIGN TIMING

Cornelius had lived up to the light revealed through natural revelation, so God now elected him to receive more light. Election never violates the volition of man. God is sovereign over the object and means of salvation. As A.W. Pink put it, “A ‘god’ whose will is resisted, whose designs are frustrated, whose purpose is checkmated, possesses no title to Deity.” This angel was no doubt more impressive physically and more eloquent than Peter, but God chose Peter to preach. The Lord did not let the angel preach to Cornelius or declare him as justified, but used the human instrument to preach to this man.

God sees and reads the heart of every man. It is no problem to God to get the gospel to the darkest and remotest corner of this world, as seen in the conversions in this book. Like a true soldier, Cornelius immediately prepared to carry out the instructions just received. He was not prejudiced as a Roman centurion against a Jewish fisherman. Humility is required for salvation as we must all come as little children. Joppa is said to be thirty miles from Caesarea. Peter saw a vision in the sixth hour, about 12 noon. The Lord clearly wanted Peter to lead Cornelius to Christ in Cornelius’ house, which would break down the barrier between Jew and Gentile.

Peter saw a vision of a sheet with four corners representing the earth and its inhabitants. God sovereignly chose this time as it was about noon when Peter would be hungry and he would see lots of food before him. After seeing and understanding the vision on the rooftop, Peter went with the servants of Cornelius to his house in Caesarea. We can see their hungry hearts as only a heart desiring peace with God could make a Roman centurion worship a despised Jewish fisherman! Cornelius’ remarks that they were *“all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God”* must have warmed Peter’s fearful heart.

THOUGHT: God is sovereign over the object and means of salvation.

PRAYER: Lord, lead me to witness to prepared souls today.

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 30

ACTS 10:34-45

ISAIAH 56:3-8

“...thy prayer is heard.”

SOVEREIGN ELECTION

Peter cut right through any tension each side was thinking about with a tremendous statement. This was an old Biblical principle (Deut 10:17; 2 Chron 19:7). Doubtless, Peter had searched the Scripture the night before since seeing the vision on the rooftop.

On the basis of Isaiah’s prophecy in Isaiah 56:3-8, we should not be surprised to read of the conversion of an Ethiopian eunuch or a Roman centurion. Gentile evangelism was not an afterthought in God’s redemptive plan. It was true that God had elected the Jews from the rest of mankind, but only because He wanted them to be a demonstration to all the other nations of the relationship God wanted to have with every nation and every people.

Literally, the Greek concept of “*no respecter of persons*” is “to receive the face.” This statement does not obviate sovereign election but simply emphasizes that God will not accept a man on account of external national rank and privileges.

In Peter’s sermon, the emphasis is on Christ’s life, death and resurrection. It was a simple message that the apostles were to preach. He distilled the essence of the gospel in a paragraph. It was exactly the same message which was preached to the Jews. Notably, no circumcision or any other work was required for them to be declared justified.

Rarely in church history do we read of a whole company attending the preaching of the gospel being brought into the liberty of salvation. Peter did not even finish his message or make any appeal. The Holy Spirit refused to wait until the altar call! In nothing did these Gentiles come short of that which had been bestowed on the Jews at Pentecost. This was the Pentecost of the Gentiles.

THOUGHT: Gentile evangelism was not an afterthought.

PRAYER: Lord, I thank Thee that Thou accept all people.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 1

ACTS 10:46-48

2 CHRONICLES 19:7

“... to testify that it is He
which was ordained of God.”

THE GENTILE PENTECOST

The gospel Peter preached to the Gentiles was exactly the same message which he preached to the Jews. The results were also the same. Cornelius and his company received the baptism and filling of the Holy Ghost direct from on high at the moment of conversion, without the laying on of apostolic hands. This special manifestation of tongues was entirely in keeping with the purpose – as a sign to unbelieving Jews. The biblical marks of the true gift of tongues were present here as they were on the Day of Pentecost.

These tongues were not ecstatic utterances but proper languages as they were understood by the listening Jews to “*magnify God.*” The experience of salvation always produces praise to the Giver of salvation, not babbling. The Jews’ cognition of this enabled them to attest to the salvation of these Gentiles in chapter 11. This fact alone contradicts Jewish prejudice that a holy God would not pour out His Holy Spirit on unclean Gentiles, unless they become ritually pure Jews. As FF Bruce comments, “The event was not so much a second Pentecost, standing alongside the first, as the participation of Gentile believers in the experience of the first Pentecost.”

After they were seen to be saved by the infilling of the Spirit and manifestation of Pentecostal tongues, they were baptized with water. No one dared gainsay the work of God. The baptism of the Holy Spirit does not do away with the baptism of water. The order of events here also proves that water baptism is not necessary for salvation.

True conversion leads to a desire for Christian fellowship. These new converts desired to know the Word of God. No doubt this hunger thrilled the heart of Peter. This example of the leader of the New Testament church should have swept away all barriers. If Peter could go to the Gentiles, then so could every other Jewish Christian! The ground is indeed level at the foot of the cross.

THOUGHT: God’s own work must be done in God’s own way.

PRAYER: Lord, thank You for the Cross.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 2

ACTS 11:1-18

JOHN 4:7

*“...the Gentiles had also received
the word of God.”*

HANDLING CRITICISM OF YOUR MINISTRY

The news of Peter’s mission to the Gentiles had preceded him to Jerusalem. People often have preconceived ideas about an event. You would have thought that the Jews in Jerusalem would have been excited to hear how Gentiles were possibly saved.

The fact that they “*contended*” (Acts 11:2) with Peter shows that the other apostles and believers did not regard Peter as infallible! The Greek word “*contended*” is in the imperfect tense, indicating they continually did this. Peter did not react angrily to his apostleship being challenged here or claim infallibility, but calmly responded and rehearsed the matter from the beginning. He allowed his claims of being led by the Spirit to be tested before the church by six witnesses, and in verse 16, by scriptural revelation. He silenced them by reminding them of the actions of God. This is the best way to deal with such contention – simply relate and rely on what God has done in your life, attested by what is revealed in His Word.

This story is repeated two times in two chapters (indeed, some parts of it three times). Luke had thousands of conversions and incidents to select for his Acts account; so clearly the Holy Spirit wants us to pay special attention to the conversion of Cornelius. Christianity could easily have become another sect of Judaism if God had not stepped in at this point.

In false belief systems such as evolution, prejudice is promoted through “survival of the fittest.” We must not let prejudices such as age, social status, ethnic status, nationality, wealth, etc, prevent us from taking the gospel to all. There is no such thing as a “middle class” or “working class” congregation in Acts. There are no “second-class” believers in the Body of Christ. Jesus Christ witnessed to people from all walks of society, from lepers and harlots, to Joseph of Arimathea and a Roman centurion.

THOUGHT: Christianity is free from prejudice from the beginning.

PRAYER: Lord, help me to love my brethren in every nation.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 3

ACTS 11:19-21

ACTS 8:14

*“And the hand of the Lord
was with them.”*

THE REVIVAL IN ANTIOCH

These Hellenist Jews from Cyprus and Cyrene did not have the same reservations as the Jews from Judea, so they reached out to Gentiles in Antioch. This city was one of the greatest cities of that era, which some said had a population of over 500,000, including a Jewish colony of 70,000. Josephus ranked it as the third greatest city of the Roman Empire, after Rome and Alexandria.

The emphasis of their preaching is also on Christ. That is why souls could be saved. The Puritan, Thomas Brooks (1608-1680), argues that our preaching as witnesses must be Christ-centred:

“Christ is a most precious commodity; he is better than rubies or the most costly pearls; and you must part with your old gold, with your shining gold, your old sins, your most shining sins, or you must perish for ever. Christ is to be sought and bought with any pains, at any price....Get him, and get all; miss him and miss all.”

This revival was certainly the result of the sovereign power of the Spirit of God at work. No apostle or famous name was leading or even guiding them to do this. The founders of the first Gentile church were not even named. Now we see for the first time the formal unity of both Jewish and Gentile believers in the church.

When news of the great move of God amongst the Gentiles reached Jerusalem, it was proper for these leaders to verify whether it was a real move of God. When there was a move of God in the Acts 8 scattering, they also did *“try the spirits”* (Acts 8:14). In Acts 9, Saul was not immediately accepted and was put to the test. In Acts 11, when Peter returned from Cornelius’ house, he was put to the test. It is all right to test a move of God as long as you use the Word of God. Too many today refuse to be held accountable or to have their actions questioned.

THOUGHT: When Christ is preached, souls will be affected.

PRAYER: Lord, help me to preach Christ always.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 4

ACTS 11:22-24

ACTS 4:36-37

“...a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith.”

CHOOSING THE RIGHT MAN

One of the greatest difficulties churches face is choosing the right character of man for the right role. Barnabas, who was a native of Cyprus and had a gracious character (Acts 4:36-37), was providentially equipped for the work which the Jerusalem church sent him. Barnabas was known for his empathy to outsiders and humbly yielded to the call of God. The church in Jerusalem chose well when they picked Barnabas.

Barnabas, or “son of encouragement,” was truly a loving and encouraging person. He was “*a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith.*” The fullness of the Holy Spirit and faith is the root or source of Barnabas’ goodness. His immediate joyful reaction to these converts can only be contrasted with the unhelpful reaction of the Jerusalem Jews in Acts 11:1-3. Faith not only discerns saving grace, it delights in grace.

However, Barnabas’ joy was not without reason. It was because of what God had done by His saving grace. His first reaction was not to show his authority or rebuke them, but to give positive encouragement. He was able to discern the grace of God in the imperfect lives of these Gentile saints. Barnabas truly cared for them and he continued to edify these believers. The word “*exhorted*” means that he continually encouraged them as the verb is in the continuous imperfect tense.

As a result of having the right type of godly leader, “*much people was added unto the Lord.*” When the saints remain in close communion with Christ, evangelism is effective. Barnabas had the right spiritual attitudes, qualities and gifts. His presence and ministry resulted in many more conversions to the Lord. God can really use a man like this. All our churches need to have men and women with the heart of Barnabas.

THOUGHT: When I see grace in new converts, I should rejoice.

PRAYER: Lord, help me to encourage new converts.

LORD'S DAY, DECEMBER 5

ACTS 11:25-30

ACTS 15:41

“...the disciples were called
Christians first in Antioch.”

CHOOSING THE RIGHT CO-WORKER

Evidently, however, Barnabas felt himself inadequate in the face of so great a work. Every preacher recognises the need for help as the work grows. The problem is that Barnabas needs to discern the need and the man with the right spiritual character and gifts to meet it. It is interesting that he did not return to Jerusalem for one of the apostles, but went to Tarsus to find Saul. It may have been as many as ten years since Saul left Jerusalem for Tarsus.

The word for “*seek*” in Greek means “to make diligent search with difficulty.” Saul might have been moving around, evangelising and establishing churches all over Cilicia (Acts 15:41). Barnabas’ attitude to make this effort shows his concern for the Antioch saints, his humility, and his discernment as to the right man for the role. It takes character to know character. The results are rewarding and we see the same pattern of growth. Once the saints were built up in the Word of God for one year, the church multiplied.

Ancient Antioch was said to be infamous for its mockery, especially the coining of nicknames. The IVP commentary states:

“When an organized brigade of chanting devotees of Nero led crowds in adulation, this band of imperial cheerleaders with their ludicrous homage was quickly dubbed *Augustiani*. And earlier, when the devotees of the one called Christ came to public attention, they were named *Christianoi*, partisans of Christ (11:26). What may have been first coined by outsiders as a term of derision (see Acts 26:28 and 1 Pet 4:16, the only two other New Testament occurrences of the term - both on the lips of hostile unbelievers), the followers of the Way embraced it as a fitting label.”

Interestingly, the term “Methodist” originated in Oxford as a nickname for the methodical lives of John and Charles Wesley.

THOUGHT: When the saints are built up, the church will multiply.

PRAYER: Lord, help me to discern spiritual qualities in others.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 6

ACTS 12:1-4

LUKE 12:11-12

“...prayer was made without ceasing
of the church unto God.”

POLITICAL PERSECUTION

You do not have to be a preacher to face martyrdom. Many laypersons and even children have died for their faith. A deacon of the New Testament church was the first martyr and now we see the first apostle martyred.

When we give our lives to God, He chooses sovereignly what to do with it. Will it be a life to be lived or will it be physically sacrificed in death? It may be that we will lead 3,000 souls like Peter to Christ, or it may be that we will be martyred like Stephen and James. God’s choice for us will always be perfect. John Bunyan was in jail for twelve years and while there he wrote *Pilgrim’s Progress*, which, next to the Bible, has affected more lives than any book ever written.

The phrase “*about that time*” was the time when Paul and Barnabas were at Antioch. A great famine hit the region and affected Jerusalem especially. The enemy lost an important leader when Saul was saved and now Satan stirs up an old family of adversaries – the Herodian dynasty. This assault on the leadership of the church would not be from the religious leaders, but the political ones. Christ warned that state power would be used against His followers (Luke 12:11-12; 21:12-19). Luke lets his reader, Theophilus, know that the secular authorities cannot stop the church in its mission!

Herod was cultivating the favour of the Jews, just as Pilate did when he crucified the Lord. Doubtless, he thought killing the leader would make him even more popular. Peter was imprisoned during the period of the Passover. This was a double blow to the enthusiasm and outreach of the church at a time when they remember the resurrection. For the third time, Peter was put in prison. Probably because of rumours as to previous deliverances, Herod placed his famous prisoner in the hands of sixteen soldiers, in chains and behind bars and bolts. This, however, could not stop God from acting.

THOUGHT: Often the devil can stir up old enemies against us.

PRAYER: Lord, thank You for religious freedom to preach.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 7

ACTS 12:5-17

MATTHEW 20:23

“Now I know of a surety, that the Lord hath sent his angel.”

GOD IN CONTROL

With the blessing breaking out in Antioch among the Gentiles, the devil hit back at the church with vicious, slashing power. Peter's arrest sent the church to its knees as this could have been a campaign to wipe out all the apostles. The death of James was a great blow, but the death of Peter would have been an even greater one. However, God's plan for Peter's life was not yet complete.

This was a very sobering moment and the church was stunned into action. They have no time to argue over the salvation of the Gentiles now. Prayer is the only weapon the church has, but it is more than enough. Their appeal was to God and not to man. Nothing can stand against God. The Lord answered their prayers just in time for Peter. As the IVP commentary states, “As if to test the church's faith to the limit and emphasize his consummate power over his enemies, the Lord waits to act until the eve of Peter's show trial and probable summary execution.”

Throughout, Peter showed a deep trust in God's sovereignty over his life. Would we be able to sleep well knowing that the next day we would lose our lives? It is difficult to sleep on a jail floor with two men chained to you. Peter did not need sleeping pills! When the angel appeared to him, Peter was disorientated. He might have thought it was a similar experience to the vision in chapter 10.

While the church was having an overnight prayer meeting, God answered their prayers. They were reluctant to believe it. That sounds like us! In one sense, it is comforting to realise that these New Testament believers were of “like passions” and not “super Christians.” Not one of the company believed that Peter had been released but a servant girl, Rhoda. God showed these weak believers that He was still in control and that He answered prayer.

THOUGHT: God showed these believers that He was still in control.
PRAYER: Lord, I thank Thee that Thou art in control.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 8

ACTS 12:18-25

PROVERBS 21:30

*“But the word of God.
grew and multiplied.”*

GOD’S UNSTOPPABLE PLAN

Sixteen innocent soldiers died because this proud man, Herod, did not believe that God could act. God’s day of reckoning for him came. Herod began this attack on God’s work but God was going to end it. It might appear initially that God had overlooked his sin, but this was not so.

Herod died in the throes of self-deification. Modesty and integrity did not run in this family! Like so many today, he believed he was God. With a powerful contrast, Luke summarises the Lord’s victory over political powers. This should encourage us. Pharaoh, Jeroboam, Ahab, Nebuchadnezzar, and others tried to fight God and lost. As MacArthur comments:

“You can’t find one man in history, one man in the revelation of God that ever fought against God and won ... the most powerful of men are unable to fight God and win ... And so God has a long history in the Old Testament of all the kings who tried to fight him and what happened to them, and the whole Old Testament is strewn with the wreckage of kings who tried to fight God.”

Despite the opposition of the devil through Herod, the Word of God grew and multiplied. Solomon, the wisest king who ever lived, summed it up, *“There is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the LORD”* (Prov 21:30). Many have tried through the centuries since Cain and all have failed to hinder God’s plan. Herod should have listened to Solomon’s wise advice.

From this period onward, the inspired historian records chiefly the labour of the Apostle Paul. Peter will fade from the picture and, from now through chapter 28, Paul dominates the picture.

THOUGHT: God is always victorious.

PRAYER: Lord, I thank Thee that Thou art always victorious.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 9

ACTS 13:1-2

ACTS 6:4

“...being sent forth by
the Holy Ghost.”

PAUL’S FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY

This chapter is a turning point in the book of Acts. It is what Winston Churchill describes as “the hinges of history.” It begins the first missionary journey of Paul. This journey summarises the main features of Paul’s missionary call (Acts 9:15-16). Paul does indeed carry the gospel before Gentiles and kings (Acts 13:7-12, 46-48; 14:8-18, 27) and before Israel (Acts 13:14-41). He truly suffered for the name of Christ (Acts 14:5, 19).

Antioch now becomes the centre from which the work spreads to the ends of the earth. Before this church could become a great missionary – sending church, it is notable that it had to be well taught in doctrine. The church must be saturated in the Word of God or it will produce carnality. The Antioch believers were so well known for their Christo-centric beliefs that they were named “Christians” by the locals. In Acts 11:26, we see that Paul and Barnabas taught there for a whole year. This church is a model church to emulate in many different ways.

The leaders of the church in Antioch “*ministered to the Lord*” – this verb is in the imperfect tense, indicating that they continued to engaged in divine service such as prayer as they fasted. In Acts 6:4, the apostles wanted to give themselves to this. Leaders need to spend time ministering to the Lord rather than just to the people. There was clearly such a serious burden in the Antioch church that they fasted. Were they burdened over the plight of millions of lost Gentile souls?

This was a church with a plurality of spiritual leadership under the control of the Holy Spirit. A congregation never really rises any higher than its leadership. We do not know how the Holy Spirit spoke, but it may have been through these prophets through divine revelation.

THOUGHT: A congregation needs a spiritual leadership.

PRAYER: Lord, give us spiritual leadership in our churches.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 10

ACTS 13:3-5

GALATIANS 1:1

*“...not of men, neither by man,
but by Jesus Christ.”*

GIVING OF YOUR BEST

The laying on of hands in verse 3 was not to ordain them to their office as both men had already preached before. Indeed, Paul was directly commissioned by God (Gal 1:1). However, it provides a good pattern of the call of the Holy Spirit working with the confirmation, identification and support of the church. Prayer and the Holy Spirit led this move. As A.B. Simpson commented, “Prayer is the mighty engine that is to move the missionary work.”

These two were probably the best leaders Antioch had, but they willingly set them apart when God called them. Churches should be willing to sacrifice their very best to evangelise the lost. This is a wonderful picture of the unity and harmony of the whole church being led by the Spirit. One commentator said:

“Compared with this voyage, the results and consequences of the voyages of Columbus, Vasco da Gamma, Magellan and the Vikings were of little consequence for this was the commencement of the Christian odyssey. For the gospel had been preached in Judea and Samaria and now it’s to be proclaimed in the uttermost part of the earth....carried with it a man and an idea, which were to affect the destinies of the human race.”

Salamis was the principal city and seaport of Cyprus, and would have had many synagogues being adjacent to Judea. We are not told whether they were explicitly commanded to go there by the Spirit. Possibly, they headed toward where they knew was a need in Cyprus and trusted God to govern and lead the choice, and to bring out of it what He desired. John Mark is called a “*minister*” here, meaning an “under-rower” or “subordinate rower” in Greek. He was not to be the main speaker but to take care of the administration. Maybe John Mark started doing this voluntarily and they took this as evidence that he was suited for this purpose and would be useful.

THOUGHT: The church should give its best for the Lord’s service.

PRAYER: Lord, lead me in my service.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 11

ACTS 13:6-12

JOHN 8:44

“...thou child of the devil,
thou enemy of all righteousness.”

A BATTLE FOR A SOUL

Often Paul sailed and went past towns and villages without preaching to them. We must be led of the Lord in evangelism. He went from Salamis in the east to Paphos in the west without apparently stopping anywhere in between. Even the Lord Jesus Christ did not talk to everyone. Paphos was a city at the western extremity of the island of Cyprus. It was famed for its immorality associated with the idolatry to the goddess Venus who was said to have been born there. A great temple was erected to Venus there.

Every fresh move of God will have the resistance of the devil. Here, Satan had his man, Elymas Bar-jesus (“son of Jesus” or “son of salvation”), to fight against the gospel in order to blind the deputy from the faith. Elymas is an Arabic word meaning “the sorcerer.” There are parallels with the account of Simon of Samaria in chapter 8. Both were Jewish and were demon-possessed mediums who seized upon the name of Jesus Christ as a guise for utterly un-Christian teaching and behaviour. One difference is that Simon infiltrated the ranks of the believers, whereas Elymas boldly opposed the gospel.

Paul did not go looking for the devil, but when he faced him, he confronted his foe head on. However, he did this when filled with the Spirit, not in his own strength. Paul “*set his eyes*” on him and was not intimidated. It is amazing that Elymas never repented despite all the signs given to him. Such is the depravity and blindness of the unregenerate heart.

This was a battle ultimately for the soul of Sergius Paulus. Satan is clever enough to know that if he can control powerful people of influence, he can control most of those under them. It was on this trip that Paul’s apostolic authority became more prominent and the leadership seemed to shift from Barnabas to Paul in verse 13.

THOUGHT: Every move of God has the resistance of the devil.

PRAYER: Lord, keep me from the evil one.

LORD'S DAY, DECEMBER 12

ACTS 13:13-14

2 TIMOTHY 4:11

*"...for he is profitable to me
for the ministry."*

THE MAN WHO WENT BACK

Satan lost the battle over Elymas but then he attacked the mission from within with the departure of John Mark. We are not explicitly told the reasons why John Mark went back. Did he go back because they were getting into too much Gentile territory? Had the romance of mission work worn off as they now faced the treacherous Taurus Mountains? Did he miss his family? Was he afraid of the resistance or was he jealous that Paul was more prominent than his uncle now? The shift in leadership from Barnabas to Paul suggested by Luke's account may be significant as in the next sentence, we read of John Mark returning to Jerusalem.

John Mark did not appear to have had a good reason and Paul remembered this later. However, it must have been something serious for Paul to take such a stand on the issue. It is interesting that the next young man they ran into was Timothy and he was mature for the type of journey they were about to embark on. However, it is edifying to see that Mark's weakness was not terminal and he matured to become a fine worker for the New Testament church (2 Tim 4:11).

Paul "*and his company*" literally means "those around Paul," which is an idiomatic Hellenistic phrase indicating a change in leadership. This was no easy journey from Perga to Antioch as Antioch of Pisidia was 3,600 feet high on a plateau up on the Taurus Mountains, a hundred miles from Perga.

At Antioch of Pisidia, they went into the synagogue. The rulers supervised the service, maintaining order and electing participants. According to the custom of the synagogue, they, as strangers, were invited to speak.

THOUGHT: People may let me down, but God is always faithful.

PRAYER: Lord, keep me from falling away from Thy will.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 13

ACTS 13:14-42

PSALM 2:7

*“...to you is the word of
this salvation sent.”*

PAUL'S SYNAGOGUE SERMON

In the synagogue, when a man stands up it was a sign of his authority. This sermon is remarkably similar in style and content to that of Stephen's. Evidently, the power of that message had never left Saul. In this message we see the importance of history and prophecy. Like all great preachers, Paul began his message with God. MacArthur points out”

“Now, God is the first of the two main characters in the sermon. Paul is not a character in his own sermon. There are two, God and Jesus. God is the background character, but God really dominates this thing. For example, in verse 17, God chose, God exalted, God brought out. In verse 18, God bore. Verse 19, God destroyed and God divided. Verse 20, God gave. Verse 21, God gave. Verse 22, God removed, God raised, and God gave testimony. Verse 23, God raised. Verse 30, God raised. Verse 37, God raised. Verse 33, God fulfilled. Etc., etc. God is a main character.”

Paul then unfolded Christ as the culmination of history, the fulfilment of prophecy, and the Saviour of sinners. He dealt with the Old Testament Scripture by drawing from Numbers (v 18), Joshua (v 19), Judges (v 20) and 1 Samuel (v 21). In verse 26 he addressed two groups of people: (1) Jews – *“stock of Abraham”* and (2) Gentile proselytes – *“whosoever among you feareth God.”* We are going to find both of these groups in the book of Acts.

Paul then went on to exegete 5 Old Testament passages in the next section: Psalm 2:7 (v 33), Isaiah 55:3 (v 34), Psalm 16:10 (v 35), Habbakuk 1:5 (v 41) and Isaiah 49:6 (v 42). This man truly was saturated with the Scripture. Of all the apostles, Paul was the only true scholar yet he never made a show of it publicly. The other apostles had other qualities, such as the boldness of Peter and John's love and zeal for truth.

THOUGHT: Sermons can affect me for years.

PRAYER: Lord, saturate my life with Thy Word.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 14

ACTS 13:38-47

ISAIAH 49:6

*“Behold, ye despisers,
and wonder, and perish.”*

THE DEPRAVITY OF THE HUMAN HEART

Preaching is the key thing to convict sinners – not debating or reasoning. Paul reached the heart of the gospel with his emphasis on Christ as the One who alone brings: (1) forgiveness of sin and (2) justification. Paul concluded his message by bringing this challenge to these Jews. He shattered their pride in their righteousness through the Law of Moses.

The Jews’ rejection was the turning point in Paul’s ministry, and he and Barnabas boldly declared that these people were *“unworthy of everlasting life.”* One of the great ironies of our depraved nature is that religion can make us blind to the true way of salvation. Even knowing great swathes of the Bible can leave us without an understanding of the truth of the gospel. Rudolf Karl Bultmann (1884-1976) was a German Lutheran theologian who was for three decades a Neo-Orthodox professor of New Testament Studies at the University of Marburg. Despite knowing the New Testament Greek Text as well as any man of his generation, he died rejecting the Christ of the Scripture.

The gospel is like a sword cutting its way through society, awakening some and hardening others. Although the Jews despised the Gentiles, they were determined also that the gospel should not be preached to the Gentiles. The depravity of the human heart is deep. This word *“contradicting”* in verse 45 is in the imperfect tense, indicating a continuous action in past time.

The sad irony is “Messiah’s people pushing the Messiah away after hundreds of years of waiting for Him.” A man who rejects Jesus Christ judges himself unworthy of salvation. Another irony is that they were so proud of their Judaism, yet their own prophets stated that the Messiah is sent to be a light to the Gentile nations for salvation. Paul, as he always did, based his decision to turn from them on the Scripture (Isa 49:6).

THOUGHT: The depravity of the human heart is deep.

PRAYER: Lord, may Thy Word convict sinners today.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 15

ACTS 13:48-52

JOHN 6:44

“...they were glad, and glorified
the word of the Lord.”

SALVATION IS GOD SEEKING MEN

The same Word of God can condemn one man and comfort another. The word “*ordained*” in verse 48 properly means “to place in a certain rank or order.” Its meaning is derived from arranging or disposing a body of soldiers in regular military order. However, we need to note the order as it does not say “as many as believed were ordained to eternal life.” Salvation is never men trying to find God; it is God who is seeking men.

Luke highlighted this as we need to understand the doctrine of election if we are going to engage in the work of evangelism. We cannot go out believing that we can persuade a man with our natural gifts to believe in Christ. Spurgeon once said, “O preacher, if thou art about to stand up to see what thou canst do, it will be thy wisdom to sit down speedily; but if thou standest up to prove what thine almighty Lord and Master can do through thee, then infinite possibilities lie about thee!” Another writer also pertinently observed:

“If you go out thinking that salvation depends on man’s decision, you have no guarantee that anyone will decide to trust in Christ. In fact, you have the Bible’s guarantee that *none* will trust in Christ, because it plainly states that none seek after God of their own free will (Rom 3:11). None come to Jesus unless the Father draws them (John 6:44). Satan has blinded their minds (2 Cor 4:4) and holds them captive to do his will (2 Tim 2:26). And, the people you are trying to convince to trust in Christ are dead in their sins (Eph 2:1). So, lots of luck trying to evangelize them!”

This shaking the dust off the feet against the rejection of the gospel is not a new concept. In Matthew 10:14, Mark 6:11 and Luke 10:10-11, we read of this. The Jews historically did this when they left Gentile territory. Therefore, Paul and Barnabas regarded the Christ-rejecting Jews the same way they did the Gentiles.

THOUGHT: Salvation is God seeking man.

PRAYER: Lord, draw the lost souls I meet today to Thyself .

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 16

ACTS 14:1-4

JOHN 6:44

“Long time therefore abode they speaking boldly in the Lord.”

SATAN’S DIFFERENT TACTICS

In chapter 14, Paul and Barnabas ministered in three different cities (Iconium, Lystra and Derbe) with differing conditions in each city. Iconium was approximately a hundred miles southeast of Antioch. In the “Acts of Paul and Thecla,” an apocryphal second century writing, the setting of which is Iconium, we have the earliest historical description of Paul: “He was a man small in size with meeting eyebrows, a rather large nose, baldheaded, bow legs, strongly built, full of grace. At times, he looked like a man and at times, he had the face of an angel.”

Paul and Barnabas did not give up because of the opposition at Antioch. Paul began again with the Jews at Iconium as instructed by the Lord. This doubtless was wise because if he had begun with the Gentiles first the Jews would likely have refused to hear him. This seemed a great beginning like Antioch. No doubt they were waiting for the opposition as before.

Here again he faced opposition from the unbelieving Jews (see Acts 4:2; 5:17; 6:9; 8:1 and 12:1). This phrase “*unbelieving Jews*” is a Greek phrase that literally says “the disobeying Jews,” as an unbeliever is one who is disobedient to God and His Word. This was no bland, meaningless gospel but a gospel that spoke to the heart.

Satan tried a different tactic from Antioch. Here, it was subtle, poisonous propaganda that was spread against them. The irony is that these religious Jews, who normally despised and separated from the pagan Gentiles, would join together with them in order to oppose the gospel.

The Lord providentially held back the division between the two groups for the gospel to take root. The apostles knew the anger was about to explode on them, but they continued to preach boldly.

THOUGHT: Satan often unites sworn enemies to oppose the gospel.

PRAYER: Lord, give me courage to witness.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 17

ACTS 14:5-13

LUKE 12:51-53

"They were ware of it, and fled."

TACTICAL PRUDENCE

We are living in a day when religious people are very opposed to the gospel. Unbelievers have always been engaged in counter-evangelism. In Luke 12:51-53, Jesus made a profound and seemingly shocking statement. No neutrality is possible when the gospel is preached in the power of the Holy Spirit. Many of our relatives do not see God's purpose in life the way we do. Jesus came to bring a crisis to every home. Holiness divides as does the New Birth.

Soon the dam broke and the tide of opposition was unrestrained. Like Cain from the beginning, murder was in the hearts of the opposition to God's servants. The church sent Paul and Barnabas away to Lystra for their own safety. This was not cowardice but tactical prudence, as in Matthew 10:23 Jesus gave these explicit orders. There is a difference between boldness and stupidity.

They were not put off preaching the gospel. No doubt they had no idea how God would reach Lystra with the gospel, but they went in faith and courage. When Paul met a cripple, he had absolute belief in God's power. Through revelation, Paul perceived that he had the faith to be healed.

There was a subtle change of tactics by the devil to appeal to the ego of the apostles, especially after the persecution they faced previously. They could have been flattered by the respect of the people after the previous raw hatred. One of the great temptations in experiencing the power of God in our ministry is to believe that it is because of us. We must always do God's work from the position of humility.

Jupiter is the Latin form of the Greek god Zeus and Mercurius is Hermes. This is the first confrontation recorded between Paul and raw paganism. It certainly would not be the last.

THOUGHT: There is a difference between boldness and stupidity.

PRAYER: Lord, give me wisdom as to when and how to witness.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 18

ACTS 14:14-18

ROMANS 1:19-20

*“Nevertheless He left not Himself
without witness.”*

THE OPEN TEXTBOOK OF CREATION

Paul quickly emphasized that they were simply human. Peter had to demonstrate the same to Cornelius when he fell down and worshipped Peter. In the Greek/Roman world, certain men were often regarded as gods, although they recognized that these men died but their gods did not. We see this in the declaration by many emperors that they are deities.

Paul’s speech began with an attack on idolatry. He initially appealed to natural revelation as opposed to supernatural revelation. Some believe that pagans cannot be held responsible if they do not have the Scripture, but verses 15 to 17 here indicate they are. The Greeks believed that the heaven, earth and sea were deities, but Paul emphasized that behind the unified creation, there is one living God. In Acts 17 and Romans 1 (although using more detailed argumentation), Paul repeated the same by focusing this time on the sustaining power of the Creator. The testimony of creation is sufficient to condemn people for their rebellion against God, but it is not sufficient to save them.

Paul then anticipated an objection from his audience of the historicity of their paganism. It seemed here Paul was referring to God abandoning all nations to live without special revelation. As John Gill comments:

“For many hundred years past; even ever since God chose and separated the people of Israel from the rest of the nations, to be a peculiar people to himself: from that time he suffered all nations to walk in their own ways; of ignorance, superstition, and idolatry.....but the apostle suggests, that the case was now altered, and God had sent them and other ministers of his, among all nations of the world, to protest against their superstition and idolatry; and to reclaim them from their evil ways, and to direct them to the true and living God, and his worship, and to preach salvation by his Son Jesus Christ.”

THOUGHT: The testimony of creation is sufficient to condemn.

PRAYER: Lord, thank You for the open textbook of creation.

LORD'S DAY, DECEMBER 19

ACTS 14:19-21

GALATIANS 6:17

"...supposing he had been dead."

DOWN BUT NOT OUT

Some of the opposition to Paul had come as far as 118 miles in their zeal to hinder the gospel. Paul, of all people, would have understood this passion. It is interesting that they targeted Paul and not Barnabas. Probably the devil could see that this man would do the greatest damage to his kingdom. This was the counter-attack of the devil reverting to his ancient tactic of violence (Gal 6:17). The capriciousness of this pagan crowd is now seen – when the man was healed they were ready to deify Paul and Barnabas, but after the instigation of some Jews from Antioch, the same crowd stoned Paul as an imposter.

What sadness and sorrow would have been in the hearts of Barnabas and the disciples. Some commentators, such as Calvin, have maintained that Paul was miraculously raised up from the dead, but others pointed out that there was no such claim and the probability was that he was merely stunned by a blow.

Paul went right back into Antioch. No wonder he did so much damage to the devil's kingdom with persistence and courage like this. That kind of courage comes only from trusting in the sovereign and living God. A hardened American sea captain looked over at the fresh-faced young Scottish Presbyterian missionary, Robert Morrison, who had boarded his ship at New York for China in 1807. "Do you really think you will make any impact on the heathen millions in China?" the captain asked. "No, Sir," Morrison replied confidently, "but I expect God will."

Morrison had to endure long separations from his family and buried two wives on the missions field. By the standards of the world, Morrison had a relatively fruitless ministry, as he only baptized ten converts in his entire ministry in China. Morrison's declaration was not over-confidence but simply faith in a great God. Less than two hundred years later, history was to prove just how right he was.

THOUGHT: God cannot be stopped in His Redemptive Plan.

PRAYER: Lord, Thou alone art great.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 20

ACTS 14:22-28

TITUS 1:5-7

“...they commended them to the Lord,
on whom they believed.”

ORGANISING THE CHURCH

The initial journey out to Derbe was more evangelistic in nature; the journey back through the same cities was more pastoral in focus. It seems evident from Acts 16 that Timothy was one of Paul’s converts here and was one of those whom Paul strengthened or confirmed. The word “*confirming*” means to “make solid, to fix, to glue down.” So Paul made these young converts – surrounded by the hazards of persecution and paganism – solid by the Word of God.

As he visited these churches, we see three things Paul did to strengthen the order of these fledgling churches:

(1) ordained – The verb means to stretch forth a hand and appoint. Probably Paul and Barnabas moderated by presiding in the assembly when the choice was made.

(2) prayed with fasting – Having commended the church to elders, they commend the whole church to God.

(3) commended – This means to put alongside as trusted.

When they returned to Antioch, it was appropriate that they should give a full account of their work to the church that sent them out. None of us are unaccountable; even the Apostle Paul. They made sure that God got the glory for their journey and this must have been an exciting meeting as they heard the stories and saw the scars. No doubt the church in Antioch had been praying much during the extended period that these men had been gone.

Although they recounted how God had “*opened the door of faith*” for the Gentiles, the devil was already busy trying to close it. At the beginning of the next chapter, we see the Judaizers attempting to close it again.

THOUGHT: God is a God of order.

PRAYER: Lord, may our churches be biblically ordered.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 21

ACTS 15:1-2

GALATIANS 2:11-14

“...ye cannot be saved.”

THE FIRST HERESY ATTACKS THE CHURCH

The devil tried another subtle approach to disrupt the church. It seemed they were in a period of relative peace after violent persecutions had fully consumed the attention of the saints. This is the first doctrinal attack on the church and it is on the heart of the gospel. This incident may have been the same as the one described in Galatians 2:11-14.

This heresy was a bold statement by these Judaizers – it was true legalism. Legalism is the system of belief that a person is saved by another means other than grace. Grace means “undeserved favour.” If you deserve it in any way, it is not grace (Rom 4:4-5; 11:6). These ministers of Satan were not only arguing for circumcision of proselytes, but they made it necessary for salvation. These men could have visited every one of the cities that Paul and Barnabas had evangelised on their missionary tour.

This was a very plausible and attractive heresy as it looked as though it had a great deal of scriptural support (Exod 12:43-49); that if men wished to benefit in the blessings which God promised through the Messiah, they must identify themselves with Israel, with her covenants, and with her law. They also appeared to be supported by the church in Jerusalem and could point to the fact that Jesus obeyed the Law and was circumcised according to the Law of Moses.

Paul always defended the gospel. It is legitimate to contend for the truth of the gospel. These men met the most formidable and theologically-equipped opponent. An appeal to Jerusalem is appropriate as the Judean visitors came from the Jerusalem church, and naturally it is the next highest court of appeal as the apostles led this church. If the church at Jerusalem repudiated this doctrine, then these Judaizers will be effectively silenced.

THOUGHT: It is legitimate to contend for the truth of the gospel.
PRAYER: Lord, show me when to contend for the faith.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 22

ACTS 15:2-6

GALATIANS 2:2

“...who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus.”

DEFINING THE GOSPEL

In Acts 15:2, the implication is that the church at Antioch sent them up to Jerusalem, but in Galatians 2:2 we discover that the Holy Spirit revealed to Paul to go up. Paul was not uncertain about this issue, but went up by divine leading. Indeed, he was prepared to confront all the other apostles if they should differ with him on this issue.

The answers to these questions are particularly pertinent in defending the true gospel of salvation in the movement toward unity between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics. It was Horatius Bonar who remarked, “Faith is not work, nor merit, nor effort; but the cessation from all these, and the acceptance in place of them of what another has done—done completely, and forever.”

This Council was faced with the responsibility of defining the gospel that would be preached. Both Barnabas and Paul did not believe unity was paramount over doctrine. J. C. Ryle, a 19th century Anglican bishop, wrote:

“Controversy and religious strife, no doubt, are odious things; but there are times when they are a positive necessity. Unity and peace are very delightful; but they are bought too dear if they are bought at the expense of truth.... It is a pity, no doubt, that there should be so much controversy; but it is also a pity that human nature should be so bad as it is, and that the devil should be loose in the world. It was a pity that Arius taught error about Christ’s person: but it would have been a greater pity if Athanasius had not opposed him. It was a pity that Tetzels went about preaching up the Pope’s indulgences: it would have been a far greater pity if Luther had not withstood him. Controversy, in fact, is one of the conditions under which truth in every age has to be defended and maintained, and it is nonsense to ignore it.”

THOUGHT: Unity is not paramount over doctrine.

PRAYER: Lord, give me grace and courage to stand for the faith.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 23

ACTS 15:7-19

ACTS 11:1-2

*“And to this agree the words
of the prophets.”*

EXPERIENCE TESTED BY SCRIPTURE

The Jerusalem church may have sidestepped the issue, but now they were forced to take a stand. The Holy Spirit moved Peter to speak, as Paul would probably have been shouted down. Peter had himself stood “on trial” before many of these same Jewish saints (Acts 11:2). He emphasized the fact that God was in all of this and gave a good presentation. His argument rested on the testimony which God bore in the evangelisation of the Gentiles at the home of Cornelius, as at Pentecost, before any possible act of circumcision.

Peter’s implication here is that they think God has made a mistake. There is extraordinary humility in his observation that all the Old Testament saints failed at being a Jew. They all needed grace. Interestingly, Peter seemed to put the Jews as subservient to the Gentiles.

When the apostle to the circumcision made such a statement, it silenced the Judaizers. Paul and Barnabas could have given a report to vindicate themselves, or Paul could have launched into a defence of the doctrine of justification by faith alone (as he did in the Book of Romans), but they chose to focus on God’s leadings and workings.

This evidences that Peter did not have infallible authority in the church, for otherwise his opinion would not have been debated. James might have been the moderator. Doubtless, when James stood up to speak, the Judaizers were hoping that he would champion their cause. He affirmed Peter’s message, not because of loyalty, but by basing his opinion on Amos 9:11-12. Theology can be seen in our experience, but it ought not to be viewed as authoritative (even from apostles) until it has been demonstrated by biblical revelation. James tested Peter’s theology with Scripture.

THOUGHT: All my experiences should be tested with Scripture.

PRAYER: Lord, may I test all my experiences with Thy Word.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 24

ACTS 15:20-35

1 CORINTHIANS 8:4-13

“Men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

TRUTH OR UNITY?

The requirements they eventually edicted were not essential requirements for salvation, but rather requirements for fellowship between Jewish and Gentile saints. James essentially gave practical suggestions designed to lay this controversy to rest. Aside from fornication, probably the other three edicts were to prevent offending Jewish sensibilities when they were present in their churches. However, it is impossible to live so as not to offend anyone and, doubtless, many Jewish believers still found it difficult to accept any Gentiles who did not live as Jews.

This meeting ended well and was handled honourably. They did everything they could to make the Gentiles comfortable. They also rebuked the Judaizers as *“subverting your souls.”* As Bob Deffinbaugh stated:

“There is great wisdom evident in the way the Jerusalem church dealt with this issue. They gave ample opportunity for discussion and debate. They made their decision on the basis of human and divine testimony, which was in accordance with the teachings of the Old Testament. And now, having reached their definition of the gospel, they decide on the implementation of their decision.”

They made it clear that God was behind their decision and therefore they were in agreement. The Jerusalem Council did not decide that love and unity were more important than truth. The overall tone was warm and encouraging toward the Gentile believers, and supportive of Paul and Barnabas, whom they described as *“our beloved.”*

Now with the gospel clearly defined and the authority of Paul and Barnabas attested, the heresy was checked and the program of evangelising the Gentiles could go forward, with the support of the Jerusalem church.

THOUGHT: If we compromise the gospel, we have no Christianity.

PRAYER: Lord, give me wisdom in handling doctrinal disputes.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 25

ACTS 15:36-41

ACTS 13:13

“And the contention was so sharp between them.”

A SAD PARTING

It is a good thing to go to the missions field and check up on the work done previously. This should have been a glorious and heartwarming trip for both men, but it ended in such tragic division. This is the second major disagreement in this chapter, and the more puzzling one after the glorious harmony at the end of the Jerusalem visit. We are told that Barnabas was “*determined*” and his mind was set and could not be changed.

The contention was so great that it seemed that these men would never work together again. The word for “*departed asunder*” is only used one other time in the New Testament in Revelation 6:14 for an apocalyptic disaster. We all succumb so easily to the old saying, “Temper gets you into trouble. Pride keeps you there.”

Barnabas took Mark, and went to Cyprus. Paul took Silas, and went in the opposite direction. They parted ways, which was the best thing to do as Paul was going to face real dangers. Silas was the right man to stand up to these. Barnabas was a great encourager and was no doubt very necessary for Paul as a new believer, but probably not so much needed now. John Mark probably needed Barnabas’ gift of encouragement more than Paul did.

Was Paul convinced that young people cannot be used? We will see that this was not true in the next chapter with Timothy. In one sense, that it is comforting to know that even the godliest of men had relationship problems. However, we should note that Paul did not cut Mark off permanently, and God providentially used the circumstances, as we now have two great missionary teams instead of one.

Paul and Silas left “*recommended*” by the saints there. It is important that our missions trips be backed by local churches.

THOUGHT: Even the godliest of men have relationship problems.

PRAYER: Lord, give me grace to control my emotions.

LORD'S DAY, DECEMBER 26

ACTS 16:1-3

1 TIMOTHY 1:2

"...well reported of by the brethren."

GOD'S WAY IS PERFECT

God directed Paul and Silas providentially, not to Cyprus as they had gone before, but another way where He had prepared another vital member of the team. It is interesting that the next young man they run into was Timothy and he was providentially ideal for the type of journey they were about to embark on.

Timotheus means "honour to God." He was the most prominent of Paul's travel companions and was probably no more than 21 years old at this time. He was likely to have been converted on Paul's first missionary journey. Paul described him as "*my own son in the faith*" (1 Tim 1:2). Timothy's mother was a Jewess, and this would have been regarded as sufficient to have him recognized as a Jew by the Jews as they believed it was passed through the mother in inter-racial marriages.

Timothy had a good report of the brethren, which is always an important matter if one is concerned about doing the work of the Lord. His upbringing would be a great advantage to him in his ministry. In the providence of God, our backgrounds can become a great asset to us after we are saved. Timothy grew up in a Gentile world and would be intimately acquainted and unprejudiced against bringing the gospel to the Gentiles.

It was Paul's desire to bring this young man along with them proving that Paul had not given up on youths. This was a tremendous honour for this young man. As Timothy's mother was Jewish, Paul had him circumcised so he would be regarded as Jewish. However, Paul fought for the right of Titus not to be circumcised as he was pure Gentile (Gal 2:3). Timothy was circumcised for the benefit of the gospel to allow him the liberty to be more effective in synagogues. It was not a condition of service or church membership.

THOUGHT: God always works everything out for good.

PRAYER: Lord, Thy way is always perfect.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 27

ACTS 16:4-8

ACTS 15:36

*“And so were the churches
established in the faith.”*

GOD’S WAYS ARE NOT OUR WAYS

The issue was not just a matter of one local church at Antioch asking for advice but these were decrees binding upon all as in the Presbyterian model. As Barnes points out, the word “decrees” (*ta dogmata*) has a strong connotation:

“The decrees in regard to the four things specified in Acts 15:20, Acts 15:29. The word translated “decrees” occurs in Luke 2:1, “A decree from Caesar Augustus”; in Acts 17:7 “The decrees of Caesar”; in Eph 2:15; and in Col 2:14. It properly means a law or edict of a king or legislature. In this instance it was the decision of the council in a case submitted to it, and implied an obligation on the Christians to submit to that decision, since they had submitted the matter to them. The same principles, also, would be applicable everywhere, and the decision, therefore, at Jerusalem became conclusive.”

The providential blessing on the churches reinforces the wisdom of the Jerusalem Council decision. We see the Acts pattern again in verse 5 – orderly, balanced churches built up in the faith will increase in number.

Paul now faced a new test unlike anything before. In Acts 15:36, he wanted to visit all the previous cities and, after accomplishing this, to launch out into new territories. But in two specific instances, Paul and team were forbidden by God. This must have caused great sanctified frustration of heart for them. It is very disconcerting when you have the desire to do something for God and providence puts a brake on it. The apostles had been told to evangelise all the world, but they still had to depend on God’s leading. So what did Paul do? Give up like so many? No, he persisted and moved on to the next place, Troas, as directed by God.

THOUGHT: God’s ways are not our ways.

PRAYER: Lord, give me grace to never forget that Thou art my Great Shepherd.

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 28

ACTS 16:9-13

PHILIPPIANS 1:1-8

“...assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us.”

PAUL’S FIRST CONVERT IN EUROPE

Luke, in verse 10, switched to first person plural, indicating that he joined them personally from this moment. It may have been that Luke was the man in the previous vision. To have an educated Gentile companion for this journey was doubtless a great blessing for Paul.

The expression “*assuredly gathering*” is one of the twelve synonyms in Greek for “teach.” How does God teach us? Sometimes through preaching, lectures, or even circumstances. This expression is indicative that when they looked back, they understood by “*gathering*” all the facts that God’s hand was in all of this. We should not be upset with God when He closes doors. What we should do is wait! Our times are in His hands. However, when He spoke, there was no wasted time and His disciples obeyed immediately. This was the first major step of the gospel into Europe.

Philippi was formerly called Dathos, but was renamed after Philip of Macedonia, the father of Alexander the Great, who repaired and adorned it. They probably waited for the Sabbath, hoping to begin their witnessing to the Jews. As there might have been no synagogue, this river side location could have been the place of prayer for devout Jews. After the splendor of the vision, this did not appear to be an auspicious beginning for an important team of Paul, Silas, Luke and Timothy. However, we should never underestimate what God could do through a few ladies. Paul’s first convert in Europe and the foundation of this endeavour would be a businesswoman. Women have always played a very important part in God’s work.

THOUGHT: I should not be upset when God closes doors.

PRAYER: Lord, give me patience to wait on Thy time.

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 29

ACTS 16:14-18

JONAH 2:9

*“These men are the servants
of the most high God.”*

SATAN COMING AS AN ANGEL OF LIGHT

Salvation is always of the Lord, and Lydia could not have been saved unless God intervened first. Salvation is not dependent on us and that is why we do not need Contemporary Christian Music or gimmicks to evangelise people. Paul never used anything but the clear preaching of God’s Word. Lydia did not get upset by the message as her heart was already prepared by God to receive it.

Lydia manifested the fruit of her salvation by forcefully constraining them to abide with her. The inns of that time were unhygienic, expensive and had a reputation for immorality.

The devil had already seen what the power of the Word of God had accomplished in other cities and here he adopted a new tactic. He quickly sought to subvert the preaching by appearing to be in line with it so he could infiltrate the evangelism. God had prepared the heart of Lydia for the advancement of the gospel and Satan had prepared his woman to undermine it in a counter-reformation.

The demon-possessed woman proclaimed a true statement. We should note that Satan can come as an angel of light. Luther once said, “When you look for the devil don’t forget to look in the pulpit.” Possibly, the devil was hoping this woman could take over the church when the apostolic team left Philippi.

False teachers cannot infiltrate by openly stating that they are false, but by appearing truthful at the beginning. This could cause those interested in Christianity to be deluded by erroneous doctrine. Or it could lead seekers to have a perverted view of Christianity and then reject it when they witness the scandals of the false teachers. God does not want any help from the devil, as anyone drawn to Christianity on that basis will always come with a wrong motive.

THOUGHT: Salvation is not dependent on me.

PRAYER: Lord, may I never use unbiblical methods to evangelise.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 30

ACTS 16:19-25

PHILIPPIANS 1:12

“...at midnight Paul and Silas prayed,
and sang praises unto God.”

JOY INDEPENDENT OF CIRCUMSTANCES

Just like the healing of the man in Lystra, Satan turned to violence when his tactics were exposed. Money is a powerful motivation for people to attack you. However, God will permit this in order to open a door for a church to be firmly planted in this city.

Paul and Silas were placed in the “*inner prison*” where there was no light or fresh air. Their feet were fastened to make their life more uncomfortable. We have two views of men in jail in this book of Acts. In Acts 12, Peter was jailed and was to die the next day. He was sleeping peacefully with the assurance that God was in control. Paul and Silas, by contrast, were making petitions and praising God.

Both these examples are worthy and the Holy Spirit gives us both to learn from. Peter had people praying for him but we do not read of anyone praying for Paul and Silas. The other prisoners “*heard*” (continuous imperfect tense) and this indicated they did not get much sleep. If you are in jail, you might as well praise and pray as they cannot throw you into jail for it since you are already there!

Doubtless their backs were raw and bloody, but they exhibited no self-pity or resentment. Probably, this discomfort was why they could not sleep. Only a man knowing that God is sovereign and that he was in the perfect will of God could sing praises in such circumstances (Phil 1:12; 2:17). They were facing agonizing uncertainty and had no knowledge that an earthquake deliverance was coming.

Paul and Silas knew that the devil had panicked and had resorted to violence which confirmed to them a true work of God in the lives of the converts. No doubt, the devil was delighted to put them in such trying circumstances, but God would not be hindered by some prison walls. Paul never tells believers to simply rejoice in their circumstances but to rejoice in the Lord, and the Lord never changes.

THOUGHT: The Lord never changes.

PRAYER: Lord, help me to rejoice in all circumstances.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 31

ACTS 16:26-40

PHILIPPIANS 3:14

*“Sirs, what must
I do to be saved?”*

THE GREAT QUESTION FOR MAN

The foundations were shaken, doors opened, fetters loosed – this was an earthquake! No demon, earthly power or obstacle on earth can hinder God’s work. God is going to use this incident to reach the hardened jailor. Perhaps the Lord also used the fear of the earthquake to keep the prisoners from escaping.

God was working in this jailor’s heart as he could discern what question he urgently needed the answer for. In the natural, we may have expected him to have been primarily concerned with how the earthquake occurred.

God built a church in Philippi on families. Now we have some men to rule the church. Like Lydia, this man now extended Christian hospitality to his former prisoners. The gospel affects all aspects of our life. A short time earlier, he was seriously contemplating suicide, now he was rejoicing. Before leaving, Paul declared his Roman citizenship and strengthened the fledging church. This declaration was not for himself but likely to mean to protect the jailor and Lydia after he had left so that they would not be persecuted.

Despite their recent harrowing trials and time in jail at Philippi, Paul and Silas pressed onward to the next assignment. The lot of God’s true people is a varied one and their case is marked by frequent change. How happy and peaceful we would be in our circumstances if like Paul and Silas, we believe that God truly cares for us and humbly commit all the cares of this life to Him.

David Livingstone once said, “I am prepared to go anywhere provided it be forward.” These two men had the courage of conviction and calling. Many today may be sound in doctrine but are sound asleep. May God grant us the same spirit of Paul and Silas to go forward.

THOUGHT: The Lord never changes.

PRAYER: Lord, grant me the courage of conviction and calling.