

Acts: Part Two

Introduction to The Jerusalem Council: Acts 15:1-5

“1) Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” 2) And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue. 3) Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. 4) When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them. 5) But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.””

The stage was now set for the first big challenge of what constitutes the Gospel. Is salvation based on faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross and His resurrection or does it also require keeping the Law? Does grace save us or do we add self-works to purchase our salvation?

At first glance, this might appear to be a trivial issue, but it changes the whole playing field of what constitutes salvation. If all sinned and fell short of saving themselves by keeping the Law before Jesus died for our sins, how could adding the Law to the atonement of Christ improve the hope of salvation? Didn't Jesus fulfill the Law and pay its penalty on our behalf?

This stiff debate set the stage for what is called “The Jerusalem Council.” Chapter 15 of the book of Acts confirmed the doctrine of “Justification by faith.” Paul wrote the books of Romans

and Galatians to defend this doctrine. The book of Philippians explains how much Paul personally suffered to defend the gospel.

This discussion addresses the question of what brings salvation. Are you saved by your religious good works or are you saved by faith in Jesus Christ? Romans 8:1-4 puts the hammer on the head of this nail. Paul argues that the Holy Spirit radically changes those who are born-again so they can automatically keep the moral standards of the Law.

Salvation through the Law is based on the flesh. It always falls short. Salvation through faith in Christ seals the believer with the Holy Spirit. He imparts the grace to change people from the inside out. It is based on the Spirit.

Please take time to wrestle with Acts chapter 15 and the books of Romans and Galatians. When Justification by Faith is understood and embraced it has the power to set you free “in Christ.” Grace is not a ticket to sin, rather it is the key to victorious living! Paul wasn’t about to concede and inch on this issue.

This doctrine opens the door to understand the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of the born-again believer. He was not given nor present under the Old Testament system of the Law. Self-righteousness holds the Holy Spirit at arms length. If righteousness is attainable through the Law, Christ died needlessly.

As a young believer, I skipped over Acts 15. It seemed irrelevant. As a growing believer, I started wrestling with Acts 15. It became foundational to understanding the full meaning of the gospel. As a mature believer, I celebrate Acts 15. It has opened the door to the mystery of the being “in Christ” and walking in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 15 defines the doctrine Paul ultimately gave his life to defend. Buckle your seat belt as we try to unpack this chapter. It might change your life.

Evidence that Demand a Verdict: Acts 15:6-12

“6) The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. 7) After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. 8) And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; 9) and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. 10) Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? 11) But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.” 12) All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.”

The discussion at the Jerusalem council was long and hearty. They fully vetted the issue of what constitutes salvation and the true Gospel Message. Let's impact some insights from this text.

First, a significant part of the discussion came through Peter as he rehearsed the events of Acts 10:1-48 and the conversion of Cornelius and his Gentile gathering. While he was preaching the gospel, the Holy Spirit fell upon them. (See Acts 10:34-48) Both his vision (Acts 10:9-16) and the giving of the Holy Spirit settled in his thinking the question of justification by faith. The climax of his message to Cornelius was Acts 10:43; "Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins."

The full realization of what God did among Cornelius and his gathering was explained in Acts 11 as Peter returned to Jerusalem and was met by legalistic critics. I am confident that this was rehearsed in Peter's defense at the Jerusalem Council as well. Acts 11:12-18 also zeroes in on the sign of the giving of the Holy Spirit. In fact, in these verses Peter quoted the promise of the Holy Spirit as given by both the Father and Jesus Himself. (Review Acts 1:4-5)

Second, when the arguments given by Peter in Acts 15:8-11 are studied carefully, three things stand out: 1) the giving of the Holy Spirit, 2) cleansing the heart by faith, and 3) being saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus. This is amazing. Peter very clearly identifies three things that should be present in the testimony of any person who claims to be born-again.

I turn these around when I hear a testimony. I want to hear the person's understanding of the gospel of grace, expression of personal faith in Jesus Christ to save them, and evidence of the Holy Spirit working in their life. It's that simple! Apart from these three things, there is no basis of believing the person is a genuine believer.

Third, when Peter concluded his discourse, Barnabas and Paul continued to relate what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. This is profound. Though not stated in the text, the acid test became; "Tell me what God is doing through your life and ministry!" While Barnabas and Saul were filled with stories, the zealous Law critics were silent. They had no stories. Nothing was happening. God was silent. Can you see the problem? They wanted to force on others something that wasn't working for them. (See Acts 15:10)

Why is this important? It ushers us into Hebrews 2:4. I call this "The Divine Apologetic!" God always shows up to confirm His true message and messengers with signs and wonders. Let's keep it simple; that means there should be ample stories of the Holy Spirit at work in your life and through your ministry. Don't resort to the empty argument that "God doesn't do miracles today." Be honest. If nothing is happening, the problem is with you, and not with God!

Finally, as James and the others listened to the arguments and stories (or lack thereof) presented by both sides at the Jerusalem Council, the verdict became clear. Peter, Barnabas, and Paul were preaching the true Gospel. Salvation is by grace through faith and is validated by the fruit of the Spirit in a person's life.

Don't follow people who come across smart in theology but are void of Spirit. At the same time don't mistake emotional hype for the work of the Holy Spirit. Dig deep and define the true gospel and expect God to work as you live it and share it with others.

The Yoke of Slavery: Acts 15:10-11

"10) Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? 11) But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."

Like the Pharisees who taught that circumcision and keeping the Law had to be added to salvation, so there are many legalistic Christians today teaching the same thing. They steal the joy of salvation by reducing the Christian life to rules and rituals.

Peter asked the right question: "Why put God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?" The Law exposes sin and becomes the basis of death. It does not produce righteousness nor does it impart life.

Paul argued this point in Galatians 3:10-14. You cannot pick and choose which parts of the Law you want to keep. If you seek to be justified by the Law you put yourself under a curse, because you have to keep the whole thing. But Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit by faith.

He goes on to argue in Galatians 4:4-7 that faith and not the Law is the avenue of adoption as sons. Then he drives the nail home; "6) And because we are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts crying "Abba Father." Salvation through faith in Jesus Christ frees us from slavery and makes us sons. It opens the door for the walk in the Spirit.

So Peter's question in Acts 15:10 is profound. It could be summarized as; "Why give up Sonship to put the yoke of slavery back on?" Why give up salvation by faith and go back to self-righteousness through works. That system failed throughout the Old Testament. It failed the Jews living in the days of the early church. It certainly failed the Pharisees. It was destined to fail the Gentiles as well. It amounted to a yoke of slavery!

The Holy Spirit is given through faith in Jesus Christ and not through keeping the Law. Paul argued that point in Galatians 3:2-5. The Holy Spirit changes people from the inside. The Law puts a yoke of slavery on people from the outside.

Here is the root problem; the Law is dependent on the flesh to make and keep people righteous. But the flesh is also bent toward sin and depravity. Any system of religion based on the works of the flesh will fail. At best it will turn out pious religious hypocrites. They might look good outwardly, but sin will rule inwardly.

Neither Peter, Barnabas, nor Paul were giving an inch toward legalism. It might sound good, but it would deal a death-blow to justification by faith. The poison was in the original proposition statement in Acts 15:1; "... unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." These Pharisees were using the Law to deny the salvation of the Gentiles who believed in Jesus Christ and the message of the Gospel. They needed more than faith in Jesus to be saved! They needed to keep the Law!

In other words, the work of Jesus Christ on the cross was not sufficient to save humanity. John 3:16-17 needed to be edited and changed. They concluded that even Jesus got it wrong!

Legalism always nullifies the sufficiency of the atonement of Jesus Christ as the sole basis of salvation. It makes self and not Jesus or the Gospel the hope for salvation. It sets Sonship aside and puts the yoke of slavery back on.

Instead of enjoying fellowship with God through faith in Jesus Christ, the Christian life becomes a daily pursuit of trying to earn God's acceptance and approval. The Christian life becomes a burden rather than a blessing.

The Example of James: Acts 15:13-18

"13) After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, 'Brethren, listen to me. 14) Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name. 15) With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written, 16) 'After these things I will return, And I will rebuild the tabernacle of David which has fallen, And I will rebuild its ruins, And I will restore it, 17) So that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, And all the Gentiles who are called by My name,' 18) Says the Lord, who makes these things known from long ago."

So who is the "James" in this context? It cannot be the Apostle James because he was martyred in Acts 12:2. So who is this mystery guy? According to Galatians 1:18-19, this was "James, the Lord's brother." He not only became a believer, he was also credited as becoming a leader in the early church and most likely wrote the book of James. (See Matthew 13:55, Galatians 2:9, 12)

James became a great example of diligence in discerning the will of God. He did two things. First, he listened carefully to the whole case. He gathered all the information and evidence available.

Second, he studied the word of God to gain perspective. He found ample testimony that God had a plan for the salvation of the Gentiles. Up to this point, nothing significant had happened among them. God was suddenly fulfilling His promise to reach the world with the gospel.

I see tremendous wisdom in this text. Learn to listen to what God is doing and measure it by Scripture. If the first does not line up with the second, it is a false movement. Be diligent to study

the Bible and not merely accept experience or opinion polls. This is especially true as we approach the end times and the apostate church begins to emerge.

The Big Four: Acts 15:19-21

“Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”

When the discussion was complete, James concluded there were four essentials from the Law the Gentile believers were to honor. They related to abstaining from idolatry, sexual immorality, blood, and things strangled.

The first two are self explanatory. But what about blood and things strangled? These two are related. Way back in Genesis 9:3-7, God told Noah not to eat meat with blood in it nor to shed human blood. Why? Because life is in the blood for both man and beast. This was an injunction about respect and reverence for life.

A relationship with Jesus Christ translates into a call for the worship of the One and only true God. It is accompanied by a call to holiness and moral purity. It produces a reverence for life in general that results in respect and dignity for all people created in the image of God.

Violence and barbaric practices are abhorrent to genuine Christians. They become channels of love and not instruments of violence. They dignify rather than exploit people nor do they treat animals with cruelty.

The historical irony is that these inner values imparted by the Holy Spirit is what motivated the early Gentile Christians to minister to widows, orphans the poor and eventually eradicate human exploitation and slavery in the Roman Empire. (See Galatians 2:10) The early Gentile Christians soon adopted higher spiritual, moral, and dignity for life principles than their Jewish counterparts.

They got it right! The Holy Spirit and not the Law produces genuine holiness in people. This is why the born-again and Jesus-honoring segment of any society are the greatest advocates for God, life, marriage, family, and justice. The inner Holy Spirit automatically produces these motivations in people.

An Early New Testament Document: Acts 15:22-36

“22) Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas—Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren,

30) So when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. 31) When they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. 32) Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message. 33) After they had spent time there, they were sent away from the brethren in peace to those who had sent them out. 34) [But it seemed good to Silas to remain there.] 35) But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching with many others also, the word of the Lord.”

Acts 15:23-29 might not seem exciting to you and me. But this small letter carried to Antioch by the men mentioned above was among the first New Testament documents. It affirmed the doctrine of justification by faith that freed the Gentile believers from the yoke of the Law to walk and live in the Spirit by grace.

It was so important, the Jerusalem council appointed Judas called Barsabbas and Silas to accompany Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch. When they arrived, they gathered the church together and read the letter out loud. Verse 31 says; “And when they read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement.” It announced good news!

Judas and Silas were also prophets. The idea of prophets most likely included the concept of being anointed preachers. They encouraged and strengthened the brethren with long messages. The church at Antioch became the scholarly and anointed church for the New Testament believers. It was equivalent to gathering the top ten Bible scholars of our day for a prolonged Bible conference.

Soon, both Jerusalem and Antioch became key sending churches for world missions. Nearly all of the apostles chosen by Jesus during His ministry were sent out from the church at Jerusalem around the world. Thomas went as far East as India. The church at Antioch sent out Paul, Barnabas, Mark, and Silas. It is likely that others were sent out as well.

It is crucial to note that the Great Commission was paramount for these early churches. I believe they reached, disciplined, and sent out hundreds of workers. Making disciples to take up the baton of world missions was their mission statement and focus.

Some wonder why God did so many signs and wonders in the early church? It appears from Hebrews 2:1-4 that God steps up in powerful ways to confirm the gospel message as it is preached and spreads.

Churches given to the Great Commission soon surf on the wake of the supernatural. They are alive, filled with awe at the presence of God, and are vibrant. They constantly see God move and work in extraordinary ways. By contrast, passive and introverted churches become deserts. They dry up and die. It happens all the time.

The Story Behind the Story: Acts 15:36-41

“36) After some days Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.” 37) Barnabas wanted to take John, called Mark, along with them also. 38) But Paul kept insisting that they should not take him along who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. 39) And there occurred such a sharp disagreement that they separated from one another, and Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. 40) But Paul chose Silas and left, being committed by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. 41) And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.”

This text is often introduced with the caption, “The Second Missionary Journey.” There were undoubtedly many other trips taking place, especially from Jerusalem. Philip the evangelist most likely continued other trips, as did Peter and the other apostles, but for some reason Luke took special interest in following the ministry of Paul.

This was providential. Paul emerged as the theologian and scholar who defined and defended the gospel. Study Galatians 1-2 and Philippians 1 carefully. His life was set aside for the defense and confirmation of the gospel. (See Philippians 1:7)

Much has been written about the conflict that emerged between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark. Being true to his name, Barnabas was the “Son of Encouragement.” (See Acts 4:36) He was much more patient with people and committed to the long-term growth process in his team members. He saw potential in John Mark.

Paul, on the other hand, was black and white and most likely so focused on the ministry he neglected the welfare of his team. He saw John Mark as a deserter. (See Acts 15:38). This was very providential.

It not only resulted in two teams, it also helped Paul grow in his understanding of different spiritual gifts. Not everyone was wired like him. The details recorded about the first missionary journey intrigues me. (Acts 13-14) I wonder who the team recorder was?

It was most likely none other than John Mark. According to Acts 16:11-13, Luke joined Paul and Silas for the second mission trip. Look at the multiple inclusions of the word “we.” Paul was a preacher, John Mark was a recorder. While Paul was in the spotlight, John Mark was content to stay behind the scenes.

Eventually the Holy Spirit revealed to Paul the incredible insight about various spiritual gifts recorded in 1 Corinthians 12-14. Right in the middle is the famous love chapter. We sometimes forget that the Christian life is a journey. Even Paul went through a growth and maturing process.

There is one more insight about John Mark. Paul may have viewed him as being distracted on the first missionary journey. Why? Because he was most likely preoccupied with writing the Gospel of Mark.

The Jerusalem council may have been an occasion for Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to gather more stories from eyewitnesses and compare notes. This in no way distracts from Divine Inspiration, but it does show how people are often drawn to others with similar gifts and motivations.

2 Timothy 4:11 is very interesting. Luke was traveling with Paul and suddenly Paul sent an urgent request to bring John Mark. I suspect that the historian Luke was working on the book of Acts and needed John Mark to fill in the details of the first missionary journey. His gifts suddenly became very important to Paul.

I concede, much of this is speculation, but plenty of clues and hints are provided in the story. But this does highlight a significant point. It is important to capture the stories. History only unfolds once and details not recorded are quickly forgotten.

One of the regrets of my life is that I have not kept a daily journal. Many stories of mighty deeds of God have long been forgotten. We have much to learn from John Mark and Luke. The story helps illustrate and color in the doctrine.

Same Gospel but Different Package: Acts 16:1-5

“1) Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. And a disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek, 2) and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium. 3) Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. 4) Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe. 5) So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily.”

Some look at this text as being hypocritical. Paul was delivering the decree from the Jerusalem council to the churches, yet he took Timothy and circumcised him. This requires some serious thinking and analysis. Let's see if we can unpack this dilemma.

Technically, the Jerusalem decree applied to the Gentiles. Jewish believers who put faith in Jesus were free to observe the Law. They were what we call “Messianic Jews.” They put faith in Jesus as the Messiah. He was celebrated as the fulfillment of every prophecy, type, shadow, example, and illustration of theological truth in the Old Testament. They were saved by faith in Christ the same way the Gentiles were.

When Paul later went to Jerusalem to keep a vow in the temple himself and to meet with Peter, he discovered the Jewish believers were all zealous for the Law. (See Acts 21:20-21) According to 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, Paul had the liberty to minister to both Jews and Gentiles. He did not force the Gentiles to keep the Law and he did not force the Jews to forsake the Law, but he persuaded all people to put faith in Jesus Christ and the Gospel.

Paul's message was that both Messianic Jews and believing Gentiles are part of the body of Christ and members of one another. (See Ephesians 2:11-22) To emphasize that point, because Timothy had a Jewish mother and grandmother, he had him circumcised because most of their ministry in that region was ministering to Jews. (See also 2 Timothy 3:14-15)

We make a big deal of Acts 16:1-5 today, but Paul had the freedom "in Christ" to navigate it without skipping a beat. He loved the Old Testament Scriptures and his Jewish heritage. He knew that being Jewish was an advantage (Romans 3:1-4) and he loved his Jewish countrymen. (See Romans 10:1-5; 11:1-5)

I personally believe Paul wrote both the books of Romans and Hebrews. Romans focuses on his Gospel to the Gentiles. Hebrews focuses on his Gospel to the Jews. Both lead to personal faith in Jesus Christ and the foot of the cross. Paul never forgot his audience. Every message he preached pointed people to Jesus Christ. It was the same gospel but in a different package.

Dreams and Visions: Acts 16:6-10

"6) They passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; 7) and after they came to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them; 8) and passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. 9) A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." 10) When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them."

Do you leave room for the Holy Spirit to change your plans? Paul and Silas had strategic plans, but the Holy Spirit vetoed them not once, but twice. They were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. Then He closed the door to Bithynia. I appreciate the fact that they were determined. They just kept going. They passed by Mysia and came to Troas.

It was there that God spoke to Paul. According to verse 9, Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia standing and appealing to him, and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

That was the sign he needed. According to Acts 16:10, they immediately sought to go into Macedonia. Paul concluded because of the vision that God was calling them to preach the gospel in Macedonia.

We now wrestle with the question of whether or not God still uses dreams and visions to direct people. This is compounded by Colossians 2:18 where Paul warns against worshiping angels and to take a stand on visions.

God certainly used them throughout biblical history, but they were not commonplace. From Jacob to Joseph, Pharaoh in Egypt to King Nebuchadnezzar, God gave providential dreams to people. According to Matthew 1:20, 2:13, and 19, God often directed Joseph the step-father of Jesus through dreams. These are but a few providential dreams in the Bible. We certainly cannot rule them out as valuable tools God has at His disposal.

The thrust to Paul's warning in Colossians 2:18 might be understood as being "do not take your stand solely on dreams or visions." You must weigh them by other factors. They must line up with the character and nature of God, Scripture, God's overall leading, and confirming answers to prayer.

For example, if you have a dream about doing something contrary to the character of God or His revealed Word, it is false. I have had people tell me God was leading them to divorce their spouse for someone else and then they add, "I even had a dream about it!" My response was, "How does that square with Malachi 2:13-16 and Matthew 19:1-12? They didn't have dreams from God, they had a fantasy fueled by the devil.

Another common one today relates to Christian singles moving in together without getting married. How does that line up with 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 or 1 Corinthians 6:12-20? The flesh can be the source of dreams. Make no mistake: Dreams contrary to biblical morals are not from God.

But God can and does use dreams and visions to sometimes guide people according to His will. Let me share a time God used dreams in my life.

At one point, I entertained the idea of running for the Iowa Legislature. It looked like the incumbent was retiring and his seat would be open. I was researching the details of a full-blown campaign when God seemingly slammed the door closed. The incumbent changed his mind and decided to seek re-election.

The work involved in a full-blown campaign was daunting. I was actually relieved by what looked like a closed door. I was very content pushing forward building GoServ Global despite not being gifted in administration. We desperately needed a skilled executive director, and I needed a way to convince the board of the needed change while continuing my speaking and writing ministry under GoServ Global.

Then the impossible happened. Soon after the primary which the incumbent handily won, I had multiple dreams in two weeks that I was serving in the Iowa legislature. They were exact and graphic right down to the seat I would occupy in the Iowa House of Representatives.

I shared the dreams with Debby. I was very shaken by them. We submitted to God's will and committed to earnest prayer. There was only one problem: It was too late to enter the race. The primary was past. I started thinking about the 2016 election cycle two years later, but the urgency of the dreams made no sense.

Then it happened! The incumbent suddenly dropped out of the race, setting up a special election. I somewhat clumsily entered the race, won the nomination, and my name was placed on the ballot for the November 2014 general election. It happened so fast it made my head spin, but I had no doubt that I was following the will of God. In less than four months it went from being impossible to becoming a reality. I won the general election.

When the session started in 2014, guess where I was seated in the Iowa legislature? All of my dreams played out like previews to a suspenseful movie. I ended up serving for eight glorious years in the Iowa part-time legislature, while continuing my speaking and writing ministry under GoServ Global. We also hired a very gifted Executive Director who helped move us to the next level. Thank you Paul Van Gorkom! His gifts were exactly what we needed.

But here is the catch, I would not have entered the special election apart from the dreams God had given me. I had totally let go of the idea of running for office and moved on. I had come to view the notion of running for office as a whim. As far as I was concerned, I had sincerely looked into the idea and God closed the door.

I was like Joseph in Matthew 1:19 who decided to call off his marriage to Mary until God spoke to him in a dream. God sometimes uses dreams to change our plans to conform us to His leading and will. The problem comes when we make it mandatory to discern God's will or when we think every dream is from God. I am not among those who believe there is a divine message in every dream.

Dreams can be prompted by many sources including the flesh, junk we have been feeding our soul, misplaced emotions, possibly the devil, and sometimes God. Each dream must be weighed and tested on its own merit and then compared to other factors like the character of God and Scripture.

Luke Joins the Team: Acts 16:11-13

“11) So putting out to sea from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and on the day following to Neapolis; 12) and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia, a Roman colony; and we were staying in this city for some days. 13) And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were supposing that there would be a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled.”

These verses indicate how quickly Paul and his team departed for Macedonia. The team consisted of Paul, Silas and... Luke. Where did he come from? Five times in these three verses

Luke included the word “we.” He may have joined the team as “the press core.” It was at this point in the book of Acts that the famed historian suddenly started traveling with Paul.

Philippi was a thriving trade city even though it was located several miles from the nearest sea port. Estimates put the population around 15,000 people in biblical times with up to 40% being slaves or indentured servants. It was a former Greek settlement with an influx of Romans. There is evidence that it was a retirement community for Roman soldiers and had a significant number of Roman citizens. However, Greek remained as the primary language spoken in the region.

Philippi had a very small Jewish population. Traditionally, it required ten Jewish men to form a synagogue. The presence of a “place of prayer” by the river indicates the absence of a Jewish synagogue. This region had nearly zero knowledge of the God of Creation from the Hebrew tradition. It boasted secular Greek and Roman culture.

Because Paul was multilingual and highly educated, he was the perfect choice to carry the gospel to this region. There is speculation that Luke was also a native Greek speaker and most likely a Roman citizen. The introduction of both the books of Luke and Acts to “Theophilus” points to his Greek heritage. (See Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-2)

This raises questions about the background and mission of Luke. He was most likely sent by Theophilus to investigate and document the facts of the ministry of Jesus Christ and the growing story of the early Christian church. He was the only Gospel writer that was not an Apostle and unfortunately the only historian to record the history of the early church.

Luke never focused on himself. There is no record of him ever teaching, preaching, actively engaged in ministry, or exercising any spiritual gift. There is no question that he was a believer, but he remained faithful to his mission of being an unbiased researcher and historian.

As such, he seemed to be exempt from direct persecution, beatings, imprisonment, and prosecution endured by Paul and Silas or later team members. He endured the rigors of traveling hardships, but was always treated like a bystander who was diligently recording the unfolding story. He was most likely funded by Theophilus and may have carried legal documents explaining his authority and mission. Of course this is mere speculation, but helps explain his consistent exemption from direct ill treatment.

Some believe his mission was to determine whether or not the emerging Christians were a threat to Rome. This might explain why he accompanied the team west to record the spread of Christianity into predominantly Roman colonies and why he eventually accompanied Paul to Rome.

Now let me make a concluding observation: God places people in key places even though they might have secular positions and authority. I will argue that apart from Jesus Christ Himself, Peter, Paul, and Luke left the greatest mark on the establishment and spread Christianity

around the world. Let that sink in for a moment. You do not have to be “in ministry” to have a huge impact for the glory of God. Most Christians are called to be a “Luke.”

The same is true in our modern world. Some of the most influential people for the Gospel today are not pastors, evangelists, or missionaries. They are consecrated believers serving in secular jobs. Some are military officers. Others are business owners. Many are musicians. Others are sports figures. Some serve in public office. Some work in the medical field. Some are public school teachers or administrators. Some are truck drivers or electricians. All of them fill the sandals of the beloved brother Luke. I take my hat off to all of them!

The First Converts in Europe: Acts 16:12-15

“12) and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia, a Roman colony; and we were staying in this city for some days. 13) And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were supposing that there would be a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled. 14) A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul. 15) And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay.” And she prevailed upon us.”

We now have the story of Christianity taking root in Europe. After arriving in the city of Philippi, Paul and his team spent some days in the city with nearly no traction. (Vs 12) Surprisingly, the man from his vision did not suddenly show up and say; “I’ve been waiting for you!” During this time, the team most likely paid for public lodging.

According to verse 13, on the Sabbath day they went outside the gate to a riverside. “The Sabbath” indicates they were looking for people with some Jewish bent. In places with no synagogue, Jewish people often gathered by water sources that made ceremonial washings easier.

Sure enough, a group of women had gathered there and Paul and the team began sharing the Gospel with them. The scene is a bit reminiscent of Timothy’s grandmother Lois and mother Eunice who gave him biblical instruction as a boy even though his father was an unbelieving Greek. (See Acts 16:1-2; 2 Timothy 1:5) Such women in mixed marriages often met for prayer and mutual encouragement.

The strategy of the team was insightful. They looked for people who were already familiar with the God of the Old Testament and had some biblical background. They represented fertile ground for the seeds of the gospel.

Among them was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira. She was a business merchant who specialized in selling purple fabrics. Philippi was known for its purple dye and

fabrics. These fabrics were expensive and seldom owned by slaves or those of the lower class. Some fabrics were for clothing while others served as tapestries or furniture coverings.

She was undoubtedly successful and had an established household with extra lodging accommodations. The text does not mention her husband or children and any speculation of marital status is an argument from silence. However, Acts 16:31 uses the same word “household” when referring to the jailer and implies his whole family. The early church had a pattern of reaching entire families.

Even though she was a worshiper of God, she was not a believer. As the team was conversing with these women most likely about Jesus Christ and the gospel, “the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul.” (Vs 13) The Holy Spirit was at work in her.

The text does not imply that Paul preached a formal message. The context makes it sound like they were casually speaking to the women and later with Lydia’s entire household.

Conversational evangelism is very effective. You do not have to be a preacher to share the gospel. I am an advocate of spontaneous conversational evangelism. It is casual, natural, and very effective. The prayer meeting context was a great way to get to know the needs of the group. The team most likely listened as much as they talked.

The day ended with a baptism service and Lydia and her entire household were baptized. How long did it take? We don’t know, but it was most likely a full day. At some point her entire household was included in the conversation. Avoid putting a time limit on God! He is always at work. He is seldom in a rush.

The day ended with Lydia inviting the team into her house. This was consistent with the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 10:9-15 for the lodging of gospel workers. The Provider was at work on behalf of the ministry team even in the Roman Colony of Philippi. This is an example of the goodness and faithfulness of God. He takes care of His own.

This might be useless trivia, but it is interesting to track the lodging accommodations for Paul and Silas during their short stay in Philippi. They went from public lodging... to the household of Lydia... to the inner jail cell... to the jailers household. The moral of this story is to be content and flexible with lodging when on a short term mission trip!

God will providentially put you in places to meet new people and greatly enhance the spread of the gospel. It is not about you and your comfort. God has a much bigger plan. Think about this –it is likely that the start-up church in Philippi had people from every lodging situation shared by the team!

Power Encounter: Acts 16:16-18

“16) And it happened that as we were going to the place of prayer, a slave-girl having a spirit of divination met us, who was bringing her masters much profit by fortune-telling. 17) Following after Paul and us, she kept crying out, saying, “These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation.” 18) And she continued doing this for many days. But Paul was greatly annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!” And it came out at that very moment.”

This passage tells the story of a woman with a spirit of divination. She was a fortune teller. She was demon-possessed. If you look up and study every passage on demon possession in the Bible, two categories emerge.

First, there were those who “used” or channeled a spirit. They had some form of paranormal ability but at some point payday came. Examples of this category included Simon the magician. (Acts 8:9-24) Elymas the magician. (Acts 13:6-12) And the woman with the spirit of divination. (Acts 16:16-18)

The second and more common category were those who were “abused” by an unclean spirit. This category included the Gerasene demoniac. (Mark 5:1-20) The tormented boy. (Matthew 17:14-21) And the demoniac at Ephesus. (Acts 19:11-17) These people were tormented mercilessly. Jesus said; “the thief comes only to steal, kill and destroy; I came that you might have life and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10)

As we return to the text we discover that the woman followed after Paul and the small group of believers for many days and made a public spectacle. According to verse 17, “she kept crying out, saying, “These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation.” It was most likely in a mocking fashion.

Note that Paul was “greatly annoyed.” The scene she created was a deterrent to the message of the gospel. People channeling a spirit are full of deception, seek the spotlight, challenge God-given authority, are usually trapped in sinful bondage, and are disruptive.

Paul finally took control and turned and said to the spirit; “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!” This is an example of a “power encounter.” Paul took authority in the name of Jesus Christ, spoke directly to the spirit and commanded it to come out. The verse concludes by saying, “And it came out at that very moment.” This is an example of instant deliverance. It was accomplished through the authority of Jesus Christ and not any special gift or ability in Paul.

Demon possession was common in biblical times. Many are tormented today as well. The Bible says much about this subject. As noted in Mark 5:1-20, Jesus Christ can set free, save, and restore those held captive by unclean spirits. The man Jesus delivered from legion went out and told his story in the entire region. When Jesus returned to Decapolis, crowds came to meet him

and a huge ministry resulted from the testimony of this transformed man. In fact, this is where Jesus eventually fed the four thousand.

This passage gives hope for those caught in the grips of the demonic. Jesus Christ and the gospel are the only cure for those trapped in the clutches of the demonic realm. No other world religion, philosophy, psychology or medical science offers freedom, healing, and total restoration to the demonically tormented. Jesus Christ came to seek and to save the lost and to set captives free.

We have joyfully witnessed many cases of deliverance over the years. For more biblical teaching and training on this subject, attend a Freedom Quest Workshop or order a Freedom Quest Workbook from our GoServ Global office. It is a very biblical, practical, and helpful resource for equipping and training in spiritual warfare and freedom ministry.

The God of Gain: Acts 16:19-21

“19) But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the authorities, 20) and when they had brought them to the chief magistrates, they said, “These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, 21) and are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans.””

In the search for truth, some people are motivated by God, but most people are motivated by gain. When gain is your god, anger and violence soon follows. They are tragically blind to the gospel and the value system of the kingdom.

This explains what motivated the masters of the slave girl. It made no difference to them that a captive of Satan was supernaturally set free from demonic influence by the power of Jesus Christ. The only thing that mattered was that she could no longer make them a profit.

Those involved in human trafficking of any kind are always blind to the gospel. They are motivated by greed. They have no rules or morals. They do not care about the value or dignity of people. For them, any evil or indignity is justified in the pursuit of pleasure and money.

Look at the story. Paul and Silas suddenly became the problem. They were viciously attacked. Their message was a threat to the crime family and they were about to pay the price of serious physical harm.

Understanding this story sheds light on how agape love, the gospel, and Christianity can be vehemently opposed by the world. God and truth are not the issue. The only issue is greed, gain, and the pursuit of unrestrained pleasure. The god of gain is blinding and fuels injustice of all kinds.

Suffering For The Gospel: Acts 19:19-24

“19) But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the authorities, 20) and when they had brought them to the chief magistrates, they said, “These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, 21) and are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans.” 22) The crowd rose up together against them, and the chief magistrates tore their robes off them and proceeded to order them to be beaten with rods. 23) When they had struck them with many blows, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely; 24) and he, having received such a command, threw them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.”

Any time a mob is moved into a frenzy the enemy is at work. This was precipitated by casting out an evil spirit. The demonic realm can negativity influence a crowd beyond comprehension and common sense.

The idea that “they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the authorities” is a description of violence. As can be seen later, They acted on emotional presumption and not truth or facts. Law and order as well as due process were set aside. This is common during a mob frenzy.

The accusation of throwing the city into confusion was false as was the assumption that they were not Roman citizens. Without giving them a chance to defend themselves, the crowd rose up together against them and the chief magistrates tore their robes off them and ordered them to be beaten with rods.

According to Jewish law, they could receive no more than 39 lashes, but this was Roman territory. They were inflicted with many blows with rods. There was no need to keep score. (See 1 Corinthians 11:24-25) Paul frequently endured this kind of treatment for the sake of the gospel.

After the punishment was inflicted, they were thrown into jail and the jail keeper was charged to keep them securely. Having received such a command, he not only put them in the inner prison, he also fastened their feet in stocks. Putting a chain on a Roman citizen was another violation of civil rights. (See Acts 22:29)

Let's review: They suffered false accusation, public humiliation, mob violence, excessive force, physical assault, were denied due process, and now endured false imprisonment. This text does a good job of defining some of the elements involved in suffering for the gospel.

The first big question here is: “Why was Paul willing to endure this kind of treatment time and time again?” It came down to his love of Christ and willingness to defend the true Gospel message.

And the second question is: "Does this text undergird the health, wealth, and prosperity gospel?" To the contrary, it obliterates it!

Earth-Shaking Prayer Meeting: Acts 16:25-30

"25) But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them; 26) and suddenly there came a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. 27) When the jailer awoke and saw the prison doors opened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. 28) But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!" 29) And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, 30) and after he brought them out, he said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?""

The way we respond to adversity might be our greatest validation of the gospel. After enduring much suffering, Paul and Silas had a midnight prayer and praise service.

Paul later wrote to the Philippians and said; "Rejoice in the Lord always! Again I will say, rejoice!" (Phil 4:4) I can imagine some in the congregation when they heard the letter read out loud commenting; "Yep, that's exactly how Paul lived! We remember that praise service in the jailhouse."

Let's be honest. Paul and Silas had every reason to grumble and complain. Their response was totally unnatural. That prayer and praise service literally moved mountains. Not only were the other prisoners listening, so was God.

Far more than a severe earthquake happened. Every prison door was opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. The captives were set free, but no one moved or fled. Those men were changed.

The jail keeper was roused from his sleep and was ready to kill himself, figuring the prisoners had fled. Death was better to him than life had his fear been realized. "But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, Do yourself no harm, for we are all here!" (Vs 28)

After substantiating the claim, he fell before Paul and Silas and cried out, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" I maintain my thesis: God does perform signs and wonders to validate the gospel. (See Hebrews 2:4)

Though the jail was the epicenter of the earthquake, I am confident that the entire city was shaken. God prepared the way for the gospel in Philippi that night. A church was born out of adversity in an earth-shaking prayer meeting. The text does not say how many were saved, but the doors for the gospel were wide open in Philippi!

How do you respond to adversity? Do you believe in the power of prayer? Are *you* ready to live out the gospel in every situation in your life?

Believer's Baptism: Acts 16:30-34

"30) and after he brought them out, he said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" 31) They said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." 32) And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. 33) And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household. 34) And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household."

We discover in this text the biblical teaching of "believer's baptism." The question from the jailer was, "What must I do to be saved?" The answer from Paul and Silas was, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved." The clarification was, "...and they spoke the word of the Lord to him and all who were in his house." The end result was, "...he was baptized and with all his household."

The New Testament pattern is that faith in Christ and the gospel always proceeds baptism. Paul made the point that baptism was not part of the salvation process in 1 Corinthians 1:14-18. In this text he points out that God called him to preach the gospel and not baptize people lest there be any confusion about what brings salvation.

If you are looking to your infant baptism to save you, you will be eternally mistaken. The practice of infant baptism cannot not be established in the New Testament. Instead we see salvation through personal faith in Christ followed by believer's baptism.

I don't care what your church teaches or practices –please diligently study the Bible for yourself! Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you. Look up everything the New Testament says about the subject of the gospel, salvation, and baptism. You will find the practice of believer's baptism clearly emerging in the New Testament.

Two Potential Options: Acts 16:35-40

"35) Now when day came, the chief magistrates sent their policemen, saying, "Release those men." 36) And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, "The chief magistrates have sent to release you. Therefore come out now and go in peace." 37) But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us in public without trial, men who are Romans, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they sending us away secretly? No indeed! But let them come themselves and bring us out." 38) The policemen reported these words to the chief magistrates. They were afraid when they heard that they were Romans, 39) and they came and appealed to them, and when they had brought them out, they kept begging them to leave the city. 40) They went out of the prison and entered the house of Lydia, and when they saw the brethren, they encouraged them and departed."

I confess, I always chuckle a bit when reading this part of the story. The magistrates sent their policemen to the jailer to release Paul and Silas assuming they would shamefully retreat from Philippi.

There was only one problem, they had publicly humiliated and beaten two Roman citizens without trial and thrown them into jail. Paul stressed this point and then demanded that the magistrates themselves come and bring them out.

When the magistrates learned they were Roman citizens, they were afraid. They were the ones who had broken the law and stood condemned. The public spectacle of them entreating Paul and Silas to depart the city spread like a wildfire. They were now begging them to depart peacefully.

Keep in mind, Philippi was a retirement community for Roman soldiers. Suddenly the stupidity of the magistrates was on open display. The whole city stood condemned. They were now deeply indebted to Paul and Silas.

One must ask, “Why the sudden change of heart by the magistrates?” Don’t forget the earthquake! This was most likely viewed as a judgment from God against the magistrates. The story of the jailhouse revival was also spreading quickly. The whole city was buzzing.

This is where the story takes an unexpected twist. Instead of seeking vengeance, Paul and Silas went into the house of Lydia, saw the brethren and encouraged them with some kind of message, and then departed.

The reader is left hanging in suspense. We want beating for beating, blow for blow. Instead, they extended love, forgiveness, and kindness. The way they departed the city in respect and dignity not only validated the gospel, it also set a banquet table up for the new church in the presence of the critics and adversaries.

Who do you suppose attended the farewell service preached by Paul and Silas? Well, Lydia and her household were present. The other women from the prayer meeting were also present. The jail keeper and his household were most likely present. Some of the cell mates of Paul and Silas may have also been present. The slave girl who had been set free from demonic oppression may have been present. The magistrates and their policemen were most likely listening from a distance as were the masters of the slave girl who instigated the riot. Actually, the eyes and ears of everyone in Philippi were tuned into this farewell message.

Why did their departure and final message carry so much weight? Well, Paul could have given two very different speeches. He had two options.

First, he could have appealed to Rome for vindication and justice. Second, he could have appealed to heaven for love, grace, forgiveness, and peace. Guess which speech he gave?

Which speech do you give when you've been wronged? Do you appeal to civil justice or do you turn to heavenly grace and forgiveness?

The Holy Spirit-Birther Church: Acts 17:1-10, 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

"1) Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. 2) And according to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, 3) explaining and giving evidence that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ.' 4) And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women. 5) But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar; and attacking the house of Jason, they were seeking to bring them out to the people. 6) When they did not find them, they began dragging Jason and some brethren before the city authorities, shouting, 'These men who have upset the world have come here also; 7) and Jason has welcomed them, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.' 8) They stirred up the crowd and the city authorities who heard these things. 9) And when they had received a pledge from Jason and the others, they released them. 10) The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews."

Leaving Philippi must have been a bittersweet occasion for the ministry team. The gospel was widely shared, new friendships were made, a church was planted, and physical wounds were healing. Most important, peace was reluctantly made with the adversaries of the gospel. The city magistrates were indebted to them.

Thessalonica represented a fresh start. It had a larger Jewish population than Philippi and boasted an actual synagogue. As was his custom, Paul and the team went into the synagogue for three Sabbaths and used the Scriptures to give evidence that Jesus was indeed the Christ. He also gave evidence of the death and resurrection of Christ.

In around 15 days, a church was planted. That's how long it takes for three Sabbaths. According to verse 4, a number of Jewish men, some God-fearing Greeks, and a number of leading women were "persuaded" to join Paul and Silas. The word means "to prevail by persuasion." It is a strong word indicating urging people to respond to the gospel. It is seen throughout the New Testament when preaching the gospel. There was a strong urging of people to respond to the gospel.

As was often the case, success for the gospel brought jealousy and opposition. Some leading Jews stirred up a crowd and started a riot. Note the charge against them in Acts 17:6; "... those who have turned the world upside down have come here also." The gospel was having an impact around the world.

According to 1 Thessalonians 1:3-10, the preaching of the gospel was accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit, full conviction, much tribulation and the joy of the Holy Spirit. The conversions were strong, deep, and lasting.

The planting of this church became one of the mighty movements of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. They became an evangelistic church that was actively sharing the gospel far and wide. Some had an Old Testament legacy. Others turned to God from idols and started serving the living God and to anticipate the return of Christ. The church at Thessalonica became a powerhouse for the gospel very quickly. It was an example of a Holy Spirit-birthed church.

Enjoy Jesus: Acts 17:10

“10) The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews.”

When we come to this verse, we need to hit the pause button and look into the life of Paul. By this point in the book of Acts, he had already suffered much for the gospel. He had been mocked, opposed by false teachers, persecuted, maligned, stoned and left for dead, beaten with rods, put in jail, and attacked by mobs. It is easy to forget that side of the coin.

Yes, there were healings, signs, wonders, many conversions, and churches started –but at some point, the many trials and adversities must have taken a toll on Paul. The magnitude of the opposition was incalculable and the frequency was daunting. Virtually every new door he walked through brought intense personal suffering. Being a ministry partner with Paul was like being chained to a lightning rod!

That’s what makes Acts 17:10 so amazing. They had been sent away from Thessalonica by night to save their lives, but as soon as they arrived in Berea they went into the synagogue and started the process all over again. Why not take a break and catch some R&R? They deserved it!

Part of the answer is that Paul was single-minded. He was focused. He had tenacity. He was 100% sold-out for Christ. Therefore he had resilience. But these character qualities do not capture the whole story.

His personal testimony in Philippians 3:7-21 tells the fuller story. His joy and motivation came from his inner relationship with Jesus Christ through the Spirit and not from outward circumstances. His inner communion with Jesus Christ was the boiler room that heated and fueled all else.

2 Corinthians 10-12 gives a glimpse of the inner Paul. His outward joy and resilience can only be explained as the overflow of his inner relationship with Christ. He alluded to one such encounter with Christ in 2 Corinthians 12. It was so glorious he could not find the words to

describe it! He was drinking from inner rivers of living water that overshadowed his outward struggles.

Here is the take-away from Acts 17:10: Paul found such a deep surpassing value in his communion with Christ that it eclipsed his outward circumstances. His calling “to God” surpassed his calling “for God.” The outward story of Paul will never make sense until you explore his inward walk in the Spirit.

Every Christian has this same inner calling. The Christian life and ministry can be exasperating until the walk in the Spirit is embraced. Answer your calling “to God!” Enjoy Jesus!

The Noble-Minded: Acts 17:10-12

“10) The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. 11) Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so. 12) Therefore many of them believed, along with a number of prominent Greek women and men.”

Berea was a breath of fresh air for Paul and Silas. They encountered “noble-minded” people. They were open, serious, and studious. They received the word with great eagerness, and then searched the Scriptures daily to validate everything being taught by Paul and Silas.

The advantage of going to a synagogue was obvious. They had a collection of Old Testament scrolls to study. Synagogues were like the city library. As a result, the “noble-minded” were allowed to search the scrolls several hours a day in diligent study.

Can you imagine spending days studying Old Testament scrolls with the Apostle Paul in the Hebrew language? He was an accomplished scholar. His short time there was like a condensed Bible college.

It might be that the “noble-minded” in Berea had a mutually positive and refreshing influence on Paul. He may have had them in mind when he wrote 2 Timothy 2:15; “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.”

As a side note, the early Christians did not own Bibles. It wasn’t until the invention of the printing press that Bibles were made available for personal ownership. This single factor brought an end to the dark ages and led to the reformation. There is a huge historical lesson in this fact. Stop living in the dark ages, be “noble-minded” and open your Bible!

Oh that Christians were as studious today. The Bereans were great examples of building their faith on the diligent study of Scripture. I don’t care about the subject matter –when emotions, bias, traditions, situational ethics, and prejudice are set aside and God’s Word is diligently

studied, embraced, and applied, then truth can be found and that area of the Christian life will be greatly empowered!

Learn this principle early in your Christian walk and become a good Berian. If you become “noble-minded” and diligently study the Word of God, then your relationship with Jesus Christ will be greatly empowered. God will show up with His glory in that “Word-based” area of your life. Let me cite a few examples:

Ephesians 6:17 says; “... the sword of the Spirit is the Word of God.” The Holy Spirit does not empower theological bias or religious tradition, He empowers the truth of God's Word! Embracing theological bias or religious tradition puts you in the sandals of the Pharisees. It kills spiritual vibrancy and life. This explains why so many religious people are so spiritually dead and defeated!

In John 8:31-32, Jesus taught that the distinguishing characteristic of His disciples was that they “abide” in My Word. The result was both truth and freedom. In John 15:7-8, Jesus added both answered prayer and fruitfulness to the blessing of abiding in God's Word. Spending time in Beria was a refreshing blessing for Paul and Silas... until the critics showed up!

There are some religious people who thrive on putting out the fire of the Spirit in others and stifling the work of God. Why? They have an ungodly devotion to some theological bias or church tradition. The only recourse is a personal resolution to build your life and Christian experience on the diligent and unbiased study of Scripture.

Become “noble-minded!” Accept the thought that you and your religious traditions might be wrong! Wear out several Bibles! Seek God diligently and search His Word courageously with an open mind. Be eager to learn, grow, and change. Invite the Spirit of God to lead and teach you!

The Playbook: Acts 17:13-15

“13) But when the Jews of Thessalonica found out that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Berea also, they came there as well, agitating and stirring up the crowds. 14) Then immediately the brethren sent Paul out to go as far as the sea; and Silas and Timothy remained there. 15) Now those who escorted Paul brought him as far as Athens; and receiving a command for Silas and Timothy to come to him as soon as possible, they left.”

Some people have an aversion to the gospel and will do anything to stop it from spreading. Why is that? The most basic answer is that Jesus Christ and the gospel changes people.

It changes beliefs. It changes morals. It changes character. It changes values. It changes entertainment. It changes priorities. When enough people embrace Jesus Christ and the gospel, it radically changes culture.

The world, the flesh, and the devil are opposed to godliness. They view it as oppressive, judgmental, and restrictive of fun and pleasure. The Bible calls it freedom from sinful bondage. The values of the world and the values of God are in opposition to one another.

Those who embrace the world oppose Jesus Christ and the gospel. But have you noticed the most vicious opposition often comes from the religious sector? It was the religious people who crucified Jesus. It was religious people who were persecuting Paul and his team. Religious people are often the most difficult to reach with the gospel. Why is that?

Religion can become a false god! It can be blind and dogmatic. It demands total allegiance. Religion can spread death rather than life. There are many religions, but only one true gospel. Even humanism, atheism, and evolution take on the fervor and dogma of religion. Whatever becomes “god” in your life becomes your religion and you will defend it against all opposing viewpoints.

It might be wise to ask yourself; “Who or what is my religion?” Everyone has one! Everyone has a core belief system that shapes their value system and worldview. Everyone has a “god” they will fight to defend. This is why Jesus Christ and the gospel changes people. He wants to sit on the throne in our lives. Some people will take extreme measures to oppose Him.

Saul was formerly one of these people. He understood his opposition very well. He wrote the playbook for the persecution of Jesus Christ and the gospel, but he failed to plan for one detail.

Jesus is God. He needs no zealots to defend Him. It was the resurrected Christ that confronted Saul on the road to Damascus. He easily won the battle.

Paul could move on from Berea because they were in good hands. Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit have ways of reaching people that mere religion does not. Paul was at peace leaving the converts and their opponents to wrestle directly with Jesus Christ. This became his new playbook!

Paul at Mars Hill: Acts 17:16-21

“16) Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols. 17) So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present. 18) And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, “What would this idle babbler wish to say?” Others, “He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. 19) And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, “May we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming? 20) For you are bringing some strange things to our ears; so we want to know what these things mean.” 21) (Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)”

This text starts looking at Paul in Athens. This was the seat of Greek Philosophy. He eventually gave an address on Mars Hill which was the site of the famed Areopagus.

This is where philosophers, free-thinkers, and religious theorists gathered to debate and explore new thoughts and world views. It was perceived to be the pinnacle gathering of the intelligent, enlightened, and worldly wise scholars.

The thing I appreciate about Paul was that he did not back away from any opportunity to share the gospel. He did not view the simple message of the gospel as inferior to any philosophy, psychology, or world view. Nor did he change his message or dress it up with eloquent terms. 1 Corinthians 2:4-5 tells how straightforward he was in his message of Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

As we back up one chapter to 1 Corinthians 1:18-31, Paul elaborates at length about his view of the wise men, scribes, and debaters of the age. Verse 20-21 are especially especially pregnant with meaning. He viewed worldly wisdom as foolishness compared to the gospel. Why? Because the power of God accompanied the message of the gospel. (Compare Romans 1:16; 1 Corinthians 1:18; and 1 Corinthians 2:4-5)

Paul saw no reason to back down with proclaiming the simple message of the gospel. He did not make it obscure with “smart talk” or “flowery speech.” He proclaimed the same simple, clear message to the philosophers on Mars Hill as he did the common people on the streets.

There is no need to be shy about sharing the gospel. It is as relevant and powerful on Capital Hill today as it was on Mars Hill in Paul’s day. It is as needed in our universities today as it was on the Areopagus in Athens!

If you are ashamed of the gospel, spend time studying Romans 1:16-32 and 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5. The cultural and eternal consequences of not knowing the true God through the simple gospel are huge. Sin and moral decay become volcanic in the absence of truth and the gospel. The simple gospel message is God’s only plan to save lost humanity. (See Acts 4:12) There is no other way to God!

That’s why Paul’s spirit was provoked within him as he saw Athens filled with idols but totally ignorant of the gospel. Darkness reigns where the gospel truth is censored or suppressed. Jesus is the only hope for lost humanity.

Altar To An Unknown God! Acts 17:22-23

“22) So Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. 23) For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, ‘TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.’ Therefore what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.”

Paul opens his discourse in the Areopagus by noting that the men of Athens were very religious, but he wasn't impressed by their beliefs. He also observed an altar with an inscription, "TO AN UNKNOWN GOD." They wanted to make sure they were covered just in case they missed one.

We here discover the problem with man-made religion. It can be observed that religion is man making gods to worship. It is a compilation of human values, philosophies, and morals that people exalt to the level of deity. It amounts to man making god in his image endowed with whatever attributes serve and perpetuate human morals, pleasure, and depravity. It is usually a pathway to excuse sin rather than a means of deliverance from sin.

However, this does highlight an important point: People from all times, places and societies have embraced some form of religious system. There seems to be a religious component in mankind not found in the animal kingdom. It points to the origin of mankind being created in the image of God. Unlike animals, people have both soul and spirit. Every human being has an inner "god consciousness" or "god void." It is an inner itch that yearns to be scratched in some form or way.

It was at this point that Paul pointed out the altar "TO AN UNKNOWN GOD." Religion is man trying to find God. Christianity is God trying to find man. 1 Corinthians 1:21 says; "(21) For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe."

This is what separates pure Christianity from every other world region or human philosophy. John 3:16-17 summarizes unadulterated Christianity well. It says; "(16) For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. 17) For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him." God has a plan to save lost humanity and it is based on the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Notice I said "pure Christianity." Many denominations and false teachers have changed, distorted, and abandoned the simple gospel message and turned Christianity into nothing more than another man-made religion. Knowing he cannot stop the gospel, Satan desperately tries to change and distort the truth.

It is at this point that you must take personal inventory. Are you embracing Jesus Christ and the gospel message or are you embracing a distorted gospel? Have you fallen for the religious trap? Are you embracing "AN ALTAR TO AN UNKNOWN GOD?" It might soothe your conscience, but it has no power to save or change you. Religion is an excuse to live as you please. The gospel message is the power of God to save and change people.

The Gospel to the Greeks: Acts 17:24-31

"(24) The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; 25) nor is He served by human hands, as though

He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; 26) and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, 27) that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; 28) for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we also are His children.' 29) Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man. 30) Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, 31) because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.'"

This message from Paul preached in the Areopagus ought to be studied by everyone. It contains multiple foundational truths.

He starts in verse 24 with origins and the Creator. He states that there is a God who made the world and all things in it. We may assume that he is referring to life and the entire biosphere. Paul attributes the mystery of life to this creator God. He has a special plan for planet earth and He is Lord of heaven and earth.

The question of origins and the mystery of life confronts every philosopher, theologian, culture, and civilization. The way this question is answered determines everything that follows related to morals, ethics, and religion because it shapes worldview.

Both here and in Romans 1:18-32, Paul builds the case that man-made religion has drifted far from the truth of the God of Creation. The end result has been idolatry and twisted human morals all neatly packaged in religious garb. Such was Greek mythology and numerous pagan religions. But notice, they were highly religious. (Acts 17:22-23) You can distort the knowledge of God, but you cannot remove the "god void" from humanity. It is as if God consciousness is hard-wired in human DNA.

As his message continues, Paul points out the fallacy of false religions, especially idolatry that makes gods of gold, silver, and stones. Verse 29 points out that these are the byproduct of the art and thought of men. The arts of every civilization includes a portrayal of the spiritual views of that culture. For some reason, the arts eventually express the notion of "god" held by the populace. Archeologists have found this to be true of every civilization.

The amazing thing about his message is that Paul starts with a religious contact point and then builds a case for the true God. He moves them from deception and ignorance about religion to the God who created all people and has a plan for mankind. Notice that this message was aimed at a Greek religious orientation and was different from his typical approach to a Jewish mindset, but it ends with the gospel and pointing people to Jesus Christ.

An interesting observation is that he quotes Greek poets and not Old Testament Jewish Scripture in this message. He is aware of his audience. He adapts his methods for presenting the gospel to the Greeks, but he brings them back to the God of creation and calls them to repentance.

Look back at verse 26; “and He made from one, every nation of mankind to live on the face of all the earth.” In doing this, Paul moves all the way back to Adam and the fall of humanity. In essence he is saying that sin is a universal problem and that God has a plan of redemption for all people.

The good news for you and me is that God has a plan for all of us. Jesus died for all of humanity and rose from the dead. The gospel is for every man, woman, and child. God is calling people everywhere to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ!

Mixed Results: Acts 17:32-34

“32) Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, “We shall hear you again concerning this.” 33) So Paul went out of their midst. 34) But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.”

The message of the cross and resurrection is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. (See 1 Corinthians 1:18) No wonder some mocked and sneered at the gospel. Some even view it as cruel that God would sacrifice His own Son.

But the gospel makes perfect sense to those with an Old Testament perspective. It lines up with all the types, ceremonies, shadows, and prophecies God gave to the Jewish people throughout history. From Abraham offering up Isaac to the Passover in Egypt, the gospel can be preached.

But even without this foundation, some men joined him and believed. The Spirit of God works in people drawing them to Christ and illuminating them to the truth. Among them were Dionysius, Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris. Each of them represented a unique story of God working in their lives drawing them to salvation.

Paul attempted to unpack the mystery of the way the Holy Spirit works in people in 1 Corinthians 1:18-3:23. In this context he talked about the natural man, the spiritual man, and the carnal man. All three are present and abundant among people in every time and every society where the gospel is preached.

It was the fruit of those who responded and were transformed by the Spirit of God that motivated Paul to continue. The Spirit-anointed sharing of the gospel always produces fruit. (See Colossians 1:3-8) When the seeds of the gospel are planted and irrigated, God sends the growth and the harvest. (1 Corinthians 3:6-9)

No experience in life or career compares to living and working in tandem with the Spirit of God. Every believer is called and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be effective and fruitful in sharing the gospel. (See John 15:4-8; 15:16; Acts 1:8).

There will be disappointments along the way. It often comes in the form of rejection and even persecution. But there will also be indescribable blessings and supernatural results. For some reason the Spirit of God is most active on the front lines of evangelism. He is the one who empowers the gospel message and wrestles people through to conversion and transformation. It happens over time.

There will always be mixed results when sharing the gospel. Do not be impatient or give up on anyone. God works over time. This can be illustrated by the Saul to Paul conversion. It took time for the seeds to be planted, start growing and the Spirit of God to eventually wrestle him to conversion. Many will never embrace the gospel. Their condemnation is just.

The Gospel Spreads to Corinth: Acts 18:1-5

“1) After these things he left Athens and went to Corinth. 2) And he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. He came to them, 3) and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they were working, for by trade they were tent-makers. 4) And he was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. 5) But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul began devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.” Acts 18:1-5

We now have the record of the gospel reaching the city of Corinth. This church was destined to become as important to the spread of Christianity as was Antioch because of the two Epistles Paul later wrote to this church.

It appears that Silas and Timothy remained for some time in Beria while Paul traveled through Athens alone and then on to Corinth. (Acts 17:14-15) They were becoming seasoned in ministry and were stepping up into key leadership roles. God was working through them in significant ways. This is the goal of leadership development.

When Paul arrived in Corinth, he found a certain Jew named Aquila, a native from Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla. Persecution against the Jews was beginning to heat up because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. This soon put the Jews and early Christians in the same boat. Persecution was used by God to spread the gospel as people were uprooted.

While there is no mention of their conversion story, a study of Aquila and Priscilla yields the most beautiful picture of a ministry couple in the New Testament. They were always side by side in ministry together and joined Paul and his team in traveling for the spread of the gospel. (See Romans 16:3-5, 1 Corinthians 16:19)

The circumstance of their meeting is not mentioned, but they most likely crossed paths in the synagogue at Corinth. God has a way of orchestrating Divine meetings. Never take lightly the people God brings into your path.

It appears that Aquila and Priscilla made a living by tent making. Paul joined them for a while in the enterprise. Acts 18:3 is famous for launching the concept of “tent making ministry.” It was not beyond the early missionaries to labor with their own hands to earn their keep to assist the spread of the gospel. They were by no means lazy.

It is prudent for those preparing for missions to learn a trade. Access to many countries is only possible for those with a legitimate trade. Not only will the income be helpful, but initial key relationships for the gospel are often formed through the workplace.

Though Paul spent time daily working with his hands, his primary focus was spreading the gospel. His Sabbaths were devoted to building relationships among the Jews through the synagogue. Undoubtedly, his focus among them was giving evidence that Jesus was the Christ through the Old Testament Scrolls. (See Acts 18:5)

The rest of his spare time was devoted to reaching Greeks through the social network of Corinth. The text says he was trying to persuade both Jews and Greeks. (Vs 4) He reached out on both fronts. The gospel is for everyone.

There is no mention in the book of Acts of any signs or wonders taking place through his ministry in Corinth. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 1:22-24, Paul mentioned that the Jews were asking for signs and the Greeks were searching for wisdom, but he focused on the simple message of the gospel. Nevertheless, 1 Corinthians 2:4-5 makes it clear that the Holy Spirit was at work in powerful ways.

As momentum began to build and more were being converted, Paul devoted his full attention to the ministry of the word. He was shortly joined by Silas and Timothy in this endeavor. Never despise the days of small things, but as momentum for the gospel grows, be prepared to be stretched. Follow the example of Acts 6:4 and devote yourself to prayer and the ministry of the Word.

Let me make an observation from the book of Acts –explosive church growth is a consistent New Testament phenomenon. Church stagnation is an enigma with no biblical foundation or excuse. In situations of static results, the Spirit of God is often being quenched, prayer is being marginalized, sharing the gospel with the lost is silenced, biblical priorities are being ignored, and sin and carnality have ascended to the throne. We need to stop making excuses for mediocrity in our churches. God has not changed!

Jesus wrote the letters to the seven churches in Revelation to address complacency and stagnation in the church. (Revelation 2 & 3) It is time to cry out for revival and awakening in our

churches and seek God with renewed abandonment. One of the most often repeated words in the above two chapters in Revelation is “repent.” I need not elaborate on that call. It is time for the Church to *be* the bride of Christ and repent.

A Closed Door and a New Opportunity: Acts 18:5-8

“5) But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul began devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. 6) But when they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his garments and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.” 7) Then he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God, whose house was next to the synagogue. 8) Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized.”

When you step back and absorb the book of Acts as a whole, you are immediately struck by the extent to which the early Christians, especially Paul and his team, devoted themselves completely to the word. (See Acts 6:4; 18:5) It was every day and nearly all day long.

We must remember that God is always at work. He is working in season and out of season. He is working during the day and He is working during the night. He is active in men. He is active in women. He is active among both the young and the old, the rich and the poor, and the Jew and the Gentile.

The work of the Holy Spirit can be illustrated by waves rolling in on the sea shore. You may not catch them *all* –but the next wave is coming. If you want to catch a wave, you need to step into the water.

It can also be illustrated by the story of the sower. (See Mark 4:1-24) You reap as you sow. If you sow sparingly then you reap sparingly. If you sow abundantly then you reap abundantly. The early Christians were constantly sharing the gospel, therefore they witnessed God working abundantly.

Sure, some will resist. (Vs 6) The Jews in the synagogue at Corinth began to mock and blaspheme, but that did not stop Paul and his team. They moved their work to another location. They started a house church in the home of Titius Justice. (Vs 7). When one door closed, God presented another opportunity.

So what does it mean that Paul shook out his garments in the synagogue and warned that their blood would be on their own heads? Let’s take a quick look at that question.

First, it meant they had worn out their welcome in the synagogue. The synagogue had most likely closed the door on Paul and his team. Second, it meant Paul had a clear conscience. He had thoroughly proclaimed Jesus as the Christ to them. Finally, it meant they had no excuse

when they stood before God for judgment. They had no plea of ignorance of the gospel. They outrightly rejected Jesus Christ as the Messiah after full disclosure.

Though Paul began to focus on the Gentiles in Corinth, God was not done with the Jewish people. The very next verse says that “Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household.” (Vs 8) In 1 Corinthians 1:14, Paul identifies Crispus and one of the men he baptized in Corinth. What a testimony of the goodness and patience of God.

Another providential outcome came from the closed door at the synagogue. When the church in Corinth eventually formed, it was not restrained or restricted by Jewish tradition. It was free to become an autonomous Spirit-filled church for all people. This is huge! From organization to church structure, from worship, to the orderly manifestation of spiritual gifts, the church was free to follow and honor God.

This does not mean they were free from trials or challenges. The books of 1 & 2 Corinthians make that abundantly clear. They had to navigate everything from sexual immorality among believers to freedom from idolatry. The church at Corinth became the proving ground to hammer out many fundamental issues.

This included Christian morality, resolving legal disputes between believers, sanctification, the sanctity of marriage, freedom in Christ, the ordinance of Lord's Supper, the manifestation of spiritual gifts in public worship, the pure gospel message, the resurrection from the dead, and Christian stewardship. These are but a few of the issues they set out to resolve.

It was at Corinth that Paul settled down for a while and focused on church planting. It was difficult and tedious work. Shepherding a local church was a challenge, but it brought some order and continuity to his life. This eventually became a stellar church and Paul's Epistles to the church at Corinth are a crucial part of our Christian heritage.

Paul Finds Comfort: Acts 18:9-11

“9) And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, “Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; 10) for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city.” 11) And he settled there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.”

Paul had ample reason for concern had his mindset been on personal safety. He had been persecuted, attacked, stoned, beaten, and thrown in prison. The enemy was trying to silence him. Fear of personal harm was beginning to take root in him. It was normal. He was only human.

But God is concerned for the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual welfare of His servants. He spoke to Paul in a vision by night and assured him of his presence and protection. In Corinth he experienced a time of calm from intense opposition and persecution.

It is hard to imagine, but the Lord actually encouraged him to step it up a notch. He was admonished to “go on speaking and do not be silent.”

These are appropriate words for the modern church. These are days of the silent church. I have even heard eloquent messages on a “silent witness.” Try as I may, I cannot find a chapter or verse in the Bible for that message. Certainly our walk must undergird our talk, but the gospel must be spoken. (See Romans 10:14-18)

God had many people in Corinth. Paul finally had a caring support network. He was surrounded by friends of the gospel. As a result, he took a year and six months and settled in Corinth.

What is the take-away from these verses? This adds credence to the spiritual idiom that “God takes care of His own.” He is with us and He cares for us. He promises to never leave or forsake us. (See Matthew 28:20) The Great Commission ends with the promise of His care and presence.

Gallio Got It Right: Acts 18:12-17

“12) But while Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and brought him before the judgment seat, 13) saying, “This man persuades men to worship God contrary to the law.” 14) But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, “If it were a matter of wrong or of vicious crime, O Jews, it would be reasonable for me to put up with you; 15) but if there are questions about words and names and your own law, look after it yourselves; I am unwilling to be a judge of these matters.” 16) And he drove them away from the judgment seat. 17) And they all took hold of Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue, and began beating him in front of the judgment seat. But Gallio was not concerned about any of these things.”

This story is almost comical. The Jewish leaders that opposed Paul, brought him before Gallio who was the Roman Proconsul of Achaia to seek a judgment against him. Though they had a dispute with Paul about the Jewish Law, they had no case based on Roman Law.

The irony is no Greek or Roman living in Achaia recognized or kept the Jewish Law. Roman custom allowed religious and moral freedom as long as it did not threaten Caesar or Roman rule. Gallio himself and most Corinthians were guilty of not worshiping God according to Jewish Law! Legalistic people and religious zealots always try forcing their values on others.

So they tried a slightly different charge against Paul. They were trying to build the case that Paul was creating civil unrest. Yet, they were the ones stirring up emotions and public controversy. The same ploy is often used today. Those guilty of civil unrest accuse others of the crime.

It is at this point that this text gets very interesting and contemporary. Get ready to wrestle with some very challenging concepts.

There is a place for secular legal intervention in civil matters, but we must retain a separation between the secular and sacred. God has established civil government for a reason as seen in Romans 13:1-8, but He wants the church to govern its own affairs.

This issue of taking religious matters before secular court became a tragic problem in Corinth even among Christians. Paul actually addressed it at length in 1 Corinthians, Chapter 6. It seems that a number of Christians in Corinth were suing one another in secular courts. The church was doing a poor job of conflict resolution.

As his argument builds, Paul moves into a discussion of sexual and moral issues. (See 1 Corinthians 6:9-11) He recognized that God had radically different standards of morality than Greek or Roman Law. He did not want secular government to dictate Christian morality. It is always foolish to give what is holy to dogs or throw your pearls before swine. They see no value in the "Holy". (Matthew 7:6)

Paul then opens his discussion of Christian morality by saying; "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything." (1 Corinthians 6:12) What was his point? (It's time to put on our thinking caps!)

Many things that were legal under Roman Law were not good or moral for Christian conduct. There is a huge disconnect between secular morals and Christian holiness. Many things that are legal in the secular Law code are classified as sinful in the Bible. God calls His people to a higher standard. But the whole notion of defining some forms of moral behavior as "sinful" is offensive to the world.

It is vital for Christians to look to God and the Bible to establish morals and personal ethics rather than to secular government. This is as true today as it was in the days of the early church under Roman law.

Now back to our text. According to Acts 18:12-17, Gallio made a profound ruling. He recognized that their religious dispute was not under his civil jurisdiction. He rightly acknowledged the separation of church and state. Religious freedom is only possible when the state does not infringe on sacred matters. This text suddenly becomes very relevant to our day.

Keep in mind, there were many religions practiced in Rome and they had to peacefully coexist without government intrusion. This is a difficult balance to maintain for two reasons.

First, with the formal establishment of a state religion, all other religions and religious practices become illegal and oppressed. Such is the case today in nations where radical Islam rules. Such was also the case in the dark ages when the Catholic Church ruled many European countries. The end result was Protestant persecution.

There is no getting around this fact. The establishment of a formal State Religion always becomes oppressive, persecution follows, and religious freedom is lost for many people.

Second, when secular government steps over its jurisdiction and intrudes in religious matters, the end result is the loss of that which is sacred and holy. Government will soon make laws forcing people to live and act contrary to their personal religious conscience.

This is the tension in the United States today. Secular government is starting to bully its way into controlling church and religious matters of morality and personal conscience. Religious freedom is being lost.

So, what is the balance? Chapter 18 of Acts, with its backdrop in the city of Corinth, and Paul's writings in the book of 1 Corinthians, make a compelling case for peaceful coexistence between the secular and the sacred. Because Corinth was filled with many different religions, the same respect and freedom was extended to those who practiced other religions.

Christians were to treat all non-Christian's with love, respect, and dignity while seeking to share the gospel with them. Those who came to Christ were forgiven, transformed by the Spirit of God into new people, and joined to the church. They were then expected to live holy lives. This is the rationale behind 1 Corinthians chapter 5.

Let me make a closing observation. Though Christians were often persecuted in the New Testament, it is impossible to find a case where the Christians persecuted others. They lived and practiced agape love toward all people.

As we close this text, I take my hat off to Gallio. He got it right. He nailed the balance between the separation of church and state. He saw the danger in proceeding with this religious case before the secular proconsul. It would have opened the door for excessive government intrusion in religious matters.

Suffering And The Sifting Process: Acts 18:12-17

"12) But while Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and brought him before the judgment seat, 13) saying, "This man persuades men to worship God contrary to the law." 14) But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, "If it were a matter of wrong or of vicious crime, O Jews, it would be reasonable for me to put up with you; 15) but if there are questions about words and names and your own law, look after it yourselves; I am unwilling to be a judge of these matters." 16) And he drove them away from the judgment seat. 17) And they all took hold of Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue, and began beating him in front of the judgment seat. But Gallio was not concerned about any of these things." Acts 18:12-17

Though Gallio did not hurt the Christian cause in Corinth, he didn't help it either. He remained neutral. He drove the whole group from his presence.

With that move, the Jews grabbed Sosthenes, who was a leader of the synagogue and began beating him in front of the judgment seat. Gallio was not moved by any of these things. He was unwilling to get involved in their religious squabbles.

It is interesting that both Crispus and Sosthenes are identified as leaders of the synagogue at Corinth. (Compare Acts 18:8 and Acts 18:17) Paul mentioned both of them by name in his first Epistle to the Corinthians. (See 1 Corinthians 1:1 and 1 Corinthians 1:14) It shows the devotion both of them had for Jesus Christ. The reference to Sosthenes in 1 Corinthians 1:1 indicates that he joined Paul's team on his next missionary journey.

This brings up an interesting point about the persecuted church. They are willing to suffer for Jesus Christ and the gospel. By contrast, the western church is not willing to suffer for Jesus Christ and the gospel. The first question related to mission trips raised by western believers is inevitably: "Can you guarantee our safety?" Their eyes are on self and not the cause of Christ.

It does not surprise me that Paul recruited Sosthenes to join his team. In Acts 18:17 he proved his devotion to Christ by his willingness to suffer for Him. He was publicly beaten for the cause of the gospel.

The early church understood that a unique blessing is bestowed on those willing to suffer for Jesus and the gospel. Let me quote 1 Peter 4:14; "If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you." The Holy Spirit bestows a special grace on those who suffer for the gospel.

Sosthenes and many early believers were sifted, confirmed, refined, and strengthened through suffering. Their faith was like gold refined by fire. (1 Peter 1:6-9) The doctrine of suffering has not been understood or embraced by the modern western church.

Things are beginning to change. Many governments around the world are becoming like Gallio. They are not concerned about religious squabbles. They neither help nor hinder the cause of the gospel.

The storm clouds endured by the secular political climate of the early church are starting to gather again. Within a few decades things shifted from favor to neutrality. Then from neutrality to opposition. Then from opposition to oppression. Then from oppression to severe persecution. And finally from persecution to absolute intolerance, prosecution, and punishment.

This trend baffles me, but it is both a biblical and historical pattern. It is time for the western church to grow up, stand up, and toughen up! The sifting is already beginning. (See Luke 22:31-32) Jesus spoke about it related to Peter. God uses it for good in those who love Him.

The ACTS Model of Ministry Training: Acts 18:18-22

“18) Paul, having remained many days longer, took leave of the brethren and put out to sea for Syria, and with him were Priscilla and Aquila. In Cenchrea he had his hair cut, for he was keeping a vow. 19) They came to Ephesus, and he left them there. Now he himself entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. 20) When they asked him to stay for a longer time, he did not consent, 21) but taking leave of them and saying, “I will return to you again if God wills,” he set sail from Ephesus. 22) When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and went down to Antioch.”

Paul did not leave Corinth immediately. He stayed many days longer after the episode with Gallio. When he departed, Priscilla and Aquila accompanied him. This was consistent with Paul's practice of mentoring people by bringing them on short term ministry trips.

By this point, Priscilla and Aquila had spent around a year and six months with Paul. (Vs 11) He was raising them up for leadership. We could call this the ACTS model... “Actual Christian Training by Service.” Both Jesus and Paul disciplined people and raised up leaders on the front lines of doing ministry.

We do a disservice to people by pulling them out of ministry for three to seven years and sending them off to the sterile environment of a Bible College or Seminary. I started pastoring a small church my second year of Bible college. My classes were transformed from academic exercises to survival training. I was suddenly desperate to listen, learn, and had many urgent questions. I also quickly discovered that much of the formal content was answering questions no one was asking. I became a magnet for practical theology.

Such was the case with the twelve disciples of Jesus and every person that accompanied Paul in ministry. They were equipped and trained on the front lines of doing ministry. They lived and walked in the daily shoes of the people they were called to shepherd.

They also became very Holy Spirit dependent. The Holy Spirit was not a category of theology to be analyzed and studied. He was their helper, teacher, guide, healer, and source of wisdom and power. They learned to walk and minister in the power of the Holy Spirit. (Take a moment and study 1 Corinthians 2:1 -3:15)

I applaud denominations and non-affiliated churches that are practicing accredited Bible training in a local church setting. This model is not only cost effective, it is biblical and practical.

It is the model often used on the mission field to train pastors and Christian leaders. Its success is amazing. It is turning out very knowledgeable, gifted, and mature leaders. The drop-out rate is greatly minimized. There is usually no debt load on the new leaders. But most important, spiritual gifts are discovered, the call into ministry is confirmed by the local church, and the transition into full time service is very natural. They also learn church organization, administration, and practical people skills.

If you sense a call into ministry, I would encourage you to seek out a local church that offers a Bible training program and then get active in the overall church ministry. The Open Bible Church we attend in Clear Lake, Iowa has a wonderful program. More and more of these kinds of programs are springing up around the country.

Also, go on several short term mission trips and volunteer for multiple opportunities of local Christian service. I learned to preach and teach while in high school leading Bible studies for youth and preaching in nursing homes. Soon I received invitations to minister around the area in multiple churches. Jesus lit a fire under me, momentum built, and I was launched.

I made plenty of mistakes and was shortly pointed toward a formal Bible College. Even in Bible College, I organized numerous evangelistic events, did street ministry in Chicago, and helped a small church revitalize. Spring break was an opportunity for beach ministry in Florida or to form a touring evangelistic team. I had trouble sitting still. Soon doors opened for preaching at rescue missions, summer Bible camps, and prison ministry. Many came to Jesus and God continued to mold and direct me.

I share bits of my story to encourage you to step up and get active. It's hard to steer a parked car. Put it in gear, start moving, and let God lead you. I believe the book of Acts is a picture of normal Christian living. This book inspires me. I trust God is using it to light a fire in you as well. Don't waste your life!

Jesus called you with a purpose. He wants to engage you in daily fellowship with Himself. In the process, He wants to heal your inner wounds, set you free from sin and bondage, and make you very fruitful for His glory. (See John 15:1-16) Pursue Him!

Paul's Shepherding Heart: Acts 18:22-23

"22) When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and went down to Antioch. 23) And having spent some time there, he left and passed successively through the Galatian region and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples."

Though informative, these are not the most exciting verses in the book of Acts. Paul ends his second missionary journey by reporting back to his sending church at Antioch. Though he was an Apostle, he lived under authority.

I firmly believe missionaries need a sending church. They are there for prayer support, spiritual encouragement, moral accountability, and financial support. They are both a launching pad and a refueling station. They are there to help with life maintenance.

Upon leaving Antioch, Paul revisited all the churches in the Galatian region he and Barnabas had started on the first missionary journey. As the book of Galatians indicates, he quickly discovered they had become very legalistic and were being persuaded to add keeping the Law

to the message of the gospel. Grace had been distorted. He spent time strengthening them and reviewing the true gospel.

These two verses in the book of Acts add insight to 2 Corinthians 11:28-29; “Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches. Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?” Many of his Epistles were written to churches he helped start or people he had mentored. Paul had a true shepherd’s heart.

The Power of Small Group Bible Study: Acts 18:24-28

“24) Now a Jew named Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth, an eloquent man, came to Ephesus; and he was mighty in the Scriptures. 25) This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he was speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus, being acquainted only with the baptism of John; 26) and he began to speak out boldly in the synagogue. But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. 27) And when he wanted to go across to Achaia, the brethren encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him; and when he had arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace, 28) for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.”

Apollos became one of the most eloquent scholars and expositors in the early church. 1 Corinthians 1:12; 3:4-7 puts him on par with Paul and Peter with the impact he had on the early church.

When he first came to Ephesus and began his public discourse, he was acquainted only with the ministry of John the Baptist. Priscilla and Aquila took him aside and filled him in on the full story of the gospel of grace. As a result, he blossomed very quickly.

There are many in ministry who are doing great things with limited knowledge. God has a way of revealing the full story to them. According to 1 John 2:27, the Holy Spirit is our primary teacher. This guarantees that those who are genuinely seeking Jesus and the gospel will find Him.

This helps solve the mystery of the next several verses in Acts 19:1-7. Apollos had been to Ephesus and raised up some disciples, but they knew nothing of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ or what happened at Pentecost. More about that in the next section.

There is another wonderful insight in this text. Priscilla and Aquila did not publicly argue or debate with Apollos. Rather “they took him aside and explained to him the way more accurately.” (Vs 26) They created a loving, safe, and peaceful environment for Scripture study and learning.

Early in my Christian life, mostly in Bible college, I was sucked into some heated debates about different doctrinal views. They were nearly all fruitless and counter-productive.

Then I learned the secret of saying; “Let’s get together and pray for the Holy Spirit’s guidance and study Scripture together.” Then I worked hard to create a loving and safe environment to learn and grow.

What has been the outcome? I’ve seen many come to Jesus and I’ve grown in my understanding of numerous biblical truths myself. Many liberal churches and denominations do not stress personal Bible study, but their people are hungry for truth. The same is true for those trapped in cult groups.

In John 8:31-32, it says; “31) So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; 32) and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” This is the power behind simple Bible study with sincere people.

I dare say, the one-on-one, small group or home Bible study is the number one most successful evangelism tool ever designed. It started in the early church. It was employed very effectively by Priscilla and Aquila in this text.

The good news is that you don’t need to be a scholar or eloquent speaker to lead or participate in fruitful small group Bible studies. Jesus promised if you abide in His word He will guide you into the truth and set you free. But be sincere and willing to grow and change yourself! Who knows, God might use you to help reach and launch the next Apollos!

Another benefit of small group Bible study is that you forge deep and lasting friendships. These people often become your personal prayer and support network. It’s impossible to put a price tag on godly friends.

Progressive Revelation: Acts 19:1-7

“1) It happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus, and found some disciples. 2) He said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said to him, “No, we have not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit.” 3) And he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” And they said, “Into John’s baptism.” 4) Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus.” 5) When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 6) And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking with tongues and prophesying. 7) There were in all about twelve men.”

The transition from the ministry of John the Baptist to Jesus resulted in some lag time. Many who were baptized by John headed back to their own country or region with only a small portion of the full story. (See Matthew 3:1-12) Many were baptized by him and he raised up many disciples. (Matthew 3:5)

As we come to Acts 19:1-7, the lag time was now well over a decade and the full gospel message had not caught up with some of them. They knew only about the baptism of John the Baptist and were faithfully preaching and practicing what they had learned.

From the previous chapter, Apollos had been one of the leaders of this group. He was most likely using texts like Malachi 4:5-6 to prepare people for the coming Messiah, but had not yet connected the dots with the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Many Christian groups are built on bits and pieces of the Bible. If they leave out Jesus Christ and the basic gospel message, they are considered a cult group.

Some pick and choose from both the Old Testament Law and the New Testament gospels. They are like the churches of the Galatia region that blended Judaism and the gospels. Paul wrote the book Galatians to them to help them understand grace and justification by faith.

Others hold to the gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and saving faith, but they ignore Pentecost and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. This is why it's important to study the whole Bible. The ministry of the Holy Spirit was also prophesied in the Old Testament. (See Joel 2:28-32)

There is a theological concept called "progressive revelation." It means that God progressively revealed Himself and His plan for mankind over time. To get the whole story you need to study the whole Bible. The Old Testament foretells the New Testament. The New Testament fulfills and unpacks the Old Testament. Genesis to Revelation tells the whole story.

If you only have the book of Genesis, you have great foundational truth but not the full story. However, the seeds of the gospel can be found in the book of Genesis in texts like Genesis 3:15 and the story of Abraham offering up Isaac in Genesis 22. It is a wonderful picture of Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God.

So what does this have to do with Acts 19:1-7? Paul was merely filling the disciples of John the Baptist in on the whole story. He was coloring in the full picture. He was adding crucial pieces to the puzzle. Keep in mind, the New Testament had not been written yet.

As soon as they heard the full story, they believed in Jesus Christ, were baptized in His name and were filled with the Holy Spirit. They immediately began to manifest spiritual gifts. Paul filled in the gaps of progressive revelation beyond the truth given through John the Baptist. He ensured that they were fully caught up on the full program of God for His people.

The Epistles were written to clarify all truth and blessings available for God's people in this present church age. The Bible is now complete. The full story has been told. Contrary to the tragic errors of the Mormon church, nothing has been added to it!

But the Bible points to the future and coming events. It prepares us for the return of Jesus Christ, His millennial kingdom and eternity. When Jesus returns the revelation will continue. (See 1 Corinthians 13:9-13) I can only imagine!

Until then, we are to study the full and complete Bible. God wants us to experience and embrace all of His program and promises for this present age. That includes salvation through faith in Christ, living by grace and the power of the Holy Spirit. He wants His church to focus on world evangelization!

School of Tyrannus: Acts 19:8-10

“8) And he entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. 9) But when some were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the people, he withdrew from them and took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. 10) This took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.”

Since the Christians had no buildings of their own, they used whatever space God opened for them. In many places, this started out being the local synagogue. Such was the case in Ephesus. For three months the synagogue opened its doors to Paul and his team.

They spoke out daily for a period of three months until stiff opposition to the gospel began to build. The text stresses that they labored daily. Take note of the fact that they worked for the cause of Christ. St Augustine later said, “Pray as if it all depends on God, work as if it all depends on man.” Such was the balance of Paul and his team. The result was that some believed while others became hardened to the gospel. Soon the synagogue closed its door to them.

By that point they gained welcome at the school of Tyrannus. His identity is not known, but he offered his space to the Apostle and his team. He was most likely Greek, and that ensured the doors were opened to all who wanted to hear and learn. They switched locations and for the next two years the daily teaching resumed.

Some try to make the case in verse 9, from the phrase, “he withdrew from there and took away the disciple” that the Christians became exclusive. I do not see that being implied. Rather I see them being accommodating and avoiding undo conflict. They peacefully departed the synagogue and found an alternative place to meet.

At no point did they become isolated, secretive, or cultish. On the contrary, the move made them more open and accessible to everyone. For the next two years they met openly to the point that “all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.” (Vs 10)

However, I will argue that the daily teaching most likely became progressively deeper. The whole of Scripture was explored and the full spectrum of New Testament doctrine unpacked. Paul was raising up the next wave of disciples and leaders for churches across Asia.

This may have served as the backdrop for 2 Timothy 2:1-2; “1) You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. 2) The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” Paul may have been referring to the School of Tyrannus.

This eradicates the notion that the early believers were shallow and emotional. To the contrary, they were diligent, studious, well educated, and trained in ministry. They walked in the Spirit and sharpened their minds with equal zeal.

The Miracles Continued: Acts 19:11-12

“11) God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, 12) so that handkerchiefs or aprons were even carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out.”

These verses confirm that extraordinary miracles were still taking place in the early church. The power of the Holy Spirit had not subsided or diminished as some scholars try to assert.

The word “miracles” is translated from the same Greek word as “power” in Acts 1:8. Those filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit may experience God confirming their witness of the gospel with validating signs. This is consistent with Hebrews 2:4; “God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.”

All three of these texts have evangelism or advancing the gospel as their backdrop. (Acts 1:8, Acts 19:11-12, and Hebrews 2:4) Though varied spiritual gifts were manifest in the local church, it appears that signs and wonders were connected to the front lines of spreading the gospel. (See 1 Corinthians 12:4-11)

I acknowledge this might be a fuzzy line to defend because the charisma gifts are also connected to the ministry of the Holy Spirit and evangelism often unfolds in some church gatherings. I shy away from putting a box around God, yet the story of the book of Acts is that signs and wonders accompanied the spread of the gospel.

Acts 19:12 shares the phenomenon that handkerchiefs or aprons were carried from the body of Paul to the sick and diseases left them and the evil spirits went out. It appeared that some objects were consecrated and transmitted anointing, power, and holiness. This did not seem to be a common practice in evangelism, but it did happen.

The main thrust of Paul's ministry was reasoning from the Word, presenting Jesus, and preaching the gospel. He did not set preaching and teaching the Word aside to focus on healing services. The miracles accompanied the spread of the gospel and took place over two years. (See Vs 10)

Another intriguing observation from verse 12 is that one of two different cures happened to the sick. Either diseases left them or evil spirits went out. It appears that there are two very different causes of sicknesses.

This observation is consistent with the healing ministry of Jesus as recorded in the four gospels. There are germs, viruses, and diseases that cause sickness. There are also unclean spirits that specialize in causing physical infirmities. Jesus healed people from both.

On a closing note, Paul did not adulterate that which is holy by turning it into a marketing strategy. I am appalled by any so-called "faith ministry" today that sells healing in exchange for monetary donations. This greedy practice is a scam. It is deceptive and demonically motivated. If someone asks for a donation in exchange for sending you a handkerchief, it might be best used to weep and cry for their wretched soul.

Jesus said to His disciples; "8) Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. Freely you received, freely give. 9) Do not acquire gold, or silver, or copper for your money belts," (Matthew 10:8-9) Marketing the blessings and power of God amounts to spiritual abuse of the poor and gullible.

The Impotence of the Exorcists: Acts 19:13-17

"13) But also some of the Jewish exorcists, who went from place to place, attempted to name over those who had the evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, "I adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches." 14) Seven sons of one Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. 15) And the evil spirit answered and said to them, "I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?" 16) And the man, in whom was the evil spirit, leaped on them and subdued all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. 17) This became known to all, both Jews and Greeks, who lived in Ephesus; and fear fell upon them all and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified."

An exorcist is someone who uses religious rites, ceremonies, or relics in the process of trying to cast a demonic spirit out of someone. Such was the case with the seven sons of a Jewish chief priest named Sceva.

They were trying to duplicate the results of Paul and the Christians without having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. They were most likely dependent on various Jewish ceremonies, holy water, oils, and even music. David had success using music when Saul was being demonically tormented. (See 1 Samuel 16:23)

When all else failed, the seven sons of Sceva resorted to the “name of Jesus whom Paul preaches.” It did not work for them. Jesus does not give His authority over the demonic realm to non-Christians.

The results were tragic. The evil spirit answered and said to them, “I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?” (Vs 15) Then the man in whom the evil spirit resided leaped on them, subdued all of them, and overpowered them. It was seven against one, but they were no match for the demon-possessed man. They fled out of the house naked and wounded.

In preparing for my Freedom Quest Workshop material, I bought and read numerous books about Catholic exorcists. Tragically, their methodology and results are similar to the seven sons of Sceva. Most are mercilessly tormented in their line of duty. Some are killed, others give way to mental breakdowns. They consider it the price they need to pay for being in their office.

The religious rituals and ceremonies of the religious exorcists cannot duplicate the authority Jesus Christ gives to His followers. (Matthew 10:7-8; Matthew 28:18-20; Colossians 2:13-15; Ephesians 1:18-23)

The authority of the believer “in Christ” over the kingdom of darkness is a fabulous biblical study. The Freedom Quest Workshop that I teach is designed to educate and equip believers to stand firm “in Christ” and lead people to freedom from the schemes and ploys of the evil one. I encourage you to attend one of these workshops. It is an in-depth biblical study of the believers authority “in Christ.”

The contrast between Paul and the sons of Sceva was shocking. “This became known to all, both Jews and Greeks, who lived in Ephesus; and fear fell upon them all and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified.” (Acts 19:17) The Gospel and power of Jesus Christ has no rival.

Cleansing The Home for Godly Living: Acts 19:17-20

“17) This became known to all, both Jews and Greeks, who lived in Ephesus; and fear fell upon them all and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified. 18) Many also of those who had believed kept coming, confessing and disclosing their practices. 19) And many of those who practiced magic brought their books together and began burning them in the sight of everyone; and they counted up the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver. 20) So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing.”

The contrast between Paul and his team and the sons of Sceva became the talk of Ephesus. The Christians had power and authority over the demonic realm. The demon possessed man defeated and humiliated the Jewish sons of Sceva. It became well known to both Jews and Greeks. According to verse 17; “ fear fell upon them and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified.”

This became a sign that validated the gospel and offered hope to those in bondage. Jesus and the gospel offered hope, forgiveness, and a new life not found in traditional Judaism or the pagan religions that filled Ephesus. People were searching for truth and personal freedom.

Soon those who came to Jesus began to cleanse their homes for godly living. They confessed and repented from their pagan practices and all of their spiritistic paraphernalia. They burned their books and artifacts formerly used in pagan religious practices. Why?

The answer took us years to figure out. Sometimes demonic activity is connected to a person like the demon possessed man encountered by the sons of Sceva, but other times it can be associated with physical objects associated with idolatry, spiritism, the occult, or pagan religions that channel demonic spirits.

This became clear to me one day while I was reading 1 Corinthians 10:19-22. Verse 20 says; “(20) No, but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons.” It was in black and white print. Demonic activity can be associated with physical objects like idols and Christians can open the door for this activity in their lives.

This helped explain why some Christians were experiencing demonic activity. The problem was not within them, it was coming from the objects they brought into their homes. This is why the Christians in Ephesus cleansed their homes from physical objects used in channeling demonic spirits.

This brought a major breakthrough in our thinking and counseling ministry. God helped us understand a level of demonic activity we previously did not know. This helped explain what was happening to some Christians who were being tormented by demonic activity. They were not demon possessed, but the things in their homes opened a portal for the activity. The defiled stuff had to be removed for the activity to stop.

It is important to note that they burned these objects. The value came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. That’s a lot of books and paraphernalia. Ephesus was filled with this stuff.

The results were that “the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing.” (Vs 20) Hindrances to the gospel were being removed. Demonic strongholds in people's lives were being torn down. People were being set free from bondage. But more important, they were growing exponentially in their walk with Jesus. The whole city was affected. New believers were being set free! The spiritual atmosphere in Ephesus began to change.

It does not surprise me that Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus about spiritual warfare. Ironically, he did not talk about casting out unclean spirits. He taught Christians how to pull down sinful strongholds (Ephesians 4:17-5:21), and put on the full armor of God. (See Ephesians

6:10-20) Previously, in Acts 19, he instructed them about cleansing their homes. If you want personal freedom, all three of these are important.

Let me take a moment and address those of you who are being harassed or tormented by unclean spirits. You can be totally set free through the Name of Jesus Christ and His authority. You need to remove the defiled stuff from your home and pull down sinful strongholds in your life.

These strongholds include deception, rebellion, bitterness, sexual immorality, addictions, pride and greed, and past involvement in spiritism and the occult. They represent the schemes of the enemy and give him a foothold in your life. (See Ephesians 4:26-27; 2 Corinthians 2:10-11). Jesus Christ is eager to forgive, cleanse, and free you from sinful bondage and compulsions.

Not everyone celebrated. With the next paragraph, stiff opposition began. Commerce was being affected. The demand for idols and spiritistic paraphernalia plummeted. More on that in the next section.

The Uproar and Mob Frenzy: Acts 19:23-41

“23) About that time there occurred no small disturbance concerning the Way. 24) For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, was bringing no little business to the craftsmen; 25) these he gathered together with the workmen of similar trades, and said, “Men, you know that our prosperity depends upon this business. 26) You see and hear that not only in Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away a considerable number of people, saying that gods made with hands are no gods at all. 27) Not only is there danger that this trade of ours fall into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis be regarded as worthless and that she whom all of Asia and the world worship will even be dethroned from her magnificence.” 28) When they heard this and were filled with rage, they began crying out, saying, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” 29) The city was filled with confusion, and they rushed with one accord into the theater, dragging along Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul’s traveling companions from Macedonia. 30) And when Paul wanted to go into the assembly, the disciples would not let him.”

Now we discover how effective the gospel had become in Ephesus. People had stopped buying silver shrines to the goddess Artemis. It may have been more than spiritistic books or scrolls that were burned in verse 19. More than likely idols, shrines, and other paraphernalia were added to the pile. Some of the value of 50,000 pieces of silver may have been in the form of molten silver. Demetrius the silversmith was outraged.

The shops that lined the streets of Ephesus and sold these shrines had become abandoned. Keep in mind, this transformation occurred over a two-year time span. In verse 25, Demetrius made the case that their trade was being jeopardized and their prosperity ruined. The gospel was changing the pattern of commerce in the city of Ephesus. Supply of silver shines was at normal levels, but demand had plummeted.

Historical records of sweeping revival in Europe and the United States had a similar impact. Hundreds of taverns and saloons were closed and even New York City laid off most of its police force because crime came to a screeching halt. Churches and Christian meeting halls were full and many were instantly transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

One of Satan's schemes to stop the gospel where it is changing culture is mob frenzy and violence. That's what happened in Ephesus. Demetrius stirred the crowd into a frenzy.

Soon a violent riot ensued. False accusations were leveled against the Christians as they were targeted by the mob and dragged into the giant Greek theater. Most had no idea what was happening. They were caught up in the emotions of the riot. (Vs 32). Never underestimate the demonic activity behind such public riots and atrocities against Christians.

The uproar lasted for hours. Confusion sat on the throne. Reason was trampled under foot. People were yelling and screaming all kinds of ridiculous and unfounded charges against the Christians.

Finally, after hours of chaos, the town clerk managed to regain control. He observed that the Christians were neither robbers of temples nor blasphemers of Artemis. The whole uproar was baseless and illegal. He warned that the riot was close to triggering Roman military intervention.

He also noted that there were lawful means to settle these disputes. But the courts remained closed. Lawlessness shuns accountability. Many of the perpetrators were noteworthy citizens of Ephesus and viewed themselves as being above the law.

Acts 19:23-41 is a case study of persecution and brutal mob mentality. Do not minimize that active role of the kingdom of darkness behind such riots and opposition to the gospel. Ephesians 6:12 says; "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." The Christians in Ephesus knew the reality of those words.

The Lightning Rod: Acts 20:1-2

"1) After the uproar had ceased, Paul sent for the disciples, and when he had exhorted them and taken his leave of them, he left to go to Macedonia. 2) When he had gone through those districts and had given them much exhortation, he came to Greece."

Paul had become a lightning rod for the Christians. The Jews had him in their cross hairs. He was the reason for the intense persecution. The believers had restrained Paul from entering the theater in Ephesus, now they wanted to keep him from public view.

After the uproar had ceased, Paul sent for the disciples and gave them words of exhortation. Then he departed to trace his steps back through Macedonia.

One by one, he met with Christian groups and gave them lengthy messages. His goal was to build up each church group. Many of them met in homes. He sent some of his team ahead to arrange lodging and meetings in each town. The believers welcomed him openly. There is no record of any public meetings on his return trip. He did not set foot in any synagogue.

The “out-reach” phase of his ministry in Macedonia ended. Paul now focused on “in-reach.” His strategy was to build up the Christians and unleash them to reach their communities.

Ephesians 4:11-16 defines his philosophy of ministry at this stage of his work in Macedonia. He left the momentum in the hands of the disciples he had reached, instructed, and raised up.

There is a principle in the New Testament that the ministry baton needs to be handed to the next generation. (See 2 Timothy 2:1-9) At this point, they could put Paul in prison, but the Word of God could not be imprisoned. Paul left behind mature, functioning, and Spirit-filled local churches.

I believe God wants every Christian to be a fruit-bearer. (See John 15:8, 16) At some point the leaders need to step aside to make room for others to step up. Where do these leaders go? They start other works and pour themselves into more people. They become mentors.

In Paul’s case, God took him from the pulpit to the prison. He became a new kind of lightning rod of inspiration to the entire early church. He picked up the pen and started writing letters to many people and churches.

Soon many of his letters began to be copied, circulated, and collected by the early churches. Many early church leaders like Peter, James, and John started the same practice. Within a few generations these letters became the inspired canon of the New Testament. The early Christians would die to protect these writings.

So one phase of ministry gave way to the next. The pen is mightier than the sword. God used persecution to accomplish a work that was destined to shape the course of human history. The Bible was completed, assembled, and soon translated to many languages.

It is no longer counted on the Bestseller list. It far surpasses the annual sales of any other book. It has been translated and printed into more languages than any other book. It has also been attacked and banned more than any other book.

In a sense, the Bible is a lightning rod. When the Spirit of God uses it to strike a human heart, home, community or nation, it ignites fires that cannot be extinguished. If you want to leave a legacy, spend daily time reading and studying your Bible. The Spirit of God will use it to change you and impact those around you!

(Over 20 million Bibles are sold annually in the United States alone. That works out to about 2,289 per hour. In addition to sales, an estimated 115,055 Bibles are also given away or distributed every day –that’s over 1.33 Bibles per second! According to the British and Foreign Bible Society, around 80 million Bibles are printed annually. It is estimated that since Gutenberg invented the printing press, a total of six billion Bibles have been printed. Chairman Mao’s “Little Red Book” comes in a distant second at 900,000 copies, and the Quran is third at 800,000 copies. It is an indisputable fact that no book has changed the world more than the Bible.) –dj

Glimpse of an Early Church Service: Acts 19:7-12

“7) On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them, intending to leave the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight. 8) There were many lamps in the upper room where we were gathered together. 9) And there was a young man named Eutychus sitting on the window sill, sinking into a deep sleep; and as Paul kept on talking, he was overcome by sleep and fell down from the third floor and was picked up dead. 10) But Paul went down and fell upon him, and after embracing him, he said, “Do not be troubled, for his life is in him.” 11) When he had gone back up and had broken the bread and eaten, he talked with them a long while until daybreak, and then left. 12) They took away the boy alive, and were greatly comforted.”

This text holds some jewels. It seems to undergird the notion that the early Christians gathered on the first day of the week rather than the seventh day, which is the Jewish Sabbath. They were celebrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ and not the finished work of creation. 1 Corinthians 16:2 indicates this same notion as does some of the writings of the early church fathers.

Were it not for the seriousness of this story, it would be comical. We could almost conclude that Paul’s messages were killers. Depending on when they started, this might have been a 12 hour service or longer. Most of it consisted of Paul’s preaching and teaching.

Luke records in verse 7, that Paul prolonged his message until midnight. Then being a doctor, he blamed what happened next on the fumes from the many lamps. Eutychus who was sitting in an open window, fell asleep during Paul’s message. Unfortunately, he lost balance and fell from the third floor.

They rushed down and picked him up dead. Paul interrupted his message and went down and fell upon him. Then he announced, “Do not be troubled, his life is in him.” Paul raised him from the dead.

Then the group went back to the upper room, broke bread and Paul continued to talk to them until daybreak. When the service finally ended, they took away the boy alive, and were greatly comforted.

We dare not minimize the significance of this miracle. In Matthew 10:8 when Jesus sent out the twelve, He said, “Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. Freely you received, freely give.” This miracle put Paul in the category of the twelve apostles.

Later in 2 Corinthians 12:12-13, when Paul defended his apostleship to the Corinthians, he noted that “the signs of a true apostle were performed among you...” Raising the dead certainly put him in that category.

As to the length of this service, I dare say it was not out of the ordinary. Nehemiah 8:1-12 pictures a gathering that lasted days. Numbers 29:35, Deuteronomy 16:18, 2 Kings 10:20 are a few of the numerous references in the Old Testament about solemn assemblies.

The average church service in most less affluent countries is 3-4 hours. There are stories of the persecuted church gathering for several days in secret and remote settings to seek the Lord day and night. They do take breaks for meals and sleep, but they seek the Lord earnestly both in prayer and biblical teaching. There are many accounts of all night prayer meetings. There are also many accounts of signs and wonders among these believers, including modern stories of raising the dead.

The “one and out” pattern of the modern Western Church is an aversion. The sixty-minute church service is the eulogy of a nearly dead church. I do not expect God to do anything mighty or significant in these marginalized and irreverent settings. When God is put on the time clock, we are saying that we can turn Him on and off at will. This is beyond comical. It borders on insanity. Then these same pastors have the audacity to observe, “We do not witness miracles in our services, so God must not do miracles today!”

Travel Itinerary: Acts 20:13-16

“13) But we, going ahead to the ship, set sail for Assos, intending from there to take Paul on board; for so he had arranged it, intending himself to go by land. 14) And when he met us at Assos, we took him on board and came to Mitylene. 15) Sailing from there, we arrived the following day opposite Chios; and the next day we crossed over to Samos; and the day following we came to Miletus. 16) For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus so that he would not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying to be in Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost.”

The rigors of travel in the days of the early church were harsh at best. Traveling by land was most likely on foot. Traveling by sea was sailing on a wooden cargo ship that also accommodated some passengers.

As this trip ensued, Paul decided on the land route for much of his journey, while sending most of his team ahead by sea. They took him on board at Assos. The reason for Paul choosing the land route for much of his journey may have been that his thorn in the flesh contributed to

motion sickness. There were no medications against that condition in those days. Every ship had a well used regurgitation rail, usually at the stern.

No matter the reason for Paul opting for the land route, travel in those days was difficult and dangerous. There were wild beasts and robbers by land and storms and potential motion sickness by sea. 1 Corinthians 9:3-6 touches on the sacrifices Paul and Barnabas made for the gospel. The rigorous travel, irregular income, and strenuous schedule may have been a contributing factor for Paul opting to remain single.

Paul's decision to sail past Ephesus was motivated by time and not lack of desire to see them. He wanted to be in Jerusalem by Pentecost. The ship was most likely in port to unload cargo and take on more merchandise. But it only afforded some time to meet with the elders from Ephesus. Travel was so slow and there was no such thing as jet lag. Waiting was a normal part of life.

Such were the harsh realities of life in those days. Nothing was easy. When I survey my travel itinerary in these modern times, I have little reason for complaining. It takes less than two days to reach most destinations around the world. Most of my "power walking" is between gates at airports for tight connections. My greatest danger is the insane driving in countries like India. I am very thankful for my time in world history. I do not want to exchange my travel journal with that of Paul or any of the early Christians.

Yet, I recognize that life is very compressed today. We can force more into a few days than they could in a few weeks or months. Ironically, this contributes to our stress and lack of deep relationships. We have become willing slaves of the clock. It may be wise to take some lessons from the early Christians. I am tired of constantly feeling rushed.

Yet, when it comes to travel, I feel spoiled. We are part of the soft generation. I do not consider 3rd class on an airplane to be a sacrifice. Jesus said, "To whom much is given, much is required." (Luke 12:48) We have no excuse for not impacting the world with the gospel in our days.

Paul's Personal Ministry Philosophy: Acts 20:18-27

As Paul gathered the elders of the church at Ephesus around him on the beach, he shared his personal ministry philosophy that made him so fruitful for Jesus Christ. Rather than giving a commentary on these verses, I am going to let them speak for themselves. These verses always impact me.

"18) And when they had come to him, he said to them, "You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, 19) serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; 20) how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, 21) solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and

faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. 22) And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, 23) except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. 24) But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.” 25) And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face. 26) Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. 27) For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.”

The Secret Weapon: Acts 20:24

“But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.”

Paul was not sharing lofty words. This was his secret weapon. It disarmed both sin and Satan. It took the sting out of ridicule and rejection. Hunger, disease, sickness, and poisonous snakes were no threat to him. Affliction, persecution, and threats of physical harm did not alarm him. Why? Because his secret weapon nailed fear to the cross.

This is what Jesus taught in Matthew 16:24-26; “24) Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. 25) For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. 26) For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”

When you die to self then you are truly ready to live unto Christ and others without fear. There is nothing more to lose. When you live for self, then worry, fear, and anxiety will be your constant companion. Every decision, step, or possible venture in life will be measured by your own perceived gain or loss.

Jesus said; “28) Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” (Matthew 10:28) The text goes on to say, then you will be able to discover God’s love, care and provision for you. When you accept His responsibility for your life then you will be flooded with love, joy, and peace despite your outward circumstances.

Paul was walking by faith in the spirit and not living according to the flesh. Full surrender to this principle is liberating. It changes everything. It changes your perspective, values, pleasures and mindset. Pleasing God becomes your focus and not self. Faith floods your life as fear evaporates. Worry and anxiety shrink away and are replaced with bold confidence.

No, Paul was not indulging in lofty speech. He was verbalizing the secret weapon that lifts every fully surrendered believer beyond the grips of mediocrity. Paul was fully reconciled with his future because he was fully surrendered to the love, goodness, providence, and will of God.

This principle was the fuel behind his words in Romans 8:37-39; “37) But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. 38) For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, 39) nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Paul's Warning: Acts 20:25-31

“(25) And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face. 26) Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. 27) For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God. 28) Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. 29) I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30) and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. 31) Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.”

Satan works hard on two fronts. First, he seeks to hinder the gospel and prevent people from coming to Christ. Jesus talked about this in the parable of the sower. (See Mark 4:14-15) Paul also talked about it in 2 Corinthians 4:3-4. Satan uses many ploys to run interference against the gospel message.

But secondly, he seeks to prevent Christians from growing up and reaching fruitful maturity in Christ. In this text, Paul was warning the Christians in Ephesus about the coming wolf pack that would be feeding on them. (See Acts 20:28-29)

Let me be blunt: Satan wants to stunt your spiritual growth. He wants you to be carnal, fleshly, stuck in sinful bondage, ignorant of God's Word, confused about kingdom principles, and dwarfed in the filling and power of the Holy Spirit. He does not want you to discover and exercise your spiritual gifts or walk in your authority “in Christ.”

This is why for three years Paul did not shrink away from declaring the whole counsel of God to them. (Vs 27) He wanted them step into their full position “in Christ.” He wanted them to fully comprehend their new life in Christ. He wanted them to put off the old and step into the new. He wanted them to live and walk in the power of the Holy Spirit. He wanted them to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth, and length, and height, and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that they might be filled up to all the fullness of God. (See Ephesians 3:14-21)

Paul later wrote the Epistle of Ephesians to this group to ground them in biblical truth and move them to Spirit empowered maturity. He wanted them to reach their full potential “in Christ.” He wanted them to grow up into all the fulness of Christ.

Let me summarize. The Christian life begins with understanding and putting faith in Jesus Christ through the simple gospel message. This brings salvation. Then starts the process of learning, growing, and becoming mature, fruitful, and powerful by learning to live and walk in your renewed spirit rather than your sinful flesh. Satan is desperate to stop this process in the life of every believer.

He wants to keep you ignorant, distracted, entangled in shameful sinful bondage while being confused about the ministry of the Holy Spirit. He wants you to wallow in anger and bitterness through broken relationships and keep you a babe in Christ through deception and false teaching. Such was Paul’s warning to elders of the church at Ephesus as recorded in Acts 20:17-38.

What is your recourse? Grow up and become everything God called you to be “in Christ.” Don’t settle for spiritual mediocrity. Get in the Word, seek the ministry of the Holy Spirit in your life and start growing. Become the man or woman “in Christ” that God wants you to be.

Commended to God: Acts 20:32

“32) And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

Paul poured himself into making disciples. He taught. He preached. He prayed with people. He prayed for people. He pointed them to Jesus. He befriended them. He served them. He encouraged them. But in the end, he could not force them to change or grow.

They needed to embrace Jesus and pursue Him and His fullness for themselves. They needed to build on truth, study the Word, and seek the ministry of the Holy Spirit in their own lives. That’s what makes this verse so profound.

Paul commended them to God and the Word of His grace. He left them at the feet of Jesus. His conscience was clear. His motives had been pure. There was nothing more to do. His job among them was done. It was time for them to solo with Jesus or crash and burn.

Paul refused to waste his life changing diapers on spiritual babies who refused to put in the effort to grow. Those who stepped into their inheritance “in Christ” no longer needed his help.

They were soaring in their own walk with God. They were in tune with the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Their lives were sanctified. They had come to freedom over sin and Satan. They were being transformed by the power of God. They were living holy lives. They were obedient to the truth and becoming fruitful for the kingdom. They were impacting others.

Early in my Christian life, I was admonished to assume responsibility for my own relationship with God and “press on” with fervor and holy abandonment. (Philippians 3:7-16) God prompted me to reject the average and zealously embrace every blessing “in Christ.”

I have sincerely tried to follow that calling. I have had ups and downs. I have had times of distraction, but God has been 100% faithful. His Word is my delight. His Spirit is my guide and teacher. After nearly fifty years of walking with God, momentum is building like a tsunami. I may have been a tough case, but Jesus has changed me into a new man. I love Him more than anything or anyone. My “spirit cup” overflows.

I do not say this to brag. To the contrary, I say this to truthfully testify that there is no end to the surpassing blessings and value of walking with God. I can say with Paul that intimate communion with Jesus Christ is a surpassing value that is irreplaceable.

I now commend you to the word of His grace. I admonish you to forsake this world and seek God through Jesus Christ. Dig deep into the Word and trust the Holy Spirit to be your teacher and guide. Embrace the surpassing value that walking with Jesus holds for you.

The Phenomenal Potential of Three Years: Acts 20:31-32

“31) Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears. 32) And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

These two verses beg the question; “How long should it take to raise up mature and fruitful disciples of Christ?” I confess the answer is shocking, but it should be around three years!

Granted, these results are not attained by attending church one hour a week or reading two or three verses a day. That is a recipe for carnality, but the potential of three focused years “in Christ” is phenomenal!

Think about this; Jesus turned out 12 apostles as a result of His three-year ministry on earth. Paul turned out mature and fruitful elders during his three years in Macedonia. It doesn’t have to take 30-40 years to be transformed by the Holy Spirit and the power of the gospel. But we are talking about three years of devotion, study, focus, and obedience.

Three years seems to be the abundant maturity age for many fruit bearing plants like grape vines, berries, and even some trees. Many go on to produce fruit for years. This pattern in nature is no mistake.

Don't settle for mediocrity. Don't waste your life being stuck. Healing and wholeness can come quickly. The gospel, God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit can bring radical growth and transformation.

Paul's Work Ethic: Acts 20:33-35

"33) I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes. 34) You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me. 35) In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' ""

We now see Paul's philosophy of a Christian work ethic. He not only taught it, he modeled it! When support for the ministry team was low, he was the first to work with his own two hands to generate revenue. Getting a job fit within his thinking of God's provision.

He mentioned this again Philippians 4:10-13 where he talked about cycles on both lack and abundance. There were times they got ample missions support, there were other times he secured work toward self-sustainability.

One of the benefits of a job was building positive relationships. Earlier in Acts 18:1-3 he shared the story of meeting Aquila and Priscilla on the job site making tents. They eventually became part of his ministry team.

If you are alone and isolated in life, think of getting a job that provides an opportunity to meet people. It can be therapeutic, help provide for your physical needs and your social needs. It might also be providential in advancing the gospel.

Numerous times over the years both Debby and I have worked various jobs to help make ends meet. Some of the relational connections formed on those jobs resulted in the spread of the gospel and provided founding families to start new churches.

If your perspective and your attitudes are Christ honoring, your job or your business will most likely become a key part of your ministry. God loves to send His people into the marketplace as salt and light in the world.

The Final Farewell: Acts 20:36-38

"36) When he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. 37) And they began to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him, 37) grieving especially over the word which he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they were accompanying him to the ship."

These three verses show the depth of love and affection the leaders of the church in Ephesus had for Paul. This was his final farewell. He knew that they would not see him again face to face. (See Acts 20:25)

They knelt and prayed. They wept and cried. They embraced and kissed him. The expression of affection was real and genuine. Let me emphasize, these were men. Their hearts were welded in agape love.

Salvation and the inner transformation of the Holy Spirit aims at healing the inner hurts and wounds. It removes calluses, pulls down walls, and makes the hardest of men soft.

Many men struggle with love. In John 21:15-17, Jesus exposed Peter's love gap. In Ephesians 5:25-33, Paul pinpointed the love challenge many husbands have toward their wives. In 1 Timothy 1:5, Paul pointed to agape love from a pure heart, good conscience, and sincere faith as the goal of his instruction. In John 13:34-35, Jesus made agape love the validation of true salvation. Paul began many of his epistles measuring faith, love and hope within the church. (See 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 2 Thessalonians 2:3 and Philippians 1:9-11) When Paul prayed for young Christians, being rooted in agape love was one of his requests. (See Ephesians 3:16-19)

There is a sense in which this sincere and spontaneous outpouring of love on Paul in Acts 21:36-38 was the validating crown of his ministry among them. He was loved. He had walked past their intellect and into the depth of their hearts. God had used him to pull down walls and build bridges. They were now healed and whole men.

There was an important reason why Luke recorded this very emotional farewell. I am convinced Paul needed it as much or more than all of them. It was his affirmation and validation. He left Macedonia with his love tank full. It was about to run empty with the affliction and persecution that awaited him.

Christian maturity is displayed best by overflowing agape cups that affirm and build up others. Purpose to become an agape love filling station for others. Top off the love tank of others on every occasion afforded you.

The Great Paradox: Acts 21:1-6

"1) When we had parted from them and had set sail, we ran a straight course to Cos and the next day to Rhodes and from there to Patara; 2) and having found a ship crossing over to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. 3) When we came in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left, we kept sailing to Syria and landed at Tyre; for there the ship was to unload its cargo. 4) After looking up the disciples, we stayed there seven days; and they kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem. 5) When our days there were ended, we left and started on our journey, while they all, with wives and children, escorted us until we were out of the city. After kneeling down on the beach and praying, we said farewell to one another. 6) Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home again."

Paul took advantage of his journey. He was either building new relationships to share the gospel or gathering believers together to build them up. He was a master of redeeming the time.

However, there is a troubling mystery introduced in verse 4. The disciples through the Spirit were warning Paul not to set foot in Jerusalem. This is consistent with Acts 20:23. It seems like he was receiving the same warning in every city where he traveled. In Acts 21:10-11, the prophet Agabus issued the same warning.

So the question is perplexing; “Why did Paul ignore all the warnings?” I have no solid answer. There are two sides of the coin. Was God trying to prevent him or was He preparing him? Either answer would fit the context. This is one of the great paradoxes in the New Testament.

Paul’s mind was settled. He had made a vow. He was bound for Jerusalem. Whether right or wrong, every warning came true. He was arrested and endured much affliction. But there is a positive note, because of his ordeal, the gospel became the focal point of every conversation. Error about the gospel was exposed as Paul was put on trial.

It can be argued that Paul’s afflictions from this point forward became the single greatest event to clarify, define, and defend the gospel in church history. God was at work. Much of the New Testament was written because of Paul’s ordeal.

This lines up with the words of Jesus to Ananias at the time of Paul’s conversion; “15) But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; 16) for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake.”” (Acts 9:15-16) And so it started happening.

I am convinced that we cannot thwart the plans, providence and sovereignty of God for our lives. This gives me great joy and confidence in walking with God. I do not live on eggshells. I believe God is greater than my strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures, and daily decisions. I am fully reconciled with my past, present, and future. My life is in His hands to fulfill His Divine purpose.

The Mystery of Philip's Four Daughters: Acts 21:7-9

“7) When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and after greeting the brethren, we stayed with them for a day. 8) On the next day we left and came to Caesarea, and entering the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, we stayed with him. 9) Now this man had four virgin daughters who were prophetesses.”

We now come to an intriguing portion of Scripture. As Paul and his team journeyed toward Jerusalem, they came to the home of Philip the evangelist and stayed with him for seven days.

He was one of the seven deacons chosen in Acts 6:5. He was also the Philip featured in Acts 8:4-40. The Holy Spirit worked through him in extraordinary ways. According to Acts 8:6-7; 13, God used him to perform many signs and great miracles as he preached the gospel. He became a significant leader in the early church.

It also happened that he had four virgin daughters who were prophetesses. (See Acts 21:9) The gift includes a speaking forth of God's word through the power of the Holy Spirit. It can be either "foretelling" future events, or "forth-telling" a message of God to His people. According to 1 Corinthians 14:1-6, prophecy is a gift to the church and is used in public.

It should be noted that there is no gender distinction for spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12-14. They are distributed to the entire body of Christ by the Holy Spirit.

This seems to be at odds with Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 where he required women to remain silent in the church. It is one of the tensions in the New Testament without a clear solution. Colossians 4:15 also mentions "Nympha and the church that is in her house." 1 Timothy 8:8-13 and Titus 2:1-5 leaves the door open for an office of deaconess in the church.

The mystery is solved for me under a discussion of church leadership. It appears that head pastors and overseers were godly men. All other gifts and ministries were under their headship and authority. I do not see the New Testament barring women from being anointed by the Holy Spirit or exercising anointed spiritual gifts when under proper authority.

John 15:1-16 is gender neutral. Jesus wants all of His followers to abide in Him and bear much fruit. There is no distinction in this text between men and women. Jesus views us all as His "Bride."

In fact, much of the modern mission force around the world is composed of single women. I celebrate them and take my hat off to them. We owe them a debt of gratitude beyond description.

The Mystery of Agabus: Acts 21:10-14

"10) As we were staying there for some days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. 11) And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, 'This is what the Holy Spirit says: 'In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.' " 12) When we had heard this, we as well as the local residents began begging him not to go up to Jerusalem. 13) Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." 14) And since he would not be persuaded, we fell silent, remarking, "The will of the Lord be done!""

Not much is known about Agabus. He was used by God to warn the early church of pending danger. He was the prophet in Acts 11:27-30 that stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit

that a great famine would come all over the world. This happened in the days of Claudius. The church at Antioch took heed and sent relief to the church in Judea.

In Acts 21:10-11; he came down from Judea to Caesarea and entered the house of Philip the evangelist while Paul was staying there. He seemed to have an itinerant ministry in the early church. Prophets had a crucial role in early church leadership. (See Acts 13:1; 1 Corinthians 14:1-5; Ephesians 4:11-16)

They had two primary roles. First, they would foretell future events. Agabus fulfilled this mission on both occasions he was mentioned in the book of Acts. Second, they would teach, exhort, and edify the church. (1 Corinthians 14:3) In this role they would hold other prophets accountable for their message. (See 1 Corinthians 14:29-33) They protected truth and biblical accuracy in the early church.

Upon entering the house of Philip, Agabus immediately took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands. The outer belt or slash was used in public to hold robes tight, but they were often removed when relaxing in the home. They were often hung on a rack near the entrance of a house, with sandals placed underneath.

On this occasion, numerous people were present, but without saying a word, the Holy Spirit led Agabus to take Paul's slash. That in itself was significant. Then the binding of his own feet and hands was a profound object lesson. This was followed by his message; "This is what the Holy Spirit says: 'In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'"

The reader is again left with the nagging question; "Was the Holy Spirit trying to prevent Paul from going to Jerusalem, or was he preparing him for persecution, bonds, and imprisonment?" It is clear that all present except Paul began begging him not to go up to Jerusalem. (Acts 21:12)

It is impossible to second-guess history, but Paul remained resolute and determined to keep his vow in Jerusalem. He was ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. He was taking up his cross and following Jesus.

I offer no opinion. I wrestle within myself with this text. I desire to be as reconciled and at peace with my future as was Paul. He fully surrendered himself to the grace and sovereignty of God. Philippians 1:20-21 sheds some light on Paul's inner dedication to Christ. He understood that death was a promotion.

A Few Non-eventful Days: Acts 21:15-16

"15) After these days we got ready and started on our way up to Jerusalem. 16) Some of the disciples from Caesarea also came with us, taking us to Mnason of Cyprus, a disciple of long standing with whom we were to lodge."

Nothing in these two verses leap off the page and grabs your attention. They had a few days of non-eventful travel. They lodged with a disciple named Mnason of Cyprus. It doesn't even appear that he was a previous acquaintance of Paul. So what can we take away from these verses?

Some days when walking with God are non-eventful. They are calm and ordinary. I look forward to these days, especially after a packed traveling and ministry schedule. I enjoy smelling the roses.

There are days I don't get a lot done. I just relax, enjoy my time in the Word and prayer, pursue a few hobbies, and lay around. If weather permits, I might head to the airport and do some recreational flying. In the summer, I like spending time in the garden. I find these things very therapeutic. I like having time to myself.

At heart, I am a homebody. I welcome times with no activity in my life. These days used to give me a guilt trip. I would look back and my inner voice would say; "You wasted this day!" I now realize these days are important. They charge the physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional batteries. I am learning to welcome them!

Granted, these days are an exception to the rule, but they are a gift from God. Verses like Acts 21:15-16 are like the calm before the storm. Take advantage of them, things will change.

Tension Brewing: Acts 21:17-26

"17) After we arrived in Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. 18) And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. 19) After he had greeted them, he began to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. 20) And when they heard it they began glorifying God; and they said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law; 21) and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs. 22) What, then, is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. 23) Therefore do this that we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; 24) take them and purify yourself along with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads; and all will know that there is nothing to the things which they have been told about you, but that you yourself also walk orderly, keeping the Law. 25) But concerning the Gentiles who have believed, we wrote, having decided that they should abstain from meat sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication." 26) Then Paul took the men, and the next day, purifying himself along with them, went into the temple giving notice of the completion of the days of purification, until the sacrifice was offered for each one of them."

Religious jealousy is deadly. This text is both sad and tragic. If understood correctly, it was not the Orthodox Jews who hated Paul, it was his Jewish brethren who believed in Jesus but were also zealous for the Law.

James and the elders were glad to see and hear testimony from Paul about what great things God was doing among the gentiles, and yet they were rightly concerned. The verdict of the Jerusalem council had been celebrated by the gentiles, but not embraced by the Jewish believers. (See Acts 15)

This resulted in three problems. First, the gospel was not clearly defined and defended. Second, it created a split between the Jewish church and the Gentile church. And finally, it fueled open hostilities between the two groups.

A full generation of believers were left confused and divided over this dilemma. Significant resolution did not come until the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the temple system in 70 AD. The book of Hebrews was written to show that Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of the sacrificial system.

When you do the math, the sacrificial system remained intact for around 40 years after the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. Think of the confusion faced by the early church. Some scholars see this dilemma being the issue addressed in Hebrews 6:1-8. Some were abandoning justification by faith in Christ alone and returning to the Law and its system of works surrounding the temple.

Notice in Acts 21:18, James was the leader in Jerusalem that welcomed Paul but was concerned about the implications of him being in the city. His tone of voice betrayed the tension and his concern that a major clash was about to explode in Jerusalem over Paul's presence. At the same time, some see Paul's insistence to go to Jerusalem as intentionally provoking the inevitable collision.

According to Acts 15:13, it was James that brought resolution to the Jerusalem council. At the same time, the books of James and Galatians have been held in tension by scholars for centuries. They beg the question; "Is justification by faith alone or are works of the Law also needed?" Martin Luther wanted to remove the book of James from the Bible.

Ironically, God used Roman hostility and the persecution of both Israel and the gentile Christians to help bridge the chasm. They suddenly needed one another.

Unfortunately, Christianity has endured centuries of splits, tension, and divisions between denominations and churches. Wars have been fought between competing Christian groups. Much persecution has come not from the world but from different segments within the Christian church.

It appears from this text that Paul's afflictions and persecution was not from the Romans, but from believing Jews. History screams at the church to focus on Christ and the gospel. It is always disastrous when religious zeal replaces a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

The Mystery of Paul in the Temple: Acts 21:23-26

"23) Therefore do this that we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; 24) take them and purify yourself along with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads; and all will know that there is nothing to the things which they have been told about you, but that you yourself also walk orderly, keeping the Law. 25) But concerning the Gentiles who have believed, we wrote, having decided that they should abstain from meat sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication." 26) Then Paul took the men, and the next day, purifying himself along with them, went into the temple giving notice of the completion of the days of purification, until the sacrifice was offered for each one of them."

James' solution to prevent a riot actually caused a riot. He instructed Paul to take four other Jewish men who were under a vow and pay their way for purification and keeping their vow in the temple. It is doubtful that Paul's vow had him present in Jerusalem to keep every temple ordinance under the Law. Christ was his sin offering, so he most likely was offering his valuation as a Jewish man and possibly a thanks offering. The absence of details related to what Paul was doing in the temple sadly leaves many unanswered questions.

Paul's most previous trip to Jerusalem was to participate in the Jerusalem council. James alludes to this in verse 25; "But concerning the gentiles who have believed, we wrote, having decided that they should abstain from meat sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication." But Paul was not a gentile believer, he was Jewish. Technically, this exemption did not apply to him.

No matter the extent of his participation in the sacrificial system, the advice from James was acceptable to him. It is here that we are left in the dark as to how much of the ceremonial Law the early Jewish believers kept and practiced. Paul maintained personal liberty to carry out some aspects of the Law. (See 1 Corinthians 9:19-23)

Jesus Himself spent much time in the temple and fulfilled all righteous requirements of the Law. This is why He was baptized by John the Baptist. (See Matthew 3:13-17) It must be remembered that Jesus was zealous for the temple because it was "His Fathers house." (See John 2:13-17; Mark 11:17) He regarded it as a house of prayer for all nations.

I maintain Paul shared this value with Jesus. His vow included fasting and praying. He was most likely in the temple to keep a seven day fast in accordance with Isaiah 58:5-12. Paul was not backsliding or compromising his doctrine of justification by faith "in Christ", he was most likely interceding for revival and awakening for all nations.

Jesus came to fulfill the Law. I maintain that God never intended the rift between Jewish and Gentile believers. He wanted the temple system to be an object lesson and talking points to illustrate the gospel. This is the mastery of the books of Hebrews and 1 Peter. We are a living building and a holy priesthood. We are a people for God's own possession. (See 1 Peter 2:4-10) Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of all types, shadows, pictures, illustrations, and prophecies of the Messiah in the Old Testament.

When a Jewish person turns to the Lord, the blinders should be taken away. (2 Corinthians 3:12-18) When a gentile turns to the Lord, the Old Testament should come alive with insights about Jesus Christ. (Read the book of Hebrews) I agree with Paul that the god of this world works hard to blind people to the gospel and run interference against the kingdom of light. (See 2 Corinthians 4:3-4)

Tragically, nearly all pieces of the puzzle of what Paul was doing in the temple are missing. It is a theological black hole. It is at this point in the story that Luke leaves his readers to walk by faith and not by sight. Welcome to the mystery of Christian liberty.

The Week of Purification: Acts 21:27-36

“27) When the seven days were almost over, the Jews from Asia, upon seeing him in the temple, began to stir up all the crowd and laid hands on him, 28) crying out, “Men of Israel, come to our aid! This is the man who preaches to all men everywhere against our people and the Law and this place; and besides he has even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.” 29) For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with him, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. 30) Then all the city was provoked, and the people rushed together, and taking hold of Paul they dragged him out of the temple, and immediately the doors were shut. 31) While they were seeking to kill him, a report came up to the commander of the Roman cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. 32) At once he took along some soldiers and centurions and ran down to them; and when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. 33) Then the commander came up and took hold of him, and ordered him to be bound with two chains; and he began asking who he was and what he had done. 34) But among the crowd some were shouting one thing and some another, and when he could not find out the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. 35) When he got to the stairs, he was carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob; 36) for the multitude of the people kept following them, shouting, “Away with him!””

Things went from peace and calm to disorder and chaos in a hurry. Paul was nearing the end of his seven days of purification. Some scholars believe this had something to do with the vow of a nazirite. Acts 18:18 makes mention of his making a vow and cutting his hair. This may have marked the beginning of the days of his separation to the Lord. (Read Numbers Chapter 6)

The person under this vow would abstain from wine and strong drink, any grape juice or fresh or dried grapes during the time of his separation. The vow had a starting day and an ending time

that included a time of purification and some sacrifices on his behalf at the tabernacle or later in the temple. According to Numbers 6:8: “all the days of his separation he is holy to the Lord.”

It was Paul's goal to end his vow of separation in Jerusalem during the celebration of Pentecost. (See Acts 20:16) It is significant that he picked Pentecost to end his vow. This celebrated the giving of the Holy Spirit and the beginning of the church age. The Promise of the Father was fulfilled. (See Acts 1:3-8)

The other four men designated by James were under the same vow and going through the purification week to end their vow of separation as well. They were almost done with their week of purification in the temple when the riot occurred. Contrary to the charges against him, Paul was devoted to a very solemn and holy week of solitude and purification in the temple. It included a focused time of prayer and fasting. It is likely that he did not leave the temple day or night during his week of purification. He was not mixing with people. He was in complete solitude with God.

The Jews from Asia failed to get their facts straight. They assumed Paul had brought Greeks past the court of the gentiles and into the temple with him. They assumed Paul was despising and defiling the temple. They assumed Paul was opposed to the Law. To the contrary, he picked Pentecost to honor God and celebrate the giving of the Holy Spirit by keeping a holy vow of separation to God found in the Law. It had to end in the temple.

This also helps explain Paul's insistence on going to Jerusalem despite multiple warnings. He was determined to keep his personal vow to God. The timing between Acts 18:18 and Acts 21:26 argue that Paul was under his vow of separation for three years.

The irony of Paul's arrest now comes into full focus. Every charge against him was false. He was innocent as was Jesus a number of years earlier. Ironically, this time it was Jewish believers seeking to put a fellow Christian to death. The craziest twist to the whole story was that Paul was saved from death by the intervention of pagan Roman soldiers.

Paul's Arrest: Acts 21:37-40

“37) As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the commander, “May I say something to you?” And he said, “Do you know Greek? 38) Then you are not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?” 39) But Paul said, “I am a Jew of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no insignificant city; and I beg you, allow me to speak to the people.” 40) When he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the stairs, motioned to the people with his hand; and when there was a great hush, he spoke to them in the Hebrew dialect, saying,”

The riot was violent and deadly. They intended to kill Paul. The confusion was terrible. A few charged that Paul had brought gentiles into the temple. It was not true, but they concluded he

had therefore defiled the holy place. They also leveled the charge that he was preaching against both the Jewish people and the Law. All Jerusalem was in confusion. (Acts 21:31)

It appears that the lines between Orthodox Judaism and Messianic Judaism were beginning to blur in Jerusalem. This fed the confusion. There seemed to be a concession that you could be a follower of Jesus if you kept the whole Law. Jewish Christians were tolerated as long as they didn't rock the temple system boat.

The Roman commander thought Paul was the leader of a band of Egyptian assassins who had previously led a revolt. He imagined the worst and thought he had captured a "Most Wanted" criminal and had him in chains. (Acts 21:38) I suspect brutality in the way the soldiers handled Paul.

Paul's appeal to address the crowd was classic. (Acts 21:37) It clarified his Jewish identity to the Roman Commander and afforded him the opportunity to share his testimony and plant the seeds of the gospel. He exploited every opportunity to point people to Jesus Christ.

But there is one question that haunts me about the text and the rest of the book of Acts. If this riot was fueled by Jewish believers as Acts 21:20-21 indicates, where were the voices of Peter, James, and John in the defense of Paul and the gospel? They are nowhere mentioned in Acts 22-28.

I understand that Peter and John may have been absent on a missionary journey and news and travel were slow in those days. But James and the other church elders were present and appeared to remain silent. (See Acts 21:18) Make no mistake, it was the Sanhedrin and the old guard that stepped in to lead the formal opposition against Paul. No one dared speak on Paul's behalf.

To his credit, Peter did appeal for peace and briefly defended Paul in 2 Peter 3:14-18. The timing of his Epistle was most likely well into Paul's imprisonment. It could be deemed as "too little too late." Nevertheless, he did endorse Paul and his writings as being "Scripture."

This drops the Bible student at the doorstep of Philippians 1:7-30 where Paul clearly explains his calling to define and defend the pure gospel message by both his life and his death. He clearly understood his calling. The word "gospel" is used six times in Philippians chapter one. It was the theme of Paul's life.

There is much confusion about "the gospel" in the modern church. We have a social gospel, humanitarian gospel, woke gospel, prosperity gospel, religious gospel, ritualistic gospel, and good works gospel. All of them feed confusion and cloud the true message of the gospel. It is well past time for a radical return to the writings of Paul that define and defend the true gospel.

The Power of a Testimony: Acts 21:40-22:11

“40) When he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the stairs, motioned to the people with his hand; and when there was a great hush, he spoke to them in the Hebrew dialect, saying,” “1) Brethren and fathers, hear my defense which I now offer to you.” 2) And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew dialect, they became even more quiet; and he said, 3) “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today. 4) I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons, 5) as also the high priest and all the Council of the elders can testify. From them I also received letters to the brethren, and started off for Damascus in order to bring even those who were there to Jerusalem as prisoners to be punished. 6) “But it happened that as I was on my way, approaching Damascus about noontime, a very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around me, 7) and I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’ 8) And I answered, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And He said to me, ‘I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting.’ 9) And those who were with me saw the light, to be sure, but did not understand the voice of the One who was speaking to me. 10) And I said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Get up and go on into Damascus, and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do.’ 11) But since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me and came into Damascus.”

This text is very insightful. After being led away in chains, Paul spoke to the commander in Greek and sought permission to speak to the people from the stairs. When he motioned with his hands, a hush came over the people. Then Paul addressed them in the Hebrew dialect. Did you notice what just happened?

Paul was at least bilingual. He most likely knew Latin as well. He was a highly educated man and could read, write, and speak in multiple languages. He was very scholarly.

Yet when given the opportunity to address the people, Paul resorted to his testimony. Never downplay the value and power of your testimony. It is the irrefutable story of what Jesus Christ had done in you. There is much to learn from the way Paul told his story.

A good testimony should briefly tell the story of your old life and then focus on how you came to faith in Jesus Christ. It should point others to the gospel and encourage them to turn to Jesus Christ as well.

Paul often used his story as the introduction to the gospel message when speaking to a new group. (See Acts 26) This gives them context and answers the question; “Why should I listen to you?”

If you know Jesus Christ, you have a testimony. I encourage you to have a short version and a longer version. Then start sharing it with people. A simple opening might be; "Let me share my story and how Jesus Christ has changed my life."

Why is this important? It enables you to start sharing the gospel! It is the starting point of being a witness. (Acts 1:8) The more you share your story, you will get better each time. Your testimony can be used one-on-one with another person or during a group setting. I encourage you to prepare your story and have it ready in your ministry toolbox.

Seeing the Light: Acts 22:6-11

“(6) But it happened that as I was on my way, approaching Damascus about noontime, a very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around me, 7) and I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’ 8) And I answered, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And He said to me, ‘I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting.’ 9) And those who were with me saw the light, to be sure, but did not understand the voice of the One who was speaking to me. 10) And I said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Get up and go on into Damascus, and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do.’ 11) But since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me and came into Damascus.”

When someone suddenly understands the gospel and turns to the Lord, they often say; “I saw the light!” Paul literally saw the light, and it blinded Him.

It is fascinating to study the word “light” in the Bible. It is used many times in both the Old and New Testaments. God spoke light into existence on the first day of creation. (See Genesis 1:3-4) It is used of the sun and stars. (Psalm 74:16; Psalms 148:3) It is essential for life. (John 1:4-5) It is often used of God’s Word. (Psalm 119:105 & 130) It is used to describe God Himself. (1 John 1:5, Psalm 27:1; Psalm 90:8) It is also used for the gospel. (2 Corinthians 4:4-6) Christians are called “sons of light.” (1 Thessalonians 5:5; Ephesians 5:8) God dwells in unapproachable light. (1 Timothy 6:16)

We now face the question, “What form of light did Saul see as he traveled to Damascus?” It was none other than the glorified Christ! Twice Jesus said to His Disciples; “I am the light of the world.” (John 8:12; 9:5) His eyes are now a flame of fire (Revelation 1:14; 19:12), and He will bring Satan and his kingdom of darkness to an end by the appearance of His coming. (2 Thessalonians 2:8) There is no way to describe the glory and brightness of the resurrected Christ. When Paul encountered Him on the road to Damascus, he was blinded.

I now ask the question; “Have you seen the light?” Do you understand the gospel? Have you put personal faith in Jesus Christ? Have you been delivered from the kingdom of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of light? Does the Holy Spirit illuminate the Word of God to you as you read Scripture? Have you been enlightened to know the will and ways of God? (See

Ephesians 1:18) Are you living and walking in truth and light? Are you a light and witness to those around you?

My conversion was not as dramatic as that of Saul of Tarsus, but I vividly remember when God turned the light of the gospel on for me. I responded by trusting in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. The Holy Spirit came into my life and God's Word became a light unto my path.

What is your story? Do you have a testimony of Jesus changing your life? Have you seen the light? Have you come to the light? You have no excuse! Jesus Christ desires to reveal Himself to you in all of His Glory!

The Trance: Acts 23:17-21

““(17) It happened when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I fell into a trance, 18) and I saw Him saying to me, ‘Make haste, and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about Me.’ 19) And I said, ‘Lord, they themselves understand that in one synagogue after another I used to imprison and beat those who believed in You. 20) And when the blood of Your witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the coats of those who were slaying him.’ 21) And He said to me, ‘Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’ ””

This introduces a new chapter in Paul's story. Verse 18 was very specific; “and I saw Him saying to me, ‘Make haste, and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about Me.’” It is not clear during which trip back to Jerusalem Paul fell into a trance and was warned by God to flee. He made several trips to Jerusalem.

His argument with God recorded in Acts 22:19-20 fell on deaf ears. God was not listening to him. His past work as a persecutor of Christians did not enhance his story or influence with the Orthodox Jews. To the contrary, they viewed him as a traitor.

Three things according to the text accompanied Paul's persecution of Christians. They were beaten, imprisoned, and killed for their faith. All three eventually happened to Paul.

His final quote from Jesus in Acts 22:21 ended his address to the crowd; “Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles.” Again, God warned him to flee from Jerusalem. Twice in this text he received the same command to flee.

Two plaguing questions nag the reader: “Why was Paul back in Jerusalem?” “When did God change His mind?” Several times on his way back to Jerusalem God warned him of the fate that would befall him. (Acts 20:23; 21:10-12) Many begged him not to return.

The book of Acts gives no answer to these questions. They remain a mystery. Was Paul's presence in Jerusalem contrary to the clear will of God? I confess, I wrestle with this issue. Acts 22:17-21 does nothing to settle the dilemma.

Nevertheless, God worked mightily through Paul as a result of his imprisonment. Listen very carefully to what I am about to say. Do not stretch it beyond face value. Paul's story screams that our missteps and innocent disobedience cannot nullify the providence and power of God in our lives. This points directly to Romans 8:26-28. God does not give up on us, but He causes all things to work together for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose.

I believe there are many Christians who are sidelined in life because the enemy has them believing they have disobeyed God and missed His will for them. Paul shines as an example that we should forget the past and press on in seeking and serving Jesus. (See Philippians 3:12-16)

This applies to both big mistakes years ago and small mess-ups yesterday. Don't let the enemy hitch you to a whipping post over shortcomings in your past! We all have them! Jesus can give you a new future, but your past is etched in stone. It can be forgiven but not changed!

No matter your past or present circumstances, Jesus calls you to follow Him starting right now with new devotion and abandonment. Keep in mind, our calling is first and foremost "to Him" and then "for Him." Throughout his entire life, Paul's #1 goal was to know Jesus intimately. (See Philippians 3:10-11) That never changed!

No external circumstance can thwart this calling. You can start flourishing in your communion with God in a prison cell, in the bonds of an addiction, a bad relationship, or a dead-end career. The turn-around is always personal revival through a right relationship with Jesus Christ and walking in the Spirit. No matter your past, you can start living a fruitful life!

Roman Citizenship: Acts 22:22-29

"22) They listened to him up to this statement, and then they raised their voices and said, 'Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live!' 23) And as they were crying out and throwing off their cloaks and tossing dust into the air, 24) the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, stating that he should be examined by scourging so that he might find out the reason why they were shouting against him that way. 25) But when they stretched him out with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, 'Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman and uncondemned?' 26) When the centurion heard this, he went to the commander and told him, saying, 'What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman.' 27) The commander came and said to him, 'Tell me, are you a Roman?' And he said, 'Yes.' 28) The commander answered, 'I acquired this citizenship with a large sum of money.' And Paul said, 'But I was actually born a citizen.' 29) Therefore those who were about to examine him immediately let go of him; and the commander also was afraid when he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had put him in chains."

Because Paul addressed the crowd in the Hebrew dialect and not in Greek, the commander most likely did not understand Paul's address to the Jewish people. He merely saw their reaction and concluded that Paul was guilty of a grievous crime.

It escapes reason why the commander missed Paul's concession in Acts 21:39 to the commander that he was a citizen. Maybe it was the heat of the moment, but this detail was totally missed by the commander in the heat of the riot.

As soon as the soldiers were back in the barracks, the commander ordered Paul to be examined by scourging. Jesus Himself was scourged before His crucifixion. This is often done by stretching a man between two whipping posts and either whipping him or burning him with hot tongs. The method was used to force a confession of guilt. Many innocent men and women falsely confessed to crimes to stop the terrible torture.

It was at this point that Paul questioned the commander about the legality of scourging a Roman citizen. That brought a swift halt to the proceedings as the commander reported the news of Paul's Roman citizenship to the centurion. It was strictly illegal to put a Roman citizen in chains or torture them in any way to get a confession of guilt. They had to be tried on the merit of the evidence. Though this brought relief from torture and bondage in chains, it did not bring his freedom from being held in custody.

As Paul's story unfolds, it seems that he and the commander established a friendship. Undoubtedly, Paul shared the gospel with him. According to Philippians 1:12-13 many soldiers entrusted to guard Paul were exposed to the gospel. Some became believers.

I believe that God puts people in our path for a reason. He wants us to be salt and light to everyone we meet. We are His witnesses in the world.

The First Hearing: Acts 22:30-23:5

"30) But on the next day, wishing to know for certain why he had been accused by the Jews, he released him and ordered the chief priests and all the Council to assemble, and brought Paul down and set him before them."

"1) Paul, looking intently at the Council, said, 'Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day.' 2) The high priest Ananias commanded those standing beside him to strike him on the mouth. 3) Then Paul said to him, 'God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Do you sit to try me according to the Law, and in violation of the Law order me to be struck?' 4) But the bystanders said, 'Do you revile God's high priest?' 5) And Paul said, 'I was not aware, brethren, that he was high priest; for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.' ""

So Paul's first hearing begins. The commander ordered the Sanhedrin to assemble and bring accusations against Paul. It was customary in both Jewish and Roman Law that the accused stand before his or her accusers.

This is reminiscent of the trial of Jesus, with the exception that Paul was not silent before his accusers. With Paul's first statement of innocence, the high priest commanded those present to strike him on the mouth.

Note that Paul claimed to have lived his life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to that day. It was not only a claim to innocence, it was a claim of righteousness according to the Law. (See Philippians 3:4-6) As to the righteousness found in the Law, Paul claimed to be blameless.

With the slap to the mouth, the high priest was violating the due process promised by the Law. (Leviticus 19:15). The high priest by his action demonstrated that he was both biased and prejudiced against Paul. He fell short as an impartial judge. He violated his oath of office. Paul quickly pointed out that the action was in total hypocrisy and contrary to the Law.

Paul then called the high priest a "whitewashed wall" and threatened God's judgment on him." The wording was on par with the charge of Jesus against the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23:27, except that Jesus called them "whitewashed tombs." It was an accusation of "covered-over corruption."

Yet with the revelation that Ananias was high priest, Paul quickly changed his tone and opted for honor and respect of the office. This self-restraint proved Paul's claim to be a righteous and honorable man.

The reader is left to imagine the observation of the Roman commander from this opening exchange. The high priest by his preemptive action did little to demonstrate restraint, patience, or the desire for truth and justice. Meanwhile, Paul took the high road and displayed honor and respect for authority. It was far from the temperament of a criminal.

There is an irony at this point in the story. It was Paul and not the high priest who was the Roman citizen and deserving of respect. By his actions, the high priest was slapping more than Paul in the face, he was slapping Rome! Worse yet, as the proceedings unfolded, not one charge of wrongdoing was leveled against Paul at this hearing.

As Christians, we are called to live with a clear conscience and show honor and respect for authority at the same time. Paul demonstrated this posture in this story. He was an example of being salt and light in the world. We are also called to win respect and favor by our good character.

Paul did nothing to hurt his testimony or the cause of Christ in this exchange. From the Roman commander's perspective; Round #1 went to Paul.

The Theological Brawl: Acts 23:6-10

“6) But perceiving that one group were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, Paul began crying out in the Council, “Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!” 7) As he said this, there occurred a dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. 8) For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. 9) And there occurred a great uproar; and some of the scribes of the Pharisaic party stood up and began to argue heatedly, saying, “We find nothing wrong with this man; suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?” 10) And as a great dissension was developing, the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them and ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force, and bring him into the barracks.”

What Paul did at this point was extremely crafty. Recognizing that his accusers were made up of Pharisees and Sadducees he reduced the hearing into a heated theological debate. He simply identified himself as a Pharisee and said “I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead.” The two groups have an unresolvable division over this matter.

It is equivalent to having a room full of Arminians and Calvinist’s and saying; “I am on trial for the doctrine of eternal security.” Immediately the room will be hopelessly divided. It will be reduced to a heated and fruitless debate.

Why? “ For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.” (Vs 8) Immediately, every Pharisee came to Paul’s defense and every Sadducee vehemently opposed him.

Not a single charge of wrongdoing was presented against Paul at this hearing. Rather it was reduced to a theological brawl. Whether by design or default, Paul accomplished his purpose. He displayed to the commander that he was not guilty of wrongdoing but rather the focus on unresolvable theological bias and controversy. The contention became so severe, the commander had to rescue Paul a second time. Paul was nearly torn apart.

Such can be the nature of theological fervor. At some point the brain shuts down and heated emotions take over. Sadly, many church business meetings and denominational differences have descended into this pit. I have found such debate to be fruitless and distasteful.

From the perspective of the commander, Paul just won round #2. He displayed that he was the victim of emotional fervor and not any criminal activity. He was indeed an innocent man.

Your Best Is Yet to Come: Acts 23:11

“11) But on the night immediately following, the Lord stood at his side and said, “Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also.””

This might qualify as the shortest paragraph in the book of Acts, but it speaks volumes. Many Jewish Christians abandoned and even opposed Paul, but Jesus did not abandon him.

In fact, the verse says; “On the night following, the Lord stood at his side.” This sounds like it went way far beyond just the sense that God’s presence was with him. The wording indicates that Jesus Himself appeared to Paul and stood at his side. Wow! What happened in this verse was monumental.

This brought huge encouragement to Paul. He was not walking alone. The words Jesus spoke to him are important: “Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also.” This comes as the first positive indication that Paul was following the leading of the Holy Spirit by going to Jerusalem. All else seemed contrary.

Jesus confirmed that Paul would also testify in Rome. He now had assurance that his life would not end in Jerusalem. No plan or plot of man can thwart the will of God. At this point, Paul knew that he was heading to Rome, and the state was going to cover his traveling expenses. God has a sense of humor!

This visitation and word from Jesus gave Paul unshakable courage through all the perils that lay before him. The journey would be difficult, but he was assured that he would not be alone.

I will argue that he was about to embark on the most fruitful years of his life. They were also the most difficult. This phase marked the transition from his public teaching and preaching ministry to his writing ministry. Much of the New Testament was about to be written.

I believe the final phase of life is intended to be the most fruitful and productive years for every child of God. We want ours to be. This is biblical. It was true for Joseph, Moses, David, Daniel, and it was about to become true for Paul. In this phase of life, years of experience are crowned with wisdom and often resources. God was about to use Paul’s writings to shape the course of human history.

Let me take a moment and address those who are approaching sixty or older. Don’t waste your senior years or your accumulated estate. Put the pedal to the metal for the glory of God and do some wise estate planning so that the state does not gobble up your accumulated wealth.

GoServ Global can help on three fronts. We can plug you into fruitful mission trips, investments in amazing mission projects around the world, and we can assist you with wise and godly estate planning.

One of our goals at GoServ Global is to help believers “out-live their lives!” This is done by making wise and intentional investments in the kingdom that will keep giving long after you are dead and gone. How can this be done?

It includes things like supporting orphans and widows in their distress, training and sponsoring national pastors and Christian workers, building churches, Christian Schools, and rural birthing and medical centers in 3rd world countries that have no medical access –all with the goal of undergirding fruitful evangelistic endeavors *and* raising up the next generation of Christian leaders!

Yes, the Great Commission includes things like providing essentials of food, clothing, safe drinking water, and long-term shelter for the poor and displaced in the name of Jesus Christ. The Great Commission involves connecting Christians with needs around the world and exploiting every opportunity to share the good news of Jesus Christ verbally. When done right, we become world-changers for the glory of God!

In this simple verse, Jesus stood by Paul and said; “Your work is not done! Your best is yet to come! Your final years will impact the world!” I believe Jesus wants to say the same to you and me! “Your best is yet to come!” I beg you, don’t waste your life, especially your senior years. Invest in the kingdom of God and lay up abundant treasures in heaven!

The Foolish Oath: Acts 23:12-15

“12) When it was day, the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. 13) There were more than forty who formed this plot. 14) They came to the chief priests and the elders and said, “We have bound ourselves under a solemn oath to taste nothing until we have killed Paul. 15) Now therefore, you and the Council notify the commander to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case by a more thorough investigation; and we for our part are ready to slay him before he comes near the place.””

This qualifies as a foolish oath. Paul had made an oath to be in Jerusalem by Pentecost. He kept his oath despite a clear indication that it would bring him bonds and imprisonment. Sure enough, it was happening.

This group of more than forty took an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. I wonder how many of them kept their oath? It would have been a quick way for God to dispose of Paul’s most zealous adversaries. Besides, what righteous person would make an oath to commit murder? This was a blatant violation of the 6th Commandment; “Thou shalt not commit murder.” (Exodus 20:13)

The worst part is that when they revealed their devious plot and foolish oath to the chief priests and elders, they were not met with rebuke or scorn. Instead, they were ready and eager to become accessories to murder. Not one of them weighed the scheme by the Word of God, but allowed bitterness and hatred to fuel their ungodly zeal.

When viewed from the sidelines, what they did was unbiblical, foolish, and wrong. It is wise to allow neutral and unbiased people to judge your plans before making a commitment or taking an oath. One wonders what their wives had to say about their foolish oath, especially after Paul left town under the watch of 200 armed soldiers?

This story screams that the majority can and often is wrong. It also shows that God has no problem thwarting the plans of the wicked. It is better to walk alone with God than join hands with a multitude in doing wrong.

Exposing the Evil Plot: Acts 23:16-22

“16) But the son of Paul’s sister heard of their ambush, and he came and entered the barracks and told Paul. 17) Paul called one of the centurions to him and said, “Lead this young man to the commander, for he has something to report to him.” 18) So he took him and led him to the commander and said, “Paul the prisoner called me to him and asked me to lead this young man to you since he has something to tell you.” 19) The commander took him by the hand and stepping aside, began to inquire of him privately, “What is it that you have to report to me?” 20) And he said, “The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down tomorrow to the Council, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more thoroughly about him. 21) So do not listen to them, for more than forty of them are lying in wait for him who have bound themselves under a curse not to eat or drink until they slay him; and now they are ready and waiting for the promise from you.” 22) So the commander let the young man go, instructing him, “Tell no one that you have notified me of these things.””

God has a way of exposing the plans of the wicked. Paul’s nephew caught wind of the conspiracy and brought warning to him. This is the only time in the Bible mention is made of Paul’s immediate family. This text mentions both his sister and a nephew. By this gesture, his immediate family seemed supportive of him and his cause in the gospel. This illustrates the principle that when others fail, family often comes through.

Paul’s growing favor with the commander and the soldiers guarding him is noted here. He was quickly able to secure the hearing of the commander.

With this disclosure, the wicked and devious nature of Paul’s opposition was disclosed. Had they succeeded in their plot to kill Paul, the very reputation and life of the commander was vulnerable. He would have to account for his failure to guard a Roman citizen entrusted to his care. He had dealt respectfully with the Sanhedrin, now they were secretly plotting against his authority, reputation, and life.

Sometimes God uses secular authority as His secret agents. Such was now the case with this commander. He gave orders for an armed escort to accompany Paul to Caesarea. By doing so, he not only frustrated the plot of the forty under the foolish vow, he also displayed to the Sanhedrin that he was privy to their devious ways.

This is an illustration of Romans 13:1-7. Paul recognized that those in civil authority are to be respected as ministers of God. Time and again God used civil authority to protect Paul and advance the cause of the gospel.

Paul spent the next few years in the constant care and company of Roman soldiers. He gained first-hand knowledge of the armor and weapons used by these elite soldiers and their unparalleled devotion to their calling.

One wonders if this experience served as the backdrop for his analogy of the armor of God in Ephesians 6:14-20 and his keen respect for the devotion of a Roman soldier as mentioned in 2 Timothy 2:3-4. He used them as an illustration of Christian loyalty and devotion to Christ.

A Picture of the Church: Acts 23:23-24

“23) And he called to him two of the centurions and said, “Get two hundred soldiers ready by the third hour of the night to proceed to Caesarea, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen.” 24) They were also to provide mounts to put Paul on and bring him safely to Felix the governor.”

Let this picture sink into your mind. Paul was surrounded by 200 foot soldiers with spears and swords and seventy horsemen. They also had weapons. Paul himself was mounted on a horse most likely in the middle of the escort. Two centurions organized and led the force. Their stealth mission was to protect Paul in the middle of the night and bring him safely to Felix the governor.

The opposition of more than 40 men who had taken a vow to kill Paul and the Sanhedrin were taken totally off guard. While they slept, Paul was ushered away to safety. This was a preemptive maneuver on behalf of the commander committed to the safety and protection of Paul.

I may be stretching what I am about to say, but from this experience Paul gained a valuable picture of the church. Church leaders are to be surrounded by the army of God equipped for battle. (See Ephesians 6:10-20) The church that understands this model of the army of God will stand strong despite the size or source of adversity. They are loyal to stand with and defend their leaders at all times and at any cost. Sometimes, there is a need for all-night prayer meetings.

Unfortunately, many churches function more like the mob in Acts 23:6-10. In these situations, the people are out to tear the pastors apart. Some even plot together against the pastor and leaders. A church divided against itself will not stand.

Ironically, the other analogy of the church is a shepherd watching over his sheep. The shepherd is committed to the safety and well-being of every sheep in his flock. Do you see what just happened? Care, protection, and wellbeing goes both directions. The army protects its leaders while the shepherd protects and nurtures the flock.

Paul gained much from this experience. It shaped his understanding of the church. In the spiritual realm, I am sure angels were also standing guard as the two legions accompanied Paul to Felix the Governor. God has ways of protecting his own.

From this text you should glean insights on your calling in the church. Are you surrounding and protecting your leaders or are you part of the band opposing them? When a change in leadership comes, and it will, it should be done decently and in an orderly fashion. These are occasions for extraordinary prayer and precaution.

The Letter of Recommendation: Acts 23:25-30

“25) And he wrote a letter having this form: 26) “Claudius Lysias, to the most excellent governor Felix, greetings. 27) “When this man was arrested by the Jews and was about to be slain by them, I came up to them with the troops and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman. 28) And wanting to ascertain the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their Council; 29) and I found him to be accused over questions about their Law, but under no accusation deserving death or imprisonment. 30) “When I was informed that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, also instructing his accusers to bring charges against him before you.””

We are now introduced to the world of politics. The commander sent a letter to Claudius Lysias that accurately represented the dispute the Jews had against Paul, but embellished his own role in the matter to cover his own back.

For example, he failed to mention that he had put Paul in chains and prepared to examine him by scourging. He also made it sound like he came to Paul’s rescue because he had learned that Paul was a Roman citizen being treated unjustly by the Jewish council.

Paul was in no place to argue. After all, it was he and not the Roman commander that was on trial by the Jews. He was most likely thankful overall for the favor eventually given him by the Roman commander.

Two things do stand out in the letter. First, the commander recognized the accusations against Paul were religious disputes and did not rise to the level of deserving death or imprisonment by Roman civil law. In his opinion, Paul was an innocent man.

Second, there was a devious plot against Paul that was both unjust and dangerous. His accusers were both underhanded and deceitful. In his assessment, truth and integrity sided with Paul.

The letter amounted to a letter of recommendation on behalf of Paul. It was definitely favorable toward him. One is left wondering what conversations Paul had with the Roman commander? Did he share the gospel with him? Did he become a believer? He at least seemed favorable toward both Paul and the Christian cause.

Paul in Herod's Praetorium. Acts 23:31-35

“31) So the soldiers, in accordance with their orders, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris. 32) But the next day, leaving the horsemen to go on with him, they returned to the barracks. 33) When these had come to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him. 34) When he had read it, he asked from what province he was, and when he learned that he was from Cilicia, 35) he said, “I will give you a hearing after your accusers arrive also,” giving orders for him to be kept in Herod's Praetorium.”

Paul's journey took at least two days. During the first night, his large escort arrived in Antipatris. There the 200 foot soldiers took their leave and, after a rest, returned to Jerusalem. They were undoubtedly watching for the mob of more than forty who had joined the plot to kill Paul.

Meanwhile, the seventy horsemen continued on with Paul until they had arrived at Caesarea. This was located in the province of Cilicia, which was Paul's birthplace. Upon arrival, they delivered him to the Governor along with the letter.

It appears that the governor spoke directly to Paul and promised him a hearing upon the arrival of his accusers. This took five more days and marked a transition in Paul's life. Thus began long days and months of waiting. His schedule radically changed, which afforded him time for writing.

The Governor ordered Paul to be kept in Herod's Praetorium. This was the judgment-hall built by Herod the Great. It consisted of smaller apartments for political prisoners, soldier's quarters, and common jail cells for the more notorious awaiting judgment.

There was a distinct contrast between the Praetorium back in Jerusalem and this facility in Caesarea. Jerusalem was markedly Jewish with many Jewish lawyers in attendance. Herod's Praetorium was distinctly Roman and secular, absent from the overwhelming influence of Judaism.

Here Paul was assured strong separation of church and state. This accommodation favored his Roman citizenship and not Jewish law or tradition. It sent a strong message to his Jewish adversaries that Paul was in the care and safety of Rome.

It is not known which accommodations housed the prisoner, but being a Roman citizen, Paul most likely occupied a secure apartment with soldiers in his attendance. He had no reason to fear for his personal care or safety in his accommodations. Because he spoke Greek, Paul most likely conversed openly with the soldiers and enjoyed a degree of freedom afforded Roman citizens.

As to the destiny of the forty who made the foolish vow, they most likely resorted to Leviticus 27:1-13 and raised a valuation to free them of their difficult vow. The priests undoubtedly kept the price low because they were co-conspirators.

The Prosecution Against Paul: Acts 24:1-9

“1) After five days the high priest Ananias came down with some elders, with an attorney named Tertullus, and they brought charges to the governor against Paul. 2) After Paul had been summoned, Tertullus began to accuse him, saying to the governor, “Since we have through you attained much peace, and since by your providence reforms are being carried out for this nation, 3) we acknowledge this in every way and everywhere, most excellent Felix, with all thankfulness. 4) But, that I may not weary you any further, I beg you to grant us, by your kindness, a brief hearing. 5) For we have found this man a real pest and a fellow who stirs up dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. 6) And he even tried to desecrate the temple; and then we arrested him. [We wanted to judge him according to our own Law. 7) But Lysias the commander came along, and with much violence took him out of our hands, 8) ordering his accusers to come before you.] By examining him yourself concerning all these matters you will be able to ascertain the things of which we accuse him.” 9) The Jews also joined in the attack, asserting that these things were so.”

The Jews amassed their best prosecution against Paul. Ananias the high priest together with some prestigious elders went to Caesarea for the trial. Representing them was a skilled attorney named Tertullus. He is mentioned by name twice in this text, but nowhere else in the Bible.

He began his accusation with a bunch of fluff and complimentary words about Felix, the Governor. The flattery soon ran out of steam and most likely did little to help his case. It was disingenuous. The Jews despised Rome and their presence in Palestine.

His accusations against Paul had four charges. First, Paul was a real pest. Second, he stirs up dissension among the Jews. Third, he was a ringleader of a sect of Nazarenes. And finally, he tried to desecrate the temple.

He then added that they had arrested Paul and were trying to judge him according to their own law. But the hysteria that triggered Roman intervention was anything but a lawful trial. It was a violent riot.

Tertullius then made the mistake of implicating Lysias the Roman commander. He accused him of violence and obstructing justice. His charges against Lysias were actually more severe than his case against Paul. It appears that emotion took over and the whole Jewish delegation joined in the verbal attack against both Paul and Lysias.

Though the charges against Paul had some merit, especially if he had indeed tried to desecrate the temple, but nothing rose to the level of capital punishment. Implicating the Roman commander was a huge mistake. Lysias now had every right to stand before his accusers as well.

It should be noted that about a decade later, Roman soldiers would march into Jerusalem and totally demolish both the temple and the city. Rome actually viewed Jerusalem and the pious attitude of the Jewish religious elite with contempt.

True to Roman law, Paul was about to have equal time for his defense. The case against him was serious, but it lacked legal merit and was about to crumble. As we shall see, Paul was about to pick it apart piece by piece.

Paul's Brilliant Defense: Acts 24:10-15

"10) When the governor had nodded for him to speak, Paul responded: "Knowing that for many years you have been a judge to this nation, I cheerfully make my defense, 11) since you can take note of the fact that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship. 12) Neither in the temple, nor in the synagogues, nor in the city itself did they find me carrying on a discussion with anyone or causing a riot. 13) Nor can they prove to you the charges of which they now accuse me. 14) But this I admit to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect I do serve the God of our fathers, believing everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets; 15) having a hope in God, which these men cherish themselves, that there shall certainly be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked."

As Paul made his defense, he had one simple strategy; he truthfully told his story in simple consecutive order. He showed how every charge against him was false and fabricated.

The reader is left with the realization that the wicked are always guilty of the very things they accuse the righteous of doing. Things have not changed in this regard. It was they and not Paul who had caused a riot. He had recently come to Jerusalem to worship God, bring alms to his nation and to present offerings. It had been several years since he had even set foot in Jerusalem.

What Paul did next was masterful. He turned his defense into a testimony for the gospel. He conceded to worshipping God according to the Way. This was a simple expression of believing in Jesus Christ as the Messiah, Who alone is the way, the truth, and the life. (See John 14:6; Acts 19:9, 23; 22:4)

He then pointed out that the Way serves the God of their fathers, believing everything in accordance with the Law, and that is written in the prophets, having a hope in God and believing in a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.

In this brilliant move, Paul put the gospel on trial and pointed to Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the whole Old Testament. Though not written yet, the books of Galatians, Romans, and Hebrews could have been presented as his full case to defend the gospel.

Suddenly, the case against him was exposed as fabricated, fraudulent, and foolish. But he skillfully turned the trial into a biblical defense of Jesus Christ and the gospel.

If you want the power of the Holy Spirit undergirding your life, do not shy away from Jesus Christ or the gospel. Instead, make it about Him! Take every opportunity to lift Him up and force people to wrestle with the implications of the gospel. Paul exposed that the true case of his opposition was not against him, rather it was against Jesus Christ and personal faith in Him.

This brings up an interesting point; if you were on trial for being a born-again believer, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Are you a devoted and shameless disciple of Jesus Christ? Paul made personal faith in Jesus Christ the central point of his defense. He pleaded guilty of believing in Jesus Christ.

The Value of a Clear Conscience: Acts 24:16

“16) In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men.”

Let's slow down and dig deep into this verse. It embodies an important concept that Paul both lived and taught. He understood the importance of a blameless and pure conscience before both God and man. Let's take a moment and unpack this nugget of biblical truth.

In 1 Timothy 1:5, Paul went so far as to say; “But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and good conscience and sincere faith.” These were important to Paul and the New Testament church! (Take a moment and read Romans 9:1; 1 Timothy 1:19; 1 Timothy 3:9; 2 Timothy 1:3; Hebrews 9:9, 9:14, 10:22, 13:18; 1 Peter 2:19; 3:16; 3:21-22)

Yet Paul issued a strong warning that the human conscience can be both defiled and seared. (See 1 Corinthians 8:7 and 1 Timothy 4:1-2). This happens by living in sin and adopting the values of the world. According to 1 John 1:5-7, you can deceive yourself into thinking you have fellowship with God and yet walk in darkness. You can be religious while living a lie at the same time.

This is the result of biblical ignorance. Human conscience alone cannot be trusted. The mind of the believer must put aside deception and be renewed by truth and the transforming work of the

Holy Spirit. (See Ephesians 4:17-24) Through this process the human conscience can be quickened according to the Word of God.

This ensures that the child of God is walking in the Spirit and not the flesh. (Compare Romans 8:5-17 and Galatians 5:13-24) The conscience of the flesh is very different from the conscience of the Spirit. The same is true of the personal morals and values of a carnal Christian who is walking in the flesh compared to a born-again Christian who is walking in the Spirit.

Obedience to the Word of God is important at this point. It should be noted that the sword of the Spirit is the Word of God. (See Ephesians 6:17) Many merely religious people and carnal Christians suffer from biblical illiteracy.

The broader context of Acts 24 now becomes important. It serves as a contrast between two groups of religious people. The high priest and the elders of Israel had no problem with lying, deceiving, twisting the truth, and plotting the murder of an innocent man. Their conscience was defiled and their morals distorted, but they were dressed in the garb of religion. As a result, their temperament was rude and their demeanor boisterous.

Paul on the other hand was calm, peaceful, honorable, and given to truth. He stood before the Governor and calmly laid out his case. His conscience was clear and his motive and conduct for being in Jerusalem was pure.

So how does this text relate to our day? The difference between apostate churches and those churches walking in truth, the gospel, and agape love is chilling. They are all under the banner of religion, but they are polar opposites when it comes to morals, values, obedience to God and His Word, and walking in light and agape love.

Do not be deceived in these days. Jesus taught that you shall know them by their fruits. (Matthew 7:13-23) Stand back and examine the fruit and compare it to the Word of God.

My observation from Acts 24 is that the high priest and elders of the people failed the truth and clear conscience test. They were producing bad fruit! Meanwhile, Paul convincingly passed the test. But notice, it wasn't religion that made the difference, rather it was the gospel and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ that set them apart from one another.

The Providential Ruling: Acts 24:22-23

"22) But Felix, having a more exact knowledge about the Way, put them off, saying, "When Lysias the commander comes down, I will decide your case." 23) Then he gave orders to the centurion for him to be kept in custody and yet have some freedom, and not to prevent any of his friends from ministering to him."

At first glance, the decision to keep Paul in custody may appear disappointing, but Felix may have done him a favor.

First, it ensured Paul's safety and protection from any left-over conspiracy from the mob and devious elders on the Sanhedrin. He would be surrounded by Roman soldiers with swords, spears, and warfare skills.

Second, because Felix had a more exact knowledge of the Way, there is no doubt he was seeking occasion to both converse and learn from Paul. This fulfilled part of the prophecy made about Paul in Acts 9:15-16. It afforded him the opportunity to openly minister to the Gentiles and kings.

Third, Paul's association with the centurion and many soldiers under his command became an open door for the spread of the gospel. It was like promoting Paul to become a Roman military chaplain. He briefly mentioned the fruitfulness of his stay in custody in Philippians 1:12-14. It was very important for the rapid spread of the gospel.

Finally, Felix granted Paul freedom to receive many friends and acquaintances. For a span of two years, Herod's Praetorium in Caesarea became like a training school and church administered by Paul. Again, I point to Philippians 1:14. Many came to Christ through his various imprisonments and were emboldened to speak the word of God without fear. Paul's faith in Jesus Christ was contagious.

So what is our takeaway from these verses? Well, they scream that God is greater than our circumstances. He wants to exploit our circumstances for His glory. He invites us to align ourselves with His purpose, power, and will.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, Paul's ministry and impact for the glory of God was greatly enhanced because of his imprisonment both at Caesarea and later in Rome. God working through Paul was not imprisoned!

So what are your current circumstances? Whether good or bad, riches or poverty, promotions or demotions, sickness or health, young or old, famous or obscure, God wants you to yield yourself to Him without reservation or inhibition. He wants to do exceedingly great and amazing things through you right where you are at this moment in your life!

He can instantly change everything when He has fully accomplished His purpose in you through your trials. Do not resist Him or fight against Him. Rather seek Him and flow with Him. Align yourself with Him. He wants you to be a witness and shining light to those around you.

Most important, Jesus Christ calls you to Himself for deep and intimate fellowship through His Spirit so He can reveal the fullness of His glory and power to you. (Study Ephesians 1:15-23; 3:14-21; Colossians 1:9-29) He wants to work greatly in you so He can work mightily through you.

Paul was not a super saint. Peter was not a super saint. John was not a super saint. James was not a super saint. Timothy was not a super saint. Philip was not a super saint. They were examples of what God wants to do in and through every born-again child of God.

Don't limit God in your life by being self-centered, self-focused and self-promoting. Stop right now and align yourself with Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Do not settle for mediocrity!

The Indecision of Felix: Acts 24:24-27

"24) But some days later Felix arrived with Drusilla, his wife who was a Jewess, and sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. 25) But as he was discussing righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix became frightened and said, "Go away for the present, and when I find time I will summon you." 26) At the same time too, he was hoping that money would be given him by Paul; therefore he also used to send for him quite often and converse with him. 27) But after two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, and wishing to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul imprisoned."

These four verses cover two years in Paul's life. During this time, Paul was kept in custody in Caesarea while Felix toyed with him. He wanted a bribe from Paul, at the same time he was doing the Jews in Jerusalem a favor. Such is the trap of politics.

Meanwhile, he would often call Paul and converse with him. His wife, Drusilla was a Jewess which gave Felix significant insight into her Jewish heritage. This gave Paul a biblical platform to talk to him about faith in Christ Jesus, the true meaning of righteousness, the importance of self control and the coming judgment. These subjects are at the heart of the gospel.

The Holy Spirit was working in Felix, but there is no indication that he became a believer. At times the conviction became so great he was shaken with fear and would usher Paul out of his presence.

Over the years, I have seen many like him. They shake and tremble with conviction at the foot of the cross, but yet resist the Holy Spirit. Their stubborn self will says "no" to God. They perish without an excuse. God honors free will. He forces no man or woman to believe in Him or obey Him. It is possible to fall short of the grace of God! (See Hebrews 12:15-17)

Felix became an example of a double-minded man. He was playing up to both Paul and the Jewish leaders back in Jerusalem at the same time. To please the Sanhedrin, he kept Paul in custody for two years and yet granted him some freedoms.

I admonish you not to be a Felix. Stop playing games with God. You are not in control. There is a coming judgment and you will give an account for your life and actions to God. According to Romans 1-3, you are without excuse. Personal faith in Jesus Christ is the only means of salvation. (Acts 4:12)

Paul and Felix present a stunning contrast of two men. Saul had been a very deceived and violent man who persecuted the Way to death. Yet he came to the point of saying “yes” to Jesus Christ and the gospel. The Holy Spirit changed him into a new man. God used Paul to change the course of human history.

By contrast, Felix was a good man who wanted to please everyone. He had a good understanding of the Way, but he said “no” to Jesus Christ. Though he was superior to Paul in status and stature, he slipped into oblivion and has long been forgotten in the journals of history.

Do not tremble in the presence of God with conviction and walk away resisting the Holy Spirit. You can gain the world and forfeit your life. “Behold, now is the day of salvation.” (See 2 Corinthians 6:1-2) Yield to Jesus while He is calling and beckoning you. Do not be caught in the indecision of Felix.

Paul’s Trial Before Festus: Acts 25:1-12

“1) Festus then, having arrived in the province, three days later went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea. 2) And the chief priests and the leading men of the Jews brought charges against Paul, and they were urging him, 3) requesting a concession against Paul, that he might have him brought to Jerusalem (at the same time, setting an ambush to kill him on the way). 4) Festus then answered that Paul was being kept in custody at Caesarea and that he himself was about to leave shortly. 5) “Therefore,” he *said, “let the influential men among you go there with me, and if there is anything wrong about the man, let them prosecute him.” 6) After he had spent not more than eight or ten days among them, he went down to Caesarea, and on the next day he took his seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought. 7) After Paul arrived, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many and serious charges against him which they could not prove, 8) while Paul said in his own defense, “I have committed no offense either against the Law of the Jews or against the temple or against Caesar.” 9) But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, answered Paul and said, “Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me on these charges?” 10) But Paul said, “I am standing before Caesar’s tribunal, where I ought to be tried. I have done no wrong to the Jews, as you also very well know. 11) If, then, I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything worthy of death, I do not refuse to die; but if none of those things is true of which these men accuse me, no one can hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar.” 12) Then when Festus had conferred with his council, he answered, “You have appealed to Caesar, to Caesar you shall go.””

We now have an account of Paul’s second trial in Caesarea. There had been a change of administrations, and Festus was now Governor over the region. Upon taking office, he made a ten-day trip to Jerusalem to become acquainted with the Jewish region he now governed. The Jewish elders warmed up to him quickly.

Foremost on the mind of the Sanhedrin was their grievance against Paul. They worked out a plan to have him extradited to Jerusalem where he could be ambushed and killed en route. It appears from the text that Festus was privy to the devious plot.

His first need was to get Paul to concede to the extradition to Jerusalem. A group of Jewish leaders accompanied Festus back to Caesarea, and the very next day he took his seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought before him. The problem was that Festus had been defiled by an evil report without occasion to hear from Paul. He only had one side of the story.

This is the most common flaw of those in leadership. Never arrive at a judgment without hearing equally both sides of any dispute. This is true for every dispute whether civil, domestic, or in the church. It is one of the most basic tenets guaranteeing truth and justice in the Old Testament Law.

The Jewish elders had two years to fabricate their charges against Paul. As soon as Paul arrived before the tribunal, his accusers stood around him and launched many and serious charges against him which they could not prove. Paul was abandoned to defend himself.

It is at this point the reader must ask; "Where were Paul's defenders?" Why had Peter, James, and John abandoned him? Where were the members of the Jerusalem council? Where were the Jewish church leaders who had advised Paul how to conduct himself in Jerusalem? Where were the multitude of Jewish Christians whom Peter had said were so numerous? (See Acts 21:17-26)

This is one of the unsolved mysteries in Paul's case. It appears that they were either overcome by fear or theological error. Paul stood alone in his own defense and in defense of the true gospel. By his own admission, his willingness to suffer alone for the cause of Christ and the gospel restored some courage and truth to the early believers. (See Philippians 1:12-20)

It can be argued that Paul stood alone as the only defense for the true gospel of justification by faith in Christ alone at this crucial time in early church history. He was in the company of others like Noah, Elijah, Jeremiah, and Daniel who stood alone for God against compromise, corruption, and popular opinion. Never underestimate what God can do through one man or woman with unbending convictions for God!

As a Roman citizen, Paul had the option of appealing to Caesar. This would be equal to appealing to the Supreme Court today. Some belittle his strategy, but Acts 23:11 undoubtedly undergirded his move. Keep in mind; " (11) But on the night immediately following, the Lord stood at his side and said, "Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also.'" He had good reason to appeal to Rome.

It appears that he was one step in front of the Jewish elders and Festus. His appeal to Rome was now public record. Festus was now obligated to deliver him safely to Rome. I believe the

hand of Divine Providence was guiding him. God often works through civil authority to carry out His will in the world.

It appears that Luke may have been a bystander at the tribunal. This is supported by both the detailed account of the case and the word “we” in Acts 27:1 and the rest of the book of Acts. He was allowed to accompany Paul to Rome.

So, how can we benefit from this story? It is not packed with theological or doctrinal insight. But it does punctuate the importance of being willing to stand alone for the cause of Christ and even suffer to the point of death for the cause of the gospel. Paul shines as the pinnacle of selfless devotion to Christ in the New Testament. Every believer needs to embrace his devotion to Christ, especially as we move deeper into the end times.

Let me close by quoting the words of Paul to the leaders of the church at Ephesus as recorded in Acts 20:24; “But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.”

The Gospel Door Opens Among High Officials: Acts 25:13-22

“13) Now when several days had elapsed, King Agrippa and Bernice arrived at Caesarea and paid their respects to Festus. 14) While they were spending many days there, Festus laid Paul’s case before the king, saying, “There is a man who was left as a prisoner by Felix; 15) and when I was at Jerusalem, the chief priests and the elders of the Jews brought charges against him, asking for a sentence of condemnation against him. 16) I answered them that it is not the custom of the Romans to hand over any man before the accused meets his accusers face to face and has an opportunity to make his defense against the charges. 17) So after they had assembled here, I did not delay, but on the next day took my seat on the tribunal and ordered the man to be brought before me. 18) When the accusers stood up, they began bringing charges against him not of such crimes as I was expecting, 19) but they simply had some points of disagreement with him about their own religion and about a dead man, Jesus, whom Paul asserted to be alive. 20) Being at a loss how to investigate such matters, I asked whether he was willing to go to Jerusalem and there stand trial on these matters. 20) But when Paul appealed to be held in custody for the Emperor’s decision, I ordered him to be kept in custody until I send him to Caesar.” 21) Then Agrippa said to Festus, “I also would like to hear the man myself.” “Tomorrow,” he *said, “you shall hear him.””

A lot was happening in the background and landscape of this passage. Let’s take a moment and explore the many dynamics that came together over time to make this providential meeting possible in Caesarea. The invisible hand of God was definitely at work.

King Agrippa and Bernice were from Jewish backgrounds. They were acquainted with the religion and customs of the Jews. As Caesarea was a resort town on the Mediterranean Sea, it was a popular vacation area.

Keep in mind, this is the very town where Peter had first been sent to share the gospel with Cornelius the Roman centurion in Acts 10. It boasted the first outpouring of the Holy Spirit on gentiles and a corresponding gentile Christian church. The city was no stranger to the gospel message.

It is reasonable to assume that during his two year stay in Caesarea, Paul may have had repeated interaction with Cornelius and many Roman soldiers. This may have enhanced his acceptance and favor among them. (See Philippians 1:13)

As the new governor over the region, Festus was ignorant of not only Jewish customs, but also the Way. The trail of Paul left him baffled. He was expecting charges of clear civil crimes against Paul by the Jewish elders. Instead, a religious squabble unfolded before him that left Paul appealing to Caesar.

So, Festus was obligated to send Paul to Rome to stand trial before Caesar, but he had no clear charges against him. He was left baffled. It was utterly foolish to send a prisoner to Caesar for judgment with no capital charges against him.

The occasion of King Agrippa and Bernice arriving in Caesarea afforded Festus an opportunity for legal counsel in regard to the charges against Paul. That was his motivation in offering them a hearing with Paul. He needed help assembling and defining charges against Paul.

King Agrippa and Bernice were most likely aware of stories both about Jesus and Paul. They may have also been privy of the rift between the Jewish believers and the emerging Gentile church. Ironically, Caesarea was a city that afforded genuine religious freedom. There was little or no tension between orthodox Jews, Messianic Jews, Gentile believers, or Roman religions in the city of Caesarea.

Cornelius himself as a Spirit-filled Roman centurion may have contributed to the respectful and peaceful atmosphere that engulfed Caesarea. He more than anyone understood that true Christianity could not be forced. It was a personal relationship with Jesus Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. The resulting baptism of Agape love produced a peaceful dignity and respect for all people.

This influence contributed to the perfect environment in Caesarea for free and open dialogue. Festus, King Agrippa, and Bernice could afford Paul a lengthy hearing without threat of ridicule, prejudice, or criticism.

It also fulfilled the prophecy of Acts 9:15 that Paul would bear the name of Jesus before “the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel.” The seeds of the gospel were about to be sown among royalty and government officials in a non-threatening environment with no pressure or agenda. God was at work in a truly big way behind the scenes of this story.

We are hearing many reports of God working to grant non-threatening hearings of the gospel by high government officials in communist, Hindu, Islamic, and humanistic countries today. Never underestimate where and with whom God is working. Pray for kings and all who are in authority to grant a personal hearing of the gospel. (1 Timothy 2:1-8)

Paul Before Governors and Kings: Acts 25:23-27

“23) So, on the next day when Agrippa came together with Bernice amid great pomp, and entered the auditorium accompanied by the commanders and the prominent men of the city, at the command of Festus, Paul was brought in. 24) Festus said, “King Agrippa, and all you gentlemen here present with us, you see this man about whom all the people of the Jews appealed to me, both at Jerusalem and here, loudly declaring that he ought not to live any longer. 25) But I found that he had committed nothing worthy of death; and since he himself appealed to the Emperor, I decided to send him. 26) Yet I have nothing definite about him to write to my Lord. Therefore I have brought him before you all and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that after the investigation has taken place, I may have something to write. 27) For it seems absurd to me in sending a prisoner, not to indicate also the charges against him.””

Amid much pomp and proper protocol, King Agrippa and Bernice were brought into the auditorium. This turned it into a public hearing. All the Roman commanders were present as well as the prominent men of the city. Paul had a huge audience of very prominent people.

The confession of Festus was much like that of Pilate years earlier about Jesus Himself; “I found that he has committed nothing worthy of death.” (Vs 25) The big difference was there were both soldiers and citizens present who quietly supported Paul. He had been in the company of these commanders for two full years.

The Sanhedrin had no occasion to stir the crowd with chants like in Jerusalem against Jesus saying; “Let Him be crucified.” (See Matthew 27:23-23) Besides, this gathering was at the request of King Agrippa and not from the chief priest or elders of the Jews. Protocol called for absolute silence and respect by those in attendance. Any disorderly conduct at this gathering would have been dealt with swiftly by the royal guard.

What transpired in the next chapter is nothing short of any sign or wonder in the New Testament. This was undoubtedly the fulfillment of the words of Jesus in Matthew 10:16-20; ““16) Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves. 17) But beware of men, for they will hand you over to the courts and scourge you in their synagogues; 18) and you will even be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. 19) But when they hand you over, do not worry about how or what you are to say; for it will be given you in that hour what you are to say. 20) For it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.””

Paul was standing before governors and kings and the Gentiles with the stage given to him to speak whatever the Holy Spirit put on his mind... and speak he did! He shared both his testimony and a powerful gospel message. Stay tuned for Acts 26.

God is arranging opportunities like this for the gospel today as well. I am hearing numerous reports of people in high places arranging for hearings of the gospel. Jesus wants to reach people in all places with the gospel message. It is our job to be clean and faithful witnesses for Jesus Christ and the gospel. It is the Holy Spirit's job to save and transform people. Our job is to tell the story, God's job is to move the mountain.

A Monumental Shift for Paul: Acts 26:1-3

"1) Agrippa said to Paul, 'You are permitted to speak for yourself.' Then Paul stretched out his hand and proceeded to make his defense: 2) 'In regard to all the things of which I am accused by the Jews, I consider myself fortunate, King Agrippa, that I am about to make my defense before you today; 3) especially because you are an expert in all customs and questions among the Jews; therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently.'" Acts 26:1-3

As Acts 26 opens, Paul opens his defense before king Agrippa in Caesarea. This city is mentioned fifteen times in the book of Acts and many monumental events happened at this popular resort city. Not only did Peter preach to Cornelius at Caesarea, this is also where Paul was sent and held in custody for two years before appealing to go to Rome.

We hear much about Jerusalem and Antioch in the early church, but Caesarea was actually the location where God did many monumental things. The influence of the gospel going out from Caesarea penetrated every level of society in the 1st Century. This is where the most influential people of Rome gathered for rest, relaxation, and recreation; and God placed Paul there for two years!

It was a popular resort city for many important Roman dignitaries. In Acts 25:13, we discover that king Agrippa and Bernice arrived in Caesarea and paid their respects to Festus. Don't miss what was happening in the broader context of Acts 23-26. Instead of sending Paul to seek hearing before all of these dignitaries, God started bringing them to him. God was actively orchestrating a huge strategy and methodology shift for Paul.

Paul's ministry was switching from a traveling itinerary ministry to a writing and equipping ministry. Rather than personally doing much of the hands-on work of ministry, he was forced to equip and train others to do the work of ministry. His new focus by default was writing. As a result, we have much of the New Testament today.

Let me make an observation: God's ways are much higher than ours. From our perspective, it looks like Paul's ministry was hindered and shrinking. After all, he spent most of his remaining years in custody. But, from God's perspective, Paul was launched into the stratosphere. It was

his writings that God used to refine the gospel and hammer out the doctrines of the Christian church.

Do you ever feel like complaining or arguing with God about the circumstances of your life? Slow down, get on your knees, and ask God to open your understanding and change your perspective. He is most likely doing something you do not see or understand. What you might think is sent against you for evil might be designed by God for a much greater good!

Joseph came to this realization in Genesis 50:19-20. God has worked this way throughout biblical history. Our challenge is to see our circumstances from God's perspective and align ourselves with His greater plan, will, and purpose.

What are you wrestling with God about in your life right now? Slow down, come before God, and ask for wisdom. Clean up your life and yield 100% to Him. He might be orchestrating a major shift or transition for you.

Let me make another observation. Something very similar to what God did to Paul may be happening to the United States church right now! As we have slowed down our missions endeavor to go into the world with the gospel, God is bringing people from around the world to us!

It is both prudent and important to stand back and adopt a new and fresh perspective. Christians must stop arguing the politics of what is happening and ask God what His purpose is for our immigration crisis? Rather than fighting against many of these innocent and exploited people, Christians must embrace the monumental ministry opportunities God is placing at our doorstep and flood these people with Agape love and the gospel.

Paul's Action Plan: Acts 26:1-29

"1) Agrippa said to Paul, "You are permitted to speak for yourself." Then Paul stretched out his hand and proceeded to make his defense: 27) King Agrippa, do you believe the Prophets? I know that you do." 28) Agrippa replied to Paul, "In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian." 29) And Paul said, "I would wish to God, that whether in a short or long time, not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains.""

Wow! How did this text progress from verse 1 to verses 27-29? This is absolutely miraculous! For that matter, what would you do and say if you suddenly had the opportunity to stand before kings, governors, dignitaries, and key community leaders? As the end times approach, it is likely to happen. Do you have a simple "go to plan" for every encounter and conversation with people?

I believe the story of Paul before king Agrippa, Bernice, and Governor Festus as recorded in Acts 26:1-32 contains Paul's personal "go to plan" in sharing the gospel with people. Sometimes

Scripture is prescriptive, other times it is descriptive. In this chapter Paul provides a great example to follow. He followed this simple plan over and over as God gave him the opportunity to converse with people.

Let's break this chapter into four simple points and discover Paul's action plan for sharing the gospel with people. (I confess... this chapter excites me!) This approach can be used by any Christian in any setting. By studying and following Paul's action plan in this chapter, we can step into his sandals in our daily lives as well. Here are the four points of Paul's action plan in sharing the gospel:

First, show honor and respect to civil authority and all people in general. (Acts 26:1-3) Paul conducted himself according to his own admonition of honor for government officials as recorded in Romans 13:1-7. Peter shared similar instructions in 1 Peter 2:13-17. When you treat people with love, respect, and dignity it pulls down their defenses.

Second, share your personal story of faith in Jesus Christ. (Acts 26:4-18) What Paul did in this chapter was amazing. He shared his personal story in simple, orderly, and sequential fashion. He made Jesus Christ the center of his story.

As you study Paul, he took every opportunity to steer conversations toward the gospel. If you knock on the door, many people will throw it wide open. People are searching! Many can relate to your story.

Third, clearly share the simple gospel message. (Acts 26:19-23) In these four verses, Paul intentionally rehearsed the gospel. He was not ashamed of the gospel and understood that it was the power of God to salvation. His approach wove Romans 1:16 and 1 Corinthians 1:18 together. He understood how to unleash the power of God! Do not underestimate these two verses and how they become the epicenter of the Holy Spirit showing up with power in your witnessing. (See Acts 1:8)

Fourth, persuade people to put personal faith in Jesus Christ. (Acts 26:24-29) Some say we are not to give an invitation to people. Paul had no problem calling people to repentance and personal belief in Jesus Christ. Look at verse 20 and 29. Compare this with 2 Corinthians 5:11 and 20. Paul said; "we beg people on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." His invitations were not passive. He was urgent and serious about people's eternal salvation.

Compare these verses also with John 1:12, 3:16-18; Romans 10:8-15 and Ephesians 1:13. People are not saved apart from personal belief and faith in Jesus Christ. That is exactly what Paul was encouraging his hearers to do in Acts 26:27-29. Do not be shy about sharing the gospel and inviting people to place saving faith in Jesus Christ.

Rather than skipping over this chapter, take time to squeeze Paul's simple action plan out of it. Practice this approach and watch the power of God show up in your conversations. Don't be

pushy with people. Just knock on the gospel door in every conversation by sharing some of your story and watch what God does! Then follow the leading of the Holy Spirit in the conversation.

The Personal Cost of Spreading the Gospel: Acts 27:1-8

“1) When it was decided that we would sail for Italy, they proceeded to deliver Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan cohort named Julius. 2) And embarking in an Adramyttian ship, which was about to sail to the regions along the coast of Asia, we put out to sea accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica. 3) The next day we put in at Sidon; and Julius treated Paul with consideration and allowed him to go to his friends and receive care. 4) From there we put out to sea and sailed under the shelter of Cyprus because the winds were contrary. 5) When we had sailed through the sea along the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we landed at Myra in Lycia. 6) There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy, and he put us aboard it. 7) When we had sailed slowly for a good many days, and with difficulty had arrived off Cnidus, since the wind did not permit us to go farther, we sailed under the shelter of Crete, off Salmone; 8) and with difficulty sailing past it we came to a place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lasea.”

These verses read more like a geography book. It proves that people in all places are important to God. Paul was willing to go any place for the sake of the gospel. No matter where you live, God sees you and cares for you. It is impossible to hide from God or his love.

These verses also show how difficult travel was in the days of the New Testament. Paul was willing to endure much suffering and personal hardship for the sake of the gospel. It shows the high value he placed on people by his willingness to suffer much personal inconvenience for the spread of the gospel. Read and compare Acts 9:16 with 2 Corinthians 11:22-33.

The fact that the Roman centurion was willing to let Paul have some freedom and be ministered to by his friends, shows the favor and respect he had gained. He was having a far greater impact among the Roman soldiers and Gentiles than among the Jewish population. It is self-evident that he had become the apostle to the Gentiles.

I wonder what would happen today if Christians put an equal importance on people and the spread of the gospel. When I hear stories of how Christians in less affluent countries suffer for the sake of the gospel, it puts me to shame. We complain if we need to drive several hours for the gospel, they rejoice when they daily walk several hours for the gospel. The early frontier preachers in the Methodist tradition contributed more to the Great awakening off horse back than modern preachers with cars and airplanes.

There is always a personal cost to pay to make Christ known. Paul is an example of what it means to lay up treasures in heaven. May each of us be willing to follow his example and the example of the early Christian believers.

The Inner Voice of the Spirit: Acts 27:9-12

“9) When considerable time had passed and the voyage was now dangerous, since even the fast was already over, 10) Paul began to admonish them, and said to them, “Men, I perceive that the voyage will certainly be with damage and great loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives.” 11) But the centurion was more persuaded by the pilot and the captain of the ship than by what was being said by Paul. 12) Because the harbor was not suitable for wintering, the majority reached a decision to put out to sea from there, if somehow they could reach Phoenix, a harbor of Crete, facing southwest and northwest, and spend the winter there.”

In this text, Paul seems to display a prophetic gift. He perceived the voyage would be met with calamity. This inner caution is a function of the Spirit.

Paul was so convinced that the inner warning was from God, he spoke up to the centurion. When God puts a word on your heart, it is important to verbalize it to those in authority, but then allow them to make the final decision.

Paul was esteemed enough by the centurion that he brought the warning to the ship's captain. Then they engaged in a rationalization process and the arguments of the pilot won out.

I've seen it hundreds of times and done it myself. The still small voice of the Holy Spirit will speak to my heart, and then my mind starts arguing with God. The end results in excuses to ignore God.

Let's make this practical. 1 Corinthians 10:13 says; “13) No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.”

When these inner cautions are ignored, a trap is set. The alcoholic says, “I'm in control, I will only take one drink!” The porn addict thinks to himself; “I don't need a block on my computer!” The vengeful and bitter person resists the grace of God to forgive by rationalizing; “I have the right to be angry!” The procrastinator stops the project early by rationalizing; “I will finish it tomorrow!” The hoarder says, “I might use it some day!” I believe the Spirit of God speaks to us more often than we realize.

So why didn't the ship's captain listen to the warning from Paul? It came down to pride! It may have followed two lines of reasoning: 1) I'm not going to allow a prisoner to tell me what to do or question my authority! 2) I'm the expert here and have the ability to handle this situation!

Second-guessing the cautions of the Spirit comes down to not listening to God and ignoring to good counsel of those around you. Pride always precedes a fall and leads to a shipwreck. Balaam is an Old Testament example of arguing with the clear voice of God.

You will never learn to walk in the Spirit without obeying His inner voice. Failure to do so leads to wisdom gained the hard way!

Enduring the Storms of Life: Acts 27:14-20

“14) But before very long there rushed down from the land a violent wind, called Euraquilo; 15) and when the ship was caught in it and could not face the wind, we gave way to it and let ourselves be driven along. 16) Running under the shelter of a small island called Clauda, we were scarcely able to get the ship’s boat under control. 17) After they had hoisted it up, they used supporting cables in undergirding the ship; and fearing that they might run aground on the shallows of Syrtis, they let down the sea anchor and in this way let themselves be driven along. 18) The next day as we were being violently storm-tossed, they began to jettison the cargo; 19) and on the third day they threw the ship’s tackle overboard with their own hands. 20) Since neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small storm was assailing us, from then on all hope of our being saved was gradually abandoned.”

The result of not listening to cautions and warnings from the Holy Spirit can result in huge storms in our lives in the physical realm. In Acts 27:10, Paul had tried warning them of pending danger, but they refused to listen. Suddenly, they were fighting for their lives.

The meaning of a wind called “Euraquilo” is not clearly known. It means winds coming from every direction and changing quickly. They were most likely caught in a hurricane with erratically shifting winds and violent choppy waves beating against the ship.

Their first mission was to save the landing boat. It was most likely being beaten against the hull of the ship. With much effort and hard work, they got it hoisted up and secured to the deck with ropes and cables. It most likely weighed a few tons itself.

Then came the fear that the planks on the ship’s hull would begin breaking away from the bulkheads. This would cause the ship to quickly fill with water and sink the vessel. The common precaution in severe storms was to “undergird the ship with ropes.” When done properly at intervals corresponding to the inner bulkheads down the full length of the ship, these formed a cradle to tightly secure the planks to the bulkhead. It was an ingenious plan used only in desperate measures.

The next measure was to jettison the cargo. The word “cargo” measures “the burden” on the ship’s hull. The more cargo, the greater the burden the hull had to endure. By lessening the cargo, it released stress on the ship.

This is the word-picture Jesus used in Matthew 11:28 where He said; “come unto Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.” If you are breaking under your “burden” in life, Jesus promises to help if we unload our cargo unto Him.

Unloading the cargo helped, but then they endured the problem of the winds catching the sails and the very tall masts. Both the waves and the winds battled against them.

The next step was to cut away the sails, then they cut down the tall masts. Together these were known as the “ship's tackle.” With the cargo gone, the leverage of the tall masts and tackle tossed the ship around like a bobber.

They had to deal with both inner cargo and outer leverage. One attempted fix without the other only compounded their problem. The same holds true for good Christian counseling. It deals with both inner burdens and external life forces. It is a paradox in life, but sometimes you need to give up control in an attempt to regain control.

Their goal was to lessen the influence and damage of the waves and wind against the hull of the ship. Jettisoning the cargo and casting off the tackle stabilized the ship but also meant that all control was lost.

Let me give an intriguing comparison. Cargo ships were designed to reach a predetermined destination. They were fairly sleek and fast. By comparison, Noah's ark was designed for a totally different mission. It was designed to endure the worst storm with the greatest possible stability and least damage. It had no tackle, sails, rudder, or landing vessel. It was absolutely stable in the midst of the storm. Life was its precious cargo. God was its pilot.

To save us, God sometimes needs to bring us to swap ships and cargo in life. This is the meaning of the idiom, “Let go and let God.” You might be at this point in a storm in your life right now. Could I suggest making Jesus your ark?

To his credit, though the captain made the wrong decision by embarking on the journey despite a warning from Paul, his emergency skills helped save lives. To his credit, though his counsel was rejected, Paul joined the crew and other passengers through the storm. A good leader joins the team, weathers the storm, and doesn't look back. There are points of no return in life.

This text was written to be informative and not instructional. It tells the story with no moral application. Yet there are lessons to be learned.

Life is full of storms and trails. Most of us will face peril filled journeys in life. You might want to evaluate what kind of vessel you choose to sail through life. When all is said, Jesus is my ark for the storms of life.

God's Presence in the Storm: Acts 27:20-26

“20) Since neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small storm was assailing us, from then on all hope of our being saved was gradually abandoned. 21) When they had gone a long time without food, then Paul stood up in their midst and said, “Men, you ought to have followed my advice and not to have set sail from Crete and incurred this damage and loss. 22)

Yet now I urge you to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. 23) For this very night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood before me, 24) saying, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and behold, God has granted you all those who are sailing with you.' 25) Therefore, keep up your courage, men, for I believe God that it will turn out exactly as I have been told. 26) But we must run aground on a certain island.'"

When the world comes to the end of hope, the Christian stands in peace being assured of the presence and protection of God. Such was the case with Paul. God was not done with him yet. He assured him that he had to testify in Rome as well.

Read the text very carefully. God granted Paul the lives of all who were with him on the ship because of the favor and protection that surrounded Paul. This is a powerful concept. Many non-Christians have been miraculously protected by being in the presence of Christians and their guardian angels during times of danger.

This text exemplifies the role of guardian angels. The angel that spoke to Paul also ensured his safe arrival in Rome. Hebrews 1:14 says; "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?" Angels are on assignment in multiple ways in this world, and one of those is to provide protection. God's Sovereignty and Divine protection surrounds Christians until their work on earth is done.

I have growing faith in Jesus Christ as my protector. When I step on an airplane, I pray for divine protection and enjoy my flight knowing I am safe in the bosom of God. I recognize my protection covers all on the plane with me.

I refuse to live or walk in fear. When the time for my heavenly promotion comes, there isn't any power on earth that is going to hold me back! My only prayer is that I depart in a way that brings maximum glory to God.

However, the opposite is also true. Everyone on the ship with Jonah became a partaker of Jonah's storm of discipline. They had to remove Jonah from the ship to save themselves. The storm was aimed at Jonah. As soon as they removed him, it became perfectly calm for those on the ship.

This is why during times of discipline for the rebellious and backsliding Christian, God's Word warns us to distance ourselves physically. (See Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13) He does not want us to share in their discipline.

This story in Acts 27:20-26 should impart peace and bold confidence in every believer. It screams that God is in control during the storms in our lives.

Those Sailing With You! Acts 27:22-25

“22) ... for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. 23) For this very night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood before me, 24) saying, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and behold, God has granted you all those who are sailing with you.’ 25) Therefore, keep up your courage, men, for I believe God that it will turn out exactly as I have been told.”

What an intriguing part of the story! “... and behold, God has granted you all those who are sailing with you.” I wonder why the angel included this detail? According to Acts 27:37, there were 276 people altogether including Paul and Luke on that ship. That’s a lot of people! Paul had most likely been interceding for both their safety and salvation.

This brings up some interesting questions. Who does God have “sailing with you” right now? Who has God placed within your sphere of influence? Who is within the reach of your salt and light for the glory of God?

I believe God sovereignly places people in our life for gospel influence. He wants us to witness to them. At the time of this story, the 276 people sailing with Paul represented his immediate sphere of influence. They were his target ministry.

It appears that Paul had been praying for them. I am sure he was ministering to them and sharing the gospel with them. There is no other explanation for this unique word from the angel; “God has granted you all those who are sailing with you.” Paul had consciously embraced these people as his immediate mission field. What an example of evangelism. It should be both constant and intentional.

Are you conscious of those “sailing with you” right now? This might include friends, relatives, neighbors, classmates, work associates, casual contacts, your health care providers, or someone sitting next to you on an airplane or sporting event. Paul was very aware of those “sailing with him.”

These people represent your ministry and sphere of influence. Pray for them. Share kind words with them. Sow appropriate gospel seeds into the encounter. Be sensitive to promptings of the Holy Spirit for deeper spiritual conversations. Offer to pray with people when you perceive needs.

This is what Jesus trained His disciples to do as He sent them out. This is the thrust behind Acts 1:8. The Holy Spirit arranges those who “sail with you” through life. Purpose to be constant salt and light to those around you! It yields supernatural conversations and stories.

Whether you realize it or not, God has given you a very unique and important sphere of influence. Granted, some of it is in constant flux and change –but that’s part of the excitement of walking in the Spirit!

Opportunities for Jesus and the gospel abound daily for every Christian! “Those sailing with you” in life represent ministry at its best! There is nothing random about the sovereignty and providence of God concerning those He sends to “sail with you!”

The Most Crucial Hour: Acts 27:27-32

“27) But when the fourteenth night came, as we were being driven about in the Adriatic Sea, about midnight the sailors began to surmise that they were approaching some land. 28) They took soundings and found it to be twenty fathoms; and a little farther on they took another sounding and found it to be fifteen fathoms. 29) Fearing that we might run aground somewhere on the rocks, they cast four anchors from the stern and wished for daybreak. 30) But as the sailors were trying to escape from the ship and had let down the ship’s boat into the sea, on the pretense of intending to lay out anchors from the bow, 31) Paul said to the centurion and to the soldiers, “Unless these men remain in the ship, you yourselves cannot be saved.” 32) Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the ship’s boat and let it fall away.”

One fathom is a unit of measure of about six feet. It is commonly used to measure the depth of water. As the storm raged through the fourteenth night, the sailors began to surmise they were getting close to land because it started getting shallower.

Soundings were taken by lowering a rope with a weight at the bottom over the side of the ship. When the rope hit the bottom, it went slack. These ropes had markings every fathom (six feet) to easily measure depth.

In short order, the depth had gone from twenty to fifteen fathoms. This marked a steep climb of five fathoms. It meant they were approaching land fast, most likely heading straight for a reef or rocks. If they did not slow the wooden vessel down, it would likely smash into a reef and be broken apart. If this happened at night, it would have been disastrous.

The first recourse for the crew was to throw four anchors from the stern of the ship to slow its progress. Then the sailors pretended they were going to use the landing boat to secure more anchors. Their real plan was to escape to shore and abandon the passengers to fend for themselves and face near certain doom.

In the face of danger, Paul showed keen discernment. He warned the soldiers that if the experienced sailors abandoned the ship, the rest could not be saved. They needed the whole team working together on a plan for survival. At this point, the soldiers heeded Paul’s warning and cut away the landing boat.

This move to prevent mutiny by the experienced crew ensured that all were equally committed to an attempted rescue plan. It leveled the playing field. It was now everyone or no one. I like that mindset.

In this story, the contrast between worldly wisdom and godly virtue becomes clear. 1) The world looks after itself while the Christian should be concerned about the welfare of others. 2) The world acts under false pretense while the Christian should be committed to truth. 3) The world is ready to abandon ship while the Christian should be loyal to serve others at all costs.

Your true character always comes out in the midst of the storm. The only way you can serve Christ and others is to die to self. In John 15:30, Jesus said; "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends."

Paul had become a friend and protector of all on the ship. He was shepherding the 276 as if they were his flock entrusted by God to his care. Unlike the sailors, his mind was not on his own welfare, but rather on those God had given to "sail with him."

Paul stepped up to assume responsibility while the crew abandoned their responsibility in an attempt of reckless mutiny. Paul stepped into a void of leadership. God wants His people to step up in the midst of the crisis to love, lead, and serve the most vulnerable.

Sadly, today on many fronts, it is the church heading for the landing craft and abandoning the most vulnerable. Voids of leadership abound. The world has no answers. These are the most crucial hours of the night.

Turning The Attitude Tide: Acts 27:33-38

"33) Until the day was about to dawn, Paul was encouraging them all to take some food, saying, 'Today is the fourteenth day that you have been constantly watching and going without eating, having taken nothing. 34) Therefore I encourage you to take some food, for this is for your preservation, for not a hair from the head of any of you will perish.' 35) Having said this, he took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of all, and he broke it and began to eat. 36) All of them were encouraged and they themselves also took food. 37) All of us in the ship were two hundred and seventy-six persons. 38) When they had eaten enough, they began to lighten the ship by throwing out the wheat into the sea."

When read slowly in context, Paul quickly stepped into the role of an encourager. The team had just been divided. The sailors that attempted the mutiny could have been tried for treason. I am sure there were some soldiers present who were more than eager to carry out the sentence. There was every reason to play "the blame game?" Instead, Paul worked toward unity.

He started speaking encouraging words. He acknowledged that they were tired, exhausted, and therefore a bit edgy. He acknowledged that they were all hungry and fatigued. He encouraged them to eat and take food. Then he changed the conversation from loss and despair to hope and survival.

These are characteristics of a true leader. During these darkest hours, defeat was not in his vocabulary and he refused to allow infighting or division. Instead, he pulled the whole 276 together and celebrated a meal.

Verse 37 then records the crucial phrase, “all of us.” Luke again included himself in the story. Keep in mind, he was the beloved physician. The love, care, encouragement, and influence of this small group of Christians became contagious. They turned the attitude tide from despair to hope from negative to positive, from anger to compassion, from open condemnation to encouragement. They made the most of a bad situation.

God was at work. A new day dawned that morning with faith and optimism. I in no way believe all had become Christians, but the seeds of the gospel were broadly sown by both word and deed.

I would rather be sinking on a ship with godly and virtuous Christians than partying in a tavern with the vile, vulgar, and ungodly. On the other hand, keep me far from the grumbling, complaining and backstabbing carnal Christian. There is a putrid stench about them that causes even God to plug His nose.

As it was, the stage was set for the miraculous. God was about to validate the gospel with a mighty deed of deliverance. God's greatest works come during otherwise impossible circumstances.

The Beach Landing: Acts 27:39-44

“39) When day came, they could not recognize the land; but they did observe a bay with a beach, and they resolved to drive the ship onto it if they could. 40) And casting off the anchors, they left them in the sea while at the same time they were loosening the ropes of the rudders; and hoisting the foresail to the wind, they were heading for the beach. 41) But striking a reef where two seas met, they ran the vessel aground; and the prow stuck fast and remained immovable, but the stern began to be broken up by the force of the waves. 42) The soldiers’ plan was to kill the prisoners, so that none of them would swim away and escape; 43) but the centurion, wanting to bring Paul safely through, kept them from their intention, and commanded that those who could swim should jump overboard first and get to land, 44) and the rest should follow, some on planks, and others on various things from the ship. And so it happened that they all were brought safely to land.”

Night giving way to day added a new perspective. They could now see the island and its shoreline clearly. They did not recognize the island, but they did see a beach that offered a potential grounding for the ship. They devised a plan to drive the ship on the beach if they could.

That involved cutting away the four anchors from the stern, loosening the rudder for some navigation and hosting the only remaining foresail to catch the wind. The rudder was only useful as the ship gained some speed.

They were making progress, until the ship struck and grounded on a shallow reef. It was immovable, and the pounding waves began breaking the stern of the ship apart. Time was of the essence.

The soldiers had devised a plan to kill all prisoners, but Paul had gained favor and most likely Christian brotherhood with the centurion. His authority and intervention saved the lives of all prisoners and commanded the plan for all on board to attempt to make it to shore alive.

The swimmers went first. The waters were still choppy, but most likely calmed by the reef. The text makes no mention how far it was to shore. Others tossed floating objects overboard and used them to make land.

The huge miracle was that everyone made it safely to land. There was no mention of women or children in the story, but it is likely some were present as well.

This fulfilled three prophecies given by Paul in this chapter. First, in verse 10 he warned that all cargo and the ship itself would be lost if they embarked on the journey. So it happened! Second, from verses 23-24, he knew that both he and all on board would be spared. So it happened! Finally, from verses 30-35 he warned that the mutiny of the crew had to be averted for all to be saved. So it happened! These three prophecies by inference included the lives of all prisoners being spared. So it happened!

This is very fascinating, because those simple prophecies included many very specific items. Had one prisoner been killed, one person drowned, or cargo been saved, Paul would have been a false prophet. As it was, he became revered as a man in tune with God!

On a comical note, after this long time at sea, the crew, the soldiers, the prisoners and the passengers all most likely suffered from “sea legs” when they finally reached shore. It would have been nearly impossible to stand or walk straight for several hours. To the island residents, they most likely looked like “drunken sailors.” This was an idiom referring to the comical sea legs of sailors arriving on land from long times at sea.

I have suffered from sea legs and once preached a message under its influence. I clung to the old wooden pulpit to maintain balance. At the end of the service, some of the old saints got a little closer than usual. I suspect they were sniffing my breath!

The reader must wonder why God included this long chapter in the book of Acts? My guess is that He wants us to know that He is with us through the storms and trials of life. Christians are not exempt.

In 2 Corinthians 11:23-27, Paul described the many storms and hardships he endured for the sake of the gospel. In verse 25, he testified that he had been shipwrecked three times. On one of those occasions, he “spent a night and day in the deep”, most likely treading water. In the

context, he included many other perils he endured in his journey's including physical beatings, being stoned, and other persecutions.

I marvel that he was willing to endure so much for Jesus and the sake of the gospel. Why? His sufferings did not come close to comparing to the glories and indescribable encounters he had with Jesus Christ in the Spirit. (See 2 Corinthians 12:1-13) These included dreams and visions, being caught up to the third heaven, and many signs and wonders. He surfed through life on the wake of the supernatural.

For the godly and Spirit-filled believer, every journey is a new adventure! Each day is a fresh opportunity for intimate fellowship with Jesus, walking in the Spirit, and beholding the miraculous. Like Paul, we need to invite God to shatter the small and pathetic boxes of our own understanding in order to daily experience His glory. His ways are so much higher than ours! Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. (Isaiah 55:6-9; Hebrews 13:8)

He invites us to live life on His level. I confess, I have a growing disdain for mundane Christianity that reduces God to small and powerless boxes of human understanding and sanitized doctrines based on naturalism. What becomes ordinary for Spirit-filled believers is carefully censored in many evangelical Bible colleges, seminaries, and churches. They read the book of Acts, but quickly point out that "God does not work that way today." It is being done for them as they believe!

The New Level of the Spirit: Acts 28:1-6

"1) When they had been brought safely through, then we found out that the island was called Malta. 2) The natives showed us extraordinary kindness; for because of the rain that had set in and because of the cold, they kindled a fire and received us all. 3) But when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened itself on his hand. 4) When the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they began saying to one another, "Undoubtedly this man is a murderer, and though he has been saved from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live." 5) However he shook the creature off into the fire and suffered no harm. 6) But they were expecting that he was about to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But after they had waited a long time and had seen nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god."

They had survived the shipwreck, now they faced both rain and cold. Hypothermia was a real danger. The natives of the island received them kindly and stepped up to help. The island was called Malta.

Paul, being a prisoner, was most likely forced to work and gather wood for the fire. Then it happened. As Paul approached the fire, the heat warmed a dormant viper that was hidden in his bundle and it suddenly fastened on his hand. It was deadly poisonous, and it was clinging to Paul for some time.

When the natives saw the viper clinging to his hand, they started saying to one another; “Undoubtedly this man is a murderer, and though he has been saved from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live.”

Shortly, Paul was able to shake it into the fire, but suffered no harm. They were expecting immediate death. It was deadly poisonous. As Paul continued on with no effect, they changed their minds and concluded he was a god. The miracle became a huge open door for the gospel.

This event lines up exactly with Mark 16:15-18. Let me quote the text; “15) And He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. 16) He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned. 17) These signs will accompany those who have believed: in My name they will cast out demons, they will speak with new tongues; 18) they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.”” Mark 16:15-18

The more I study miracles among believers in the early church, I am discovering their faith transformed them into a new life in Christ through His Spirit. The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus set them free from the law of sin and death. (Romans 8:2)

At first it sounds radical, but they seemed to be transformed from living by the laws that govern the physical body and by faith entering into new life in the Spirit. It affected everything about them, including their mortal bodies. (See Romans 8:9-11)

This study of the book of Acts has prompted some sincere questions in me. For example, were the early Christian’s literally operating by the laws of the Spirit rather than the laws of the flesh? By faith, had they actually entering into new life in the Spirit as spoken of in texts like Romans 6:8-14, Romans 8:5-14, 1 Corinthians 5:17, 2 Corinthians 3:4-9, Galatians 5:16-25, Galatians 6:7-8, Ephesians 4:22-24 and 1 Peter 1:2-3?

Could it be that what the modern church interprets as figurative, the early church understood as literal? Did they actually step into “new life in Christ” rather than the old life governed by the flesh and death?

In the same way, could it be that what the modern church views as future tense they started experiencing in the present tense? Were they experiencing life on a new and higher level through the Spirit that was above the usual laws of sin and of death? Were they living according to the Spirit rather than according to the flesh? To what extent did they enter into “Zoe life” versus regular “bios life”?

Let me ask it another way, can snake bites and poison kill the spirit or merely the flesh? Was Paul living on a higher level “in Christ” through the Spirit and therefore the viper bite did not kill him? Take a moment to ponder that question!

Does this help explain the difference between the signs, wonders, miracles, healings and deliverances in the early church compared to the modern church? Did they take their position and authority “in Christ” more literally and therefore by faith actually live a higher level of life in the Spirit? More importantly, is the same level of life available for us today if we understand it and step into the full benefits of our “new life in Christ” by faith?

I confess, this study of the book of Acts is opening my eyes to an understanding of Scripture I have previously not seriously pondered. There is no doubt that the modern western church views God and Scripture through the lens of naturalism and interprets the Bible figuratively. But the early church viewed God and Scripture through the lens of supernaturalism and by faith entered into the new life “in Christ” literally. Did it happen for them just as Jesus taught?

I believe that God has not changed. He still works the same way today through His Spirit. But the western church has radically changed and become Christian agnostics that question and deny the power and promises of God.

However, God is doing the same signs and wonders in many 3rd world churches today as He did in the book of Acts. My doubts are being exposed and my faith is being stretched.

I am seeing new and refreshing insights in Scripture. I don’t want to miss anything God has for me through faith “in Christ” and His indwelling Holy Spirit.

I am seeing that this “New Life Principle” is taught throughout the entire New Testament. We are called to live on the new level of the Spirit and not on the old level of the flesh.

Let’s return to the story. Compared to themselves, the crowd that witnessed the viper bite concluded that Paul was living on a divine level. He survived what would have killed them. Did their observation have merit? (See 2 Peter 1:3-4)

God’s Plan to Reach an Island: Acts 28:7-10

“7) Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the leading man of the island, named Publius, who welcomed us and entertained us courteously for three days. 8) And it happened that the father of Publius was lying in bed afflicted with recurrent fever and dysentery; and Paul went in to see him and after he had prayed, he laid his hands on him and healed him. 9) After this had happened, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases were coming to him and getting cured. 10) They also honored us with many marks of respect; and when we were setting sail, they supplied us with all we needed.”

What an amazing paragraph. Paul arrived on the island because of being shipwrecked. He was a prisoner of Rome and guarded by soldiers. He had no schedule or agenda, but simply followed the example and command of Jesus to serve others, pray for the sick and use every resulting open door to share the gospel. (See Matthew 5:23-25; Matthew 9:35, Matthew 10:7-8; Luke 10:8-9 and Acts 4:29-31)

Soon, the power of God showed up. Doors for the spread of the gospel rapidly opened. Paul started by healing Publius and the story spread across the entire Island. Shortly crowds were coming to Paul for healing and hearing the gospel.

I can only imagine the impact on the soldiers. They were both seeing the miracles and hearing the gospel preached multiple times a day. It may well be that some among them who believed became part of Paul's ministry team. The question each morning may have been, "Who wants to guard Paul today?" The answer was most likely; "We will all come and bring the other prisoners with us!" Can you fathom the dynamic impact on this group?

In three months, the gospel spread like lightning across the entire island. By the time their journey resumed, they were honored with many marks of respect and abundantly supplied with provisions to continue their journey.

What Satan intended for evil in the shipwreck, God intended for good for the evangelizing of the entire island of Malta.

I am confident this movement of the Holy Spirit was not on any strategic plan. Paul and Luke were merely willing to suffer for the gospel and exploit every opportunity to serve people and share the gospel. The Holy Spirit orchestrated the rest.

When we are obedient and follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit, similar spontaneous doors can open for us. Much of the abundant ministry for us over the years were not even on our radar screen a few months earlier. It resulted from following with the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Let me share a small spiritual secret. Learn to follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit throughout each day and just serve the people God brings across your path. Give food and shelter to those in need. Pray for those who are sick. Your caring will open a door for the gospel. As you lift Jesus up, people will be saved and lives changed. Then be ready for a tsunami of Spirit-filled momentum. Like in this story, God will open doors for the gospel across the whole island.

Jesus wants to reach people with the gospel more urgently than we do. The challenge the Holy Spirit has is finding available people to work through. Our lives are so busy we squeeze God out and silence the voice of the Holy Spirit. Purpose to be available and obedient to those promptings.

Ironically, Paul's trip to Rome freed him up for spontaneous ministry. Go through each day listening for the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Be part of God's plan to reach islands around you! They are everywhere!

Final Destination: Acts 28:11-16

“11) At the end of three months we set sail on an Alexandrian ship which had wintered at the island, and which had the Twin Brothers for its figurehead. 12) After we put in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days. 13) From there we sailed around and arrived at Rhegium, and a day later a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli. 14) There we found some brethren, and were invited to stay with them for seven days; and thus we came to Rome. 15) And the brethren, when they heard about us, came from there as far as the Market of Appius and Three Inns to meet us; and when Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage. 16) When we entered Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him.”

After three months, it was time to set sail again. Getting on another ship was most likely accompanied with some anxiety. 2 Corinthians 11:25 records that Paul was shipwrecked three times. God's grace is more than sufficient to help us overcome any fear, phobia, or anxiety.

Each leg of the journey most likely brought new people across the path of the team. Though Luke records few details of their encounters on this final leg of the journey, it was most likely not obscure.

In Puteoli, they found some brethren and stayed with them for seven days. The gospel was spreading and Christians were now scattered across the Roman Empire. These believers were most reached by others who had carried the gospel far and wide. In 1 Thessalonians 1:8 Paul mentions this phenomenon.

As Paul and Luke entered Rome, they were met by a Christian welcoming party. Some brethren met them as far out at the Market of Appius and more joined the procession at Three Inns. When Paul saw them, he rejoiced and took courage. God provided exactly what Paul needed to lift his spirit.

Never minimize the value of Christian fellowship. Go out of your way to welcome and celebrate other believers. It causes grace to abound and joy to overflow. Ironically, Paul found a bigger support network of Christians waiting for him in Rome than Jerusalem. He was abandoned by all as his ordeal began.

He also received strong support and commendation from the Roman soldiers. Verse 16 says, “Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him.” The role of the soldier had changed from guarding a prisoner from escape to being the personal bodyguard of Paul. I have no doubt he had become a believer.

Paul mentions how the gospel had spread among the praetorian guard in Philippians 1:12-13. There is a much broader audience for the gospel than meets the eye. It includes those you casually rub shoulders with in your daily routine. It includes the clerk at your gas station, the waitress who serves your table, and the teachers in your local public school.

In Matthew 5:43-44, Jesus taught His followers to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Why? The gospel can turn rough soldiers into gentle body guards. In Acts 16:23-34 it turned a cruel jail keeper into a welcoming host. God wants the Agape love emanating from you and me to melt cold hearts, soften hard minds, and straighten crooked roads. Jesus wants His people to plant seeds, cultivate weeds, and water growing plants.

This is done through consistent Agape love to those watching how we respond to both adversity and adversaries. Always build bridges of love and not walls of hate to those around you. They are your mission field. Help a rough Roman soldier by carrying his bags two miles rather than one. The greatest impact always happens in the second mile. (Read Matthew 5:38-42)

What God did through Paul on his journey to Rome was miraculous. His consistent and loving influence created a huge wake for the gospel.

The Focus on Jesus and the Gospel. Acts 28:17-22

“17) After three days Paul called together those who were the leading men of the Jews, and when they came together, he began saying to them, “Brethren, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans. 18) And when they had examined me, they were willing to release me because there was no ground for putting me to death. 19) But when the Jews objected, I was forced to appeal to Caesar, not that I had any accusation against my nation. 20) For this reason, therefore, I requested to see you and to speak with you, for I am wearing this chain for the sake of the hope of Israel.” 21) They said to him, “We have neither received letters from Judea concerning you, nor have any of the brethren come here and reported or spoken anything bad about you. 22) But we desire to hear from you what your views are; for concerning this sect, it is known to us that it is spoken against everywhere.””

This text makes it clear that it was not Paul who was on trial, but rather the gospel itself. There were no charges sent against Paul. His only offense was being a Christian.

The meeting with the Jewish leaders in Rome was initiated by Paul. The Christian brethren knew he was on his way to Rome, but not the Jewish leaders. It must be observed that the Orthodox Jews were themselves merely tolerated in Rome.

Paul wrote the Epistle of Romans from Corinth. A reading of Romans 1:7-17 records his desire to visit Rome. The gospel had spread there several years prior to his arrival. The gospel was in fact spread quickly through the whole known world within several decades.

It may well be that few of the other Apostles were left in Jerusalem by the time of Paul’s arrest in the temple. Thomas carried the gospel as far East as India. The others were preaching the gospel, but God appointed Paul to define and defend the gospel message.

A detailed reading of Philippians 1:7-21 and Galatians 1:6-3:14 shows that Paul was very conscious of this vital calling and mission. He was appointed by God to define and defend the pure gospel message.

Why did God send him to Rome? It was the seat of the Roman Empire that ruled much of the world at that time. From there, Paul's writings and influence could spread quickly throughout the whole world.

This brief meeting with the Jewish leaders in Rome set the stage for Paul to become the official mouthpiece for Christianity throughout the entire Roman Empire and beyond. It should come as no surprise that his writings comprise over one-third of the New Testament. This is why God raised him up and called him. This is also why his story was featured by Luke in the last half of the book of Acts.

The book of Acts records the start of the Church by Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Then it features the explosion of the gospel through Peter and the apostles among the Jewish people. The last half of the book features the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles. The book ends with detailed coverage of the defense and confirmation of the gospel message through the life and work of Paul.

The last chapter of the book of Acts is almost anticlimactic. It ends with all eyes on the gospel and not Paul. The New Testament is the story of Jesus Christ and the gospel and not Peter, Paul or any other person. All eyes are left focused on Jesus Christ.

The Kingdom of God: Acts 28:21-24

"21) They said to him, 'We have neither received letters from Judea concerning you, nor have any of the brethren come here and reported or spoken anything bad about you. 22) But we desire to hear from you what your views are; for concerning this sect, it is known to us that it is spoken against everywhere.' 23) When they had set a day for Paul, they came to him at his lodging in large numbers; and he was explaining to them by solemnly testifying about the kingdom of God and trying to persuade them concerning Jesus, from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets, from morning until evening. 24) Some were being persuaded by the things spoken, but others would not believe."

Controversy feeds curiosity. So it was with the gospel and the early Christians. The Jews in Rome knew the Christian sect was spoken against everywhere, but they did not know why. When Paul offered to meet with them, they eagerly embraced the opportunity.

They set a day, and they came to him in large numbers. Paul used this opportunity to solemnly testify about the kingdom of God. (See Vs 23) According to Matthew 4:17 and 23, Jesus proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom. This was also the message of the early church.

At the moment of salvation, every born-again believer is transferred out of the domain of darkness and into the kingdom of light. (Colossians 1:12-13) Jesus is ruler of this Kingdom. Citizenship comes with the filling and power of the Holy Spirit and every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places “in Christ.” (Acts 1:3-8; Ephesians 1:3)

Paul spent the whole day testifying about the kingdom of God. It lasted from morning until evening. He unpacked the message of Jesus Christ from the entire Old Testament. He referred to many Scriptures from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets.

When a person becomes a Christian, they can start living by Kingdom promises and principles. Peter briefly referred to this in 2 Peter 1:2-4. (Please study these verses as an introduction into Kingdom living) These precious and magnificent promises include becoming a partaker of God’s divine power, Zoe life (life in the Spirit rather than the flesh) and becoming partakers of the divine nature.

It took Paul hours to unpack the full mystery of Jesus Christ and the Christian life. He was not talking about mere religion, he was explaining the full scope of the gospel of the kingdom of God. (See John 3:1-8) This was the message Jesus preached to Nicodemus, which he was too religious-minded to understand at first.

The results were that some people were being persuaded by Paul and believed, but others did not believe. Look at how the book of Acts ends; “30) And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, 31) preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.” (Acts 28:30-31) The gospel of the Kingdom was the core of Paul’s message.

Have you been born-again by faith in Jesus Christ into the kingdom of God? Are you walking and living in the flesh or in the Spirit? Are you embracing kingdom promises and principles? Are you merely religious or do you have a genuine and deepening relationship with Jesus Christ? These are vital questions.

The Acts of the Apostles... Continued! Acts 28:25-31

“25) And when they did not agree with one another, they began leaving after Paul had spoken one parting word, “The Holy Spirit rightly spoke through Isaiah the prophet to your fathers, 26) saying, ‘Go to this people and say, “You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; And you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive; 27) For the heart of this people has become dull, And with their ears they scarcely hear, And they have closed their eyes; Otherwise they might see with their eyes, And hear with their ears, And understand with their heart and return, And I would heal them.”’ 28) Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will also listen.” 29) [When he had spoken these words, the Jews departed, having a great dispute among themselves.] 29) And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, 30) preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.”

The book of Acts ends as it began. Let me cite three comparisons: First, in Acts 1:3, Jesus spent His post-resurrection days "... speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God." In Acts 28:31, Paul spent two years "preaching the kingdom of God."

Second, in Acts 1:8, the final words of Jesus sent His disciples beyond the Jewish people to the uttermost parts of the world. Notice, in the same way, Paul's final words at the end of the book of Acts were; "(28) Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will also listen."

Finally, both Jesus and Paul pointed to the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Jesus talked about the promise of the Father. (Vs Acts 1:4-5) Paul pointed to Him as the author of Scripture. (Acts 28:25) There is no question that the ministry of the Holy Spirit would accompany the church age.

Then the book of Acts abruptly ends. It is almost anti-climatic. The reader is left searching for answers. "How did Paul's trial in Rome end?" "What happened to Luke?" "Why did he abruptly put down his historian pen?" "Did the gospel spread around the world?" "What was happening through the other Apostles?" "Was God doing similar signs and wonders through them?" "When would the end of the age come?"

I personally believe "The Acts of the Apostles" are still being recorded in heaven today through His anointed followers. Hebrews 2:1-4 applies as much to God's people today as it did to the early church. The book of Acts is ongoing because the story of the spread of the gospel will be ongoing until Jesus returns.

I recently returned from Ethiopia where one Spirit-filled denomination is growing by over 400,000 new believers a year. Every new believer is being discipled and sent out to share the gospel at home and abroad across North Africa. They tell of many Muslims turning to Jesus because of dreams, healings, and signs and wonders accompanying the preaching of the gospel in the Name of Jesus Christ.

I am hearing similar stories coming from China, India, Indonesia, Central, and South America, and many other places. The gospel is spreading in extraordinary ways around the world today just as recorded in the book of Acts.

So why is the western church being bypassed? Granted, there are amazing things happening in some regions and pockets, but as a whole things are very dry. "Why?"

I do not have the full answer, but I suspect many western denominations have become the end time apostate church. They hold to a form of godliness but have denied its power. (Read 2 Timothy 3:1-9)

The western church has become both humanistic and naturalistic. Its focus is on man, it embraces worldly and sinful values and it denies the supernatural power of God. This battle is ripping through many western denominations. Much of the western church has become the new Judaism that rejected both Jesus and the gospel.

Today, Jesus is sending His gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit to those who have an ear to hear, the faith to believe, and the heart to obey. Living in the dynamics of the book of Acts are for the sons of the Kingdom and not for those who are merely religious.

I am coming to realize that the “Acts of the Apostles” are for the entire Church Age! The book of Acts closed, but the signs and wonders continue –and are happening today in the church Jesus Christ is building around the world!

I am a work-in-progress. This study of the book of Acts has had a major impact on me. By God’s amazing grace, He often takes me to the front lines around the world where amazing things are happening. I am overwhelmed by the goodness and power of God. He is setting me free from the religious inhibitions of my past and inviting me to walk in the power and reality of His Spirit as revealed in His Word! From glory to glory He is changing me! (2 Corinthians 3:17-18)