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The Book of Acts

A Practical Bible Commentary by Terry Baxter



The Book of Acts begins with a tsunami of Holy Spirit power starting in Jerusalem and spreading the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the known world of the time. It ends with a shipwreck amidst the power of a fearsome storm on the sea, but even this is used by God to bring many to faith and salvation. It's an amazing story of the awesome power of God!



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(Edited and occasional comment by Dan Jones)

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Introduction to the Book of Acts: Acts 1:1-2

“1) The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, 2) until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen.”

The book of Acts was written by the same human author that penned the Gospel of Luke. He was both a researcher and an accomplished historian. He was known as “Luke, the beloved Physician.” (Colossians 4:14)

From this context of Colossians 4:10-14, we discover that Luke was not from “the circumcision.” He was not Jewish. Judging by the style of his Greek language usage, which approaches that of Classical Greek Literature, he was by far the most Greek-cultured of all New Testament writers.

This means the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are the only two books in the Bible not written by a Jewish author. The book was often quoted by early Christian writers and not one of them questioned the authorship or authenticity of the book.

As you read the book of Acts, suddenly the word “we” is included in the text. Some believe that Luke accompanied Paul on three separate occasions. (See Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-21:18; and 27:1-28:16) He is the earliest example of “a media team.” Though he is subtly mentioned in these three texts, he ascribes no ministry or works to himself.

Both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are addressed to Theophilus. (Compare Luke 1:3 and Acts 1:1) The name “Theophilus” is a bit of a mystery. It is a Greek name that could be translated as “God Lover” or “Loved by God.” Some ascribe the name to a real person, others see it more generally as meaning “all who love God.”

The books may have been written from Rome where Luke accompanied Paul in his imprisonment. The date of the two books seem to be around AD 62 or 63. The book of Acts oddly and abruptly ends with Paul’s imprisonment in Rome with no mention of his trial or martyrdom.

This leads me to a personal speculation about these two books. They may have been prepared by Luke as part of the legal defense for Paul before Caesar. This would help explain the abrupt end of the book of Acts prior to Paul’s actual trial in Rome. It also explains why Luke did not track the history of the other more prominent Apostles like Peter, James, or John. After the arrest of Paul in Jerusalem, they were completely dropped from the record.

Whatever the human purpose, the book of Acts was divinely inspired by God to be the only history of the early church. Nearly all other Epistles of the New Testament can be fit into the timeline of the book of Acts. The big exception is the book of Revelation, which was written later by the Apostle John.

Join me as we begin a detailed study of the book of Acts.

Proof of the Resurrection: Acts 1:3

“3) To these He also presented Himself alive after His suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God.”

One of the important ministries of Jesus Christ took place between His resurrection and ascension. He made numerous post-resurrection appearances over a period of forty days. He gave proof of His resurrection and did much teaching about the kingdom of God.

I Corinthians 15:1-11 talks about some of His posts resurrection appearances. At one point, He appeared to a group of over 500 disciples at one time. Paul stressed that at the time of his writing the book of 1 Corinthians, many of the witnesses were still alive.

This is important because the resurrection of Jesus Christ was not an obscure event. It was not a fictitious story made up by a few of His zealous followers. In fact, some like Thomas were doubters.

The crowning proof of His resurrection is that His disciples willingly became martyrs to uphold the claim of His resurrection. This phase of His ministry lasted forty days and was very convincing. It became the launching pad of the gospel and world evangelization.

I have ministered to many skeptics, agnostics, and atheists over the years. My favorite form of apologetics is to invite them to research the claims of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As many of them have been confronted with the evidence of the resurrection, the Holy Spirit brought them to saving faith in Jesus Christ.

Wait for the Promise: Acts 1:4-5

“4) And Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, “Which,” He said, “you heard of from Me; 5) for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.””

The promise of the indwelling Holy Spirit marks a new age not experienced in the Old Testament. It was foretold in texts like Joel 2:28-29, but remained a mystery.

The Father promised the ministry of the Holy Spirit in John 14:16-18: 14:25-27 15:26-27 and 16:7-15. This would mark the beginning of a new age. Some call it the church age and others refer to it as the age of the indwelling Spirit of God.

Jesus did not want His disciples to leave Jerusalem and embark on the Great Commission without the baptism and power of the Holy Spirit. He was not raising up a new religious sect –

He was about to pour out an entirely new kind of relationship with God through the indwelling Holy Spirit. He commanded them to wait in Jerusalem for this promise from the Father.

In Acts 1:5, Jesus quotes from John the Baptist. The baptism of the Holy Spirit was promised by John the Baptist in each of the four gospels. It is recorded in Matthew 3:11-12; Mark 1:7-8; Luke 3:16 and John 1:33. These are the verses Jesus was referring to in Acts 1:5: “For John Baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

The stage was being set for something profound and unprecedented. It is tragic that there is so much controversy and confusion over the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Let me briefly share some of my story related to my deepening understanding and walk in the Spirit.

I came from a theological background that was very timid and inhibited about the ministry of the Holy Spirit. It took me years to embrace the full meaning of Scriptures like John 4:22-25 and John 7:37-39.

Theological bias blinded me to the gifts and fruits of the Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12-14 and Galatians 5:22-26) I believed in Jesus but lived in fleshly bondage and trusted man-made doctrines and human reason to guide me. The full meaning of Romans 6-8 escaped me. I shunned the person of the Holy Spirit.

Memorizing many chapters in the Bible from books like John, 1 Corinthians, Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Hebrews and 1 & 2 Peter began to chip away at the numerous false notions about the Holy Spirit commonly held in evangelical churches. However, solid hermeneutics prevented me from embracing much of the emotionalism and extra-biblical phenomenon in other groups. The Bible became my guide.

As my understanding about the walk in the Spirit deepened, so did my exposure to the international body of Christ and the persecuted church. I have been privileged to rub shoulders with many obscure saints of whom the world is not worthy. Over time, God graciously led me into deep and overflowing communion with Jesus Christ through His Spirit and His Word.

Now I fully enjoy and embrace the anointing and power of the Holy Spirit. My walk with God through His Spirit has become like rivers of living water in my innermost being. I no longer stuff God or the Holy Spirit in the small box of any denominational bias. I long to experience the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, the fellowship of His suffering, the full mysteries of His Word, and sweet communion with His Spirit.

Be prepared to be challenged as we study the book of Acts. This book will expose your theological bias no matter your background.

Many believers and segments of the body of Christ around the world today are still experiencing God working in ways like the book of Acts. I am no longer an agnostic about the ministry and power of the Holy Spirit in this present age. God is sovereign, powerful, and in control – but He

will not force His Spirit or glory on any person. Many have not because they believe not. My advice to the skeptic about the gifts and power of the Holy Spirit is the same as Jesus to His disciples: "Wait for what God promised!"

Changing the Times: Acts 1:6-7

"6) So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" 7) He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority;"

These two verses are fascinating. The Jewish people were looking for the Messiah to restore the Kingdom to Israel and rule the world from Jerusalem. Daniel 7:13-14; 27 and Amos 9:11-14 are prime examples of this kingdom restoration mindset.

The disciples were well-versed in this kingdom-restoration theology and expectation. This prompted the question; "Lord, is it at this time you are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" According to their Old Testament view of prophecy, this was the next event on God's timetable.

In Acts 1:7, Jesus acknowledged a coming change in times and epochs. God does indeed rule over the affairs of mankind and brings changes to times, governments, and earthly administrations. Revelation 20:1-10 talks about the millennium reign of Christ on earth. The restoration promised in the Old Testament prophecy is coming.

But God had a mystery age not clearly revealed in the Old Testament. Paul talked about this in depth in texts like Ephesians 3:3-13 and Colossians 1:26. This is often referred to as "the church age" or "the age of the indwelling Spirit of God."

In Matthew 16:17, Jesus talked about building "His Church." This was a new concept for the disciples. The obvious question should have been; "What is a church?" This is the first time the word "church" is used in the Bible. No wonder Paul called it a mystery. Let me paint a broader picture of this mystery:

The concepts of the Gospel based on the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, grace, justification by faith, conversion, the indwelling Holy Spirit, spiritual gifts, the church, the bride of Christ, salvation for the Gentiles, and the Great Commission are all part of the mystery not clearly revealed in the Old Testament. Christianity is a huge paradigm change from Old Testament Judaism.

There is some argument over when the church age formally started. Was it with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ or was it the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost? Most point to Pentecost.

According to Acts 1:4-5, the promise of the Father was going to change everything. It was going to mark a change in the times and the epochs. The age of the indwelling Holy Spirit for all

believers was about to begin. The new focus would be on the ministry of the Holy Spirit and the body of Christ. Jesus was about to start building His Church. Times were about to change.

But here is the crucial point: The focus of this coming age revolves around the ministry of the Holy Spirit. If you want to be part of His Church, you need to put faith in Jesus Christ and then grow and mature in your walk in the Spirit. The Holy Spirit desires to do a huge work in you followed by a mighty work through you. Welcome to the book of Acts.

Dunamis Power: Acts 1:8

“8) but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” Acts 1:8

This verse highlights the Great Commission purpose of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Greek word for “power” is “dunamis.” It is the same word from which we get the English word for “dynamite.” That intrigues me!

The basic idea in this verse is that God would do extraordinary things both in and through believers through His indwelling Holy Spirit. This “power” would give them both inner unction for effective witnessing and supernatural outward signs to confirm the gospel message.

It doesn’t mean that the miraculous would become common or ordinary. Then it would cease to be miraculous. But it means that God would step up and confirm the message of the gospel in powerful ways.

This is the point behind Hebrews 2:4. When the gospel is preached, God Himself would bear witness of the message with signs and wonders and miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit. In this verse, the word “dunamis” is translated as “miracles.” A true miracle can always be traced back to God.

In Acts 3-4, one miracle of healing opened the door for numerous evangelistic messages and opportunities to teach and preach about Jesus Christ. In the process, the disciples displayed unusual courage and boldness. This is a great example of the power of God at work. Only one man was healed and that resulted in many hearing the gospel.

Acts 1:8 provides another principle. God’s promised power was tied to the spread of the gospel. I look at it as “front line power.” God did not promise His power for those sitting on the side lines or for personal consumption. It accompanies the spread of the gospel. It is an unction for witnessing.

I cannot explain it, but I’ve seen it hundreds of times over. When ordinary believers step up and step out in witnessing and sharing the gospel, glorious things begin to happen. Personal joy is compounded and God begins working in marvelous ways!

There is a wave or surge of power that accompanies the spread of the gospel. It translates into experiencing God in extraordinary ways.

If your walk with God is dry and mundane, it may be an indication that you are not living on the front lines of faith and world evangelism. Instead, you have most likely retreated into the comfort zone of self-focus.

I cannot find a single verse in the Bible promising dunamis power for self-consumption. Yet this is where many modern churches are content to live. Then they make that tragic observation that God doesn't do miracles today.

Let me state this clearly: Dunamis power is for making Jesus known and not for making oneself comfortable. It's for actively reaching Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the remotest parts of the world with the gospel. If you want to experience God, get off your blessed assurance and report for duty on the front lines of sharing the gospel!

(As long as we are talking about the dunamis power of the Holy Spirit, let's not forget just how much power we are talking about: The Holy Spirit is the same Spirit that was hovering over the waters of the earth at creation. (Genesis 1:2) God breathed the breath of life into Adam. (Genesis 2:7) God led the Israelites out of Egypt with a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire. (Exodus 13:21 & 22) The LORD used a mighty wind to part the Red Sea. (Exodus 14:21) God descended on Mount Sinai with smoke and fire. (Exodus 19:18) When the glory of the LORD fills the temple with clouds and smoke and fire, it's so intense human beings cannot bear it. (2 Chronicles 5:14 and 7:1-16, Ezekiel 43) When Elijah showed the 950 prophets of Baal and Asherah the power of God on Mount Carmel, some serious fire-power came down from heaven! (1 Kings 18:1-40) The kind of power seen in these passages and events makes man-made dynamite look like the cheap cap guns we had as kids. This is world-forming, life-breathing, amazing, astounding, power-of-God-Himself POWER! So, when Paul writes in Romans 8:11 that the same Spirit of God that raised Jesus from the dead *lives in each one of us* – that ought to change how we look at ourselves and our glorious God forever!) -dj

The Ascension: Acts 1:9-11

“9) And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. 10) And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. 11) They also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.””

There is no way to measure the impact of the ascension on the disciples. As He finished His final words which pointed to the coming work of the Holy Spirit, He was lifted up before their very eyes into heaven while they were intently watching. This was a literal, visible, and actual

event. They were eye-witnesses. They watched it happen. The ascension was meant to cement several truths in their minds.

First, the ascension validated His resurrection. All of them saw the resurrected Christ, but none of them actually witnessed the event. It was accomplished in the solitude of the sealed tomb. By contrast, the ascension happened before their very eyes in broad daylight! All doubt was removed.

Second, the ascension proved that His work on earth was done. Human redemption was complete. The debt of human sin was paid in full once and for all time. His death and burial satisfied the wrath and justice of God. Nothing can be added to His work on the cross to earn or merit salvation. It is a free gift based on faith in the grace of God.

Third, the ascension indicated that His new work in heaven was beginning. He was entering into the office of intercessor at the right hand of God. Romans 8:27-28; Hebrews 4:14-16 and 7:25 all speak of His office as intercessor on our behalf at the right hand of God. He is to be credited for the good and glorious things that happen in our lives.

Fourth, the two men in white clothing illustrate that we are not alone during our sojourn on earth. God has heavenly agents that help carry out His will and plans here on earth. Hebrews 1:14 states that they render secret service to those who will inherit salvation.

Finally, the promise of His return underlines the fact that Jesus is coming again! This is a foundational truth taught throughout the whole New Testament. Just as He was taken up into a cloud into heaven, so He is going to return on the clouds of heaven. (See 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18)

The resurrection, the ascension, and the promise of the Holy Spirit were the three main points to Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost. (See Acts 1:22-36) Witnessing the ascension accomplished something profound in these men. It punctuated, validated, and cemented everything about the life, ministry and gospel of Jesus Christ. They lived and died knowing the reality of heaven and the love and acceptance of Jesus Christ.

Men of Galilee: Acts 1:11-13

"11) They also said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.' 12) Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. 13) When they had entered the city, they went up to the upper room where they were staying; that is, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of James." Acts 1:11-13

The two angels made an interesting observation when they addressed the disciples at the time of the ascension. They called them “Men of Galilee.” This is significant for three reasons.

First, they were outsiders in Jerusalem. They were sojourners. They were common working class folks from around the Sea of Galilee. They were a ragtag group of fishermen, tax collectors and blue collar workers. They were looked down on as being uneducated and uncultured men. (See Acts 4:13)

They did not fit the high culture and prestige of the religious leaders in Jerusalem. This created much tension between the ruling class of Judaism and the emerging leadership in the early church.

They fit the description Paul made in 1 Corinthians 1:26-31 of the kind of people God often uses. God often calls weak, ordinary, common and foolish people for His great work. In the process, He gets all the glory.

The same is true today. God chooses unlikely people to accomplish His great work. He seems to favor common and ordinary people as His vessels through which He accomplishes extraordinary things.

Second, there was a lot of traveling taking place during these forty days. Immediately after His resurrection, Jesus commanded His disciples to return to Galilee from the Passover in Jerusalem. (Matthew 28:10). It appears that much of His post-resurrection ministry happened back in the region of Galilee.

However, they returned to Jerusalem for the ascension. The disciples were mobile and spent much time traveling. The upper room became a multi-purpose facility. It was used for lodging, but it also served as their organizational headquarters and their prayer and worship center. It was not fancy, but it was functional. Let me extrapolate for just a moment.

The contrast between the religious institution of Jerusalem occupied by the religious leaders and the upper room used by the disciples is totally comical. The Religious leaders occupied and controlled the temple grounds and all of the religious facilities and institutions of Jerusalem. Judaism had become very institutionalized while the new church was forced to remain very flexible, mobile, and practical. The Jewish religious leaders followed centuries of religious tradition, but the disciples were free to follow the Spirit. The Jewish religious leaders focused on buildings, but the disciples focused on the organic body of Christ. The Jewish religious leaders practiced authoritarian leadership, the disciples practiced servanthood leadership.

This contrast goes on and on, but it is important. The more institutionalized a movement becomes the more negative weight it carries. This might be a topic for another discussion, but it is certainly embodied in this text.

Finally, the actual ascension happened from the Mount of Olives. According to Zechariah 14:4, this will be the place of the return of the Messiah. Jesus is going to return to the exact place where He ascended. It is a Sabbath day's walk from Jerusalem.

(A very significant geological event will occur at the very same time as Jesus' return, leaving no doubt that the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy from Zechariah 14:4 is taking place.) -dj

Keep your eyes and ears focused on Israel and the Middle East as the end times approach. This is the geographical backdrop for much of the Bible both historically and prophetically.

Devoted to Prayer: Acts 1:13-15

"13) When they had entered the city, they went up to the upper room where they were staying; that is, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of James. 14) These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers. 15) At this time Peter stood up in the midst of the brethren (a gathering of about one hundred and twenty persons was there together), and said,"

This was the prayer meeting that shook the world. This gathering of 120 persons did not have a planning meeting about how they were going to fulfill the Great Commission, instead they focused on prayer. Seeking God in prayer and intercession was the methodology of the early church.

With one mind they continually devoted themselves to prayer. I must stress that prayer is not about prayer, it is about connecting and aligning with God. They spent the time between the ascension and the day of Pentecost seeking God in prayer.

It was in this prayer meeting and not at a board meeting that God welded them together in one mind. Through prayer God worked in them individually and He bonded them collectively. Just as Jesus launched His public ministry with 40 days of prayer and fasting, so the early church was launched through an extended prayer meeting.

They were following the command of Jesus Christ to wait for the promise of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 1:4) Tragically, as the church exploded with growth, they started neglecting prayer. Acts 6:4 records what I call "The Great Reset." The Apostles cleared their schedules and returned to their primary calling; "4) But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the Word."

Again we see the word "devote." It means "To be devoted, to tarry, remain somewhere, to continue, remain steadfastly, to cleave to someone." The idea is to cleave to God in prayer and continue in that relationship. Prayer became their primary focus from which the ministry of the Word was fueled and sustained in the early church.

The greatest way to align the modern church with the early church is through this devotion to continually seek God in prayer. This became the shared foundation of the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1-4), and it became the primary instruction from Paul to Timothy for building an effective ministry. (2 Timothy 2:1-8)

I want to stress this point – God gives His marching orders to His church through extended prayer meetings and not through elongated board meetings. Unity grows out of prayer meetings and not congregational meetings. God speaks to His people as they wait on Him in prayer and not as they focus on self-agendas. The fire and fuel for ministry comes from prolonged times in God's presence. By contrast, fleshly ministry is exhausting and leads to division and burnout.

These verses at the beginning of the book of Acts set the focus for the early church. Their primary calling was to seek God in prayer and from the resulting deep relationship forged with God they were to embark on ministry in the world. The early church was God-centered and not man-centered. It was God-focused and not self-focused. It prioritized prayer meetings far above planning meetings.

The Demise of Judas: Acts 1:15-20

“15) At this time Peter stood up in the midst of the brethren (a gathering of about one hundred and twenty persons was there together), and said, 16) “Brethren, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. 17) For he was counted among us and received his share in this ministry.” 18) (Now this man acquired a field with the price of his wickedness, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his intestines gushed out. 19) And it became known to all who were living in Jerusalem; so that in their own language that field was called Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) 20) “For it is written in the book of Psalms, ‘Let his homestead be made desolate, And let no one dwell in it’; and, ‘Let another man take his office.’”

The name “Judas” was a popular name. It is from Greek origin and means “praised.” It fell from prominence for centuries because of the disciple who betrayed Jesus. Lady Gaga brought it back somewhat to popularity when she released the track Judas in 2011. Her use of the name was selected to promote the dark side of Judas. The name is associated with insubordination, rebellion, and ungodliness.

The actions of one man can stain and ruin a name. The same happened to the names “Benedict” and “Adolf.” Both abruptly dropped from popularity because of treacherous men who ruined their names. The name “Jezebel” suffered the same fate.

The opposite is true of good and godly people whose life adorned their names. Many biblical characters made their names popular for centuries for both women and men. Examples of popular names for women are Sarah, Rachel, Deborah, Esther, Ruth, and Mary. There are also many examples for men like Joseph, John, David, Daniel, Isaiah, Peter, James, Mark, Paul, or Timothy. I might ask; “What are you doing to your name?”

The actions of Judas became well-known. He was greedy and became a traitor. He became the guide to those who arrested Jesus. From verses 16 and 21 we discover that his actions fulfilled prophecy. This often feeds a lively discussion of human free will and the Sovereignty of God. I see them walking hand-in-hand through the pages of Scripture. Judas was responsible for his actions and yet God knew the end from the beginning.

The end result was Judas took his own life. He attempted to hang himself and evidently something went wrong to the point that he fell down a cliff and burst open so that his guts spilled out. It was a gruesome death. Satan always turns on those who side with him. John 10:10 says he is like a thief who comes only to steal, kill and destroy. Judas is a sober warning to any who come close to Jesus only to turn their back on Him.

The monument of his life became the field of blood purchased in his name with the very money he received for betraying Jesus. It became a burial place for strangers. (Matthew 27:6-10) Money obtained by falsehood, fraud, and corruption is never blessed. Proverbs 22:1 says; “A good name is more desirable than great riches.” You cannot buy salvation or a good reputation.

(There is a plot of land in Jerusalem, visible from where we know the home of Caiaphas the High Priest was located, that is said to be the field of blood purchased with the money Judas received for betraying Jesus. It is barren to this day.) -dj

The Vacant Office Filled: Acts 1:21-26

“21) Therefore it is necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us— 22) beginning with the baptism of John until the day that He was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection.” 23) So they put forward two men, Joseph called Barsabbas (who was also called Justus), and Matthias. 24) And they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all men, show which one of these two You have chosen 25) to occupy this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” 26) And they drew lots for them, and the lot fell to Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.”

This is one of those texts which at first glance seems trivial, but is actually monumental. The actions of Peter and the other Apostles in this text are often criticized as being presumptuous. The critics say they acted too quickly and Paul should have been the twelfth Apostle. I personally disagree with that opinion and believe Peter and the early leaders got it right for the following reasons.

First, Peter and the 120 had just devoted themselves to prayer for many days. If they did not discern the leading of God rightly on this action, no subsequent decision should be trusted either.

Second, there are two groups of Apostles in the New Testament. There were the Twelve Apostles of the Lamb who were all selected by Jesus prior to the Day of Pentecost (Revelation 21:14), and there was the spiritual gift of “apostle” or those “sent out” by the Holy Spirit. (Ephesians 4:11) I look at this as the missionary gift. Biblically distinguishing between the two groups is important. They are radically different.

This again begs the question; “When did the church age or the age of the indwelling Holy Spirit begin?” Most scholars agree that it was on the Day of Pentecost when the promise of the Father was poured out. The offices of the Twelve Apostles of the Lamb had to be filled prior to that significant transition. Putting Matthias in office was the last major action taken prior to the Day of Pentecost. The timing was both right and very significant.

Third, the qualifications to fill the position that Judas forfeited were twofold: 1) having accompanied Jesus during His entire public ministry, 2) being a personal witness of the resurrected Christ and His ascension. (See Acts 1:21) Paul did not come close to meeting these qualifications. His name doesn’t show up in a search of disciples of Jesus Christ in the four gospels. Technically, Matthias doesn’t either, but he was well known by the Apostles. He was part of the 120 faithful followers of Jesus Christ who were with him to the very end.

Fourth, this position had to be filled prior to the Day of Pentecost to occupy the ministry and apostleship from which Judas had gone aside. (Acts 1:25) Their ministry was to validate the public teachings of Jesus and provide eye witness testimony of His resurrection and Ascension. Again, Paul did not meet this qualification.

Fifth, the selection by lot meant that Jesus did the selecting and appointing for this office. It was not done in haste. It followed prophetic guidance. (See Acts 1:20) Matthias was put into office prior to the Day of Pentecost. Let me emphasize again, the Twelve Apostles of the Lamb were chosen by Jesus Christ Himself. They were not sent out by the Holy Spirit as a spiritual gift after Pentecost.

Sixth, Saul was not even a believer in Jesus Christ at this time. In fact, he was about to lead an intense persecution against Jesus and the early church. He had many Christians put in prison and some put to death. (Acts 8:1-3) The conversion of Saul may have taken place two or three years after the start of the church. Then he spent time in solitude in Arabia before going up to Damascus. (Galatians 1:18) His spiritual gift as an apostle to the Gentiles was not confirmed by Peter, James, and John until 14 years later. (See Galatians 2:1-10)

Seventh, Paul and Barnabas were both commissioned and sent out by the Holy Spirit from the Gentile church at Antioch. (See Acts 13:1-4) Keep in mind, the word “apostle” means “sent out.” In these verses it was clearly the Holy Spirit sending them out to carry the gospel to new regions. They immediately left for their first “missionary journey.”

Eight, both Paul and Barnabas as well as several others were referred to as “apostles” in the New Testament. (Acts 14:4, 14) These were a separate group of apostles and clearly distinguished from “The Twelve.” They were missionaries entrusted with the gospel.

The biblical evidence seems overwhelming that Peter and the 120 who prayed in the day of Pentecost got it right. The Twelve Apostles of the Lamb were in office prior to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the dawn of a new age.

(The casting of lots goes way back to Exodus where God told Moses how to construct the tabernacle and all its furnishings and even how his brother, Aaron, is to be dressed as high priest. This included an ephod (a long, sleeveless garment) to which is attached a breastplate which is adorned with twelve precious stones engraved with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. When we get to Exodus 28:30, we find this:

“And in the breastpiece of judgment you shall put the Urim and the Thummim, and they shall be on Aaron’s heart, when he goes in before the LORD. Thus Aaron shall bear the judgment of the people of Israel on his heart before the LORD regularly.” (ESV)

Exactly what the Urim and Thummim were is unknown in this day and age. What we do know is that they were used in the casting of lots, which is mentioned 70 times in the Old Testament and seven times in the New Testament. Essentially, it worked like flipping a coin or rolling dice.

From a modern standpoint, making decisions by flipping a coin or rolling dice seems very odd or even irresponsible – but if God is in control of everything everywhere and He can make all things work out for the good of those who love Him, is it really such a bad idea? God had his people use this method for thousands of years. It’s certainly Biblical and there is an element of faith in it that seems to me would work better than a two-hour meeting to debate the color of the carpet being considered for church renovations. Just a thought.) -dj

Meaning of the Day of Pentecost: Acts 2:1

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.”

The day of Pentecost marked the beginning of the early weeks of harvest. It was one of three annual Jewish festivals. The word “Pentecost” is the Greek name for what the Jews called the Feast of Harvest or the Feast of Weeks. It is mentioned three times in the Books of the Law. (Exodus 23:14-17; Numbers 28:26-31 and Deuteronomy 16:9-17) It was seven weeks or 50 days after the Passover. It was celebrated for seven days.

This gives us an anchor for how long the gathering in the upper room waited and prayed. After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to them over a period of forty days and then ascended from the Mount of Olives. He gave them instruction to wait for the Promise of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 1:3-11) As I count off the fifty days between the Passover and Pentecost, the gathering in the upper room completed the fifty days. That means it lasted between seven and ten days depending on how you include the time between the crucifixion and the resurrection.

Keep in mind, Pentecost marked the beginning of the harvest. This becomes significant. Without realizing it, they were waiting for a new kind of harvest. It would be sparked by the giving of the Holy Spirit. This would be a harvest of people continually coming to Jesus through the Gospel.

If we stand back and take a broad look, this particular day of Pentecost marked the beginning of a harvest that has lasted nearly 2,000 years. Acts 1:8 again becomes important. The giving of the Holy Spirit was going to launch the Gospel from Jerusalem and Judea to the remotest parts of the earth. Technically, this season of harvest will last until Jesus returns.

The harvest for the Gospel is always in season. I believe Jesus picked Pentecost to pour out the Holy Spirit to signify the beginning of a new kind of harvest. The ministry of the Holy Spirit is closely tied to world evangelization.

I am not an expert on the Jewish calendar and festivals, but it is clear something beautiful is beginning to come into focus. There were three annual Jewish festivals in the Old Testament. The first was the Passover where the lamb was sacrificed. The four Gospels end with Jesus as the Lamb of God being crucified on the Passover. He fulfilled the first festival.

The second festival was the feast of weeks or Pentecost. It marked the beginning of the Harvest. The book of Acts records the explosive beginning of the harvest with the giving of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. The imagery of the second feast is still being fulfilled. The harvest is still happening. With the next feast, things are about to get very interesting. You may already be anticipating what is coming with the next festival.

The third festival was called the Feast of Booths or the Day of Assembly. It is recorded in Leviticus 23:33-44. This is when all the people gather to celebrate the completion of the harvest. The book of Revelation points to the Day of Assembly when the harvest of the Gospel is complete, the wheat has been separated from the chaff, and all believers enter into God's heavenly storehouse. This is a simplified look at the three festivals, but also very profound!

So where are we on God's calendar? I believe the harvest is wrapping up soon and the Day of Assembly is about to begin. I believe we are in the last days of the harvest.

The Public Witness of God: Acts 2:1-2; 6

"1) When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2) And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting." "6) And when this sound occurred, the crowd came together, and were bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language."

We are now faced with a dilemma surrounding the text. Where were the believers gathered? Were they gathered in the solitude of the upper room or were they meeting in a more public house closer to the temple grounds? Why do I ask this question?

When the Holy Spirit was poured out and the sound of a violent rushing wind occurred, many people heard the phenomenon. Also, as the believers were speaking in other tongues, the multitudes who came together heard them speaking in their own language. The description sounds very public. This points toward a location other than the privacy of the upper room.

The timing was also significant. It happened during the festival of Pentecost when Jerusalem was filled with visitors from numerous countries. The news of this event was quickly going to spread far and wide.

This might be a trivial point, but the text stresses that what happened was witnessed by many people from many places. Though God does some things in secret, He often works openly and very publicly. In fact, He sometimes shows off His glory and power to shame the adversaries and adorn His glory.

For example, the signs of Moses in Egypt were done openly as a witness to all the people. They affected everyone! God was openly humiliating the gods of Egypt. The miracles of Jesus and most of His teaching were in the open and in public. The crucifixion was very public.

Before we get into the details of what happened on the day of Pentecost, I want to emphasize the point that God wanted it to be known by all people. The Promise of the Father was poured out only on believers, but it was witnessed by crowds of people.

God does not want us to hide the gospel or our testimonies. We are the light of the world and like a city set on a hill. (Matthew 5:14) God wants to be known. God wants you and me to know Him. He wants us to make Him known.

Unless you live under intense persecution, God does not call you to be a “secret agent” as a Christian. He wants you to be real, sincere, and open about your faith. He wants people to talk about Him as a result of your witness.

Baptism with the Holy Spirit and Fire: Acts 2:1-4

“1) When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2) And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3) And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. 4) And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance.”

This was the second time in three years that the Spirit of God descended from heaven. Matthew 3:16-17 records a similar event at the baptism of Jesus; “16) After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him, 17) and behold a voice out of heaven, saying, “This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased.”

When we compare this to Acts 2:2-4, there are some striking similarities. First, in both cases the Spirit of God descended from heaven. In the case of Jesus, He came in the form of a dove. On the day of Pentecost, He came with the sound of a violent rushing wind. The Greek word for “wind” is “pneuma”. It is the same Greek word used for “Spirit.” It can also be used for breath. Jesus was breathing life into His Church.

The “violent rushing wind” was a fulfillment of the words of Jesus to Nicodemus in John 3:5-8. In these verses, Jesus described those who are born of the Spirit. He said in verse 8) that “the wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from or where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Note the comparison between wind and the Spirit of God.

Second, both cases were connected closely to prayer. In Matthew 4:1, the Spirit of God led Jesus into the wilderness for forty days of prayer and fasting. In Acts 2:1-2, the Holy Spirit was poured out after an extended time of prayer by the 120 who gathered to pray for the Promise of the Father to be given.

Third, both cases were accompanied by speech. At the baptism of Jesus, a voice out of heaven said; “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” On the day of Pentecost, those speaking in tongues were “speaking the mighty deeds of God.” (Acts 2:11) Both were an indication of belonging. The Father was claiming His Son, the early believers were proclaiming their God.

Fourth, in both cases it was a widely-witnessed event. The baptism of Jesus was at the Jordan River and was witnessed by the crowd gathered around John the Baptist. The baptism of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost happened in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost and was witnessed by sojourners from many nations and languages.

Finally, both marked the launching of an era of new ministry. The Spirit coming on Jesus started His public ministry to the lost sheep of the House of Israel.. The Holy Spirit coming from heaven on the Day of Pentecost launched the church into the ministry of World Evangelization. No wonder there were tongues of many languages.

However, there were some differences. First, the Spirit that descended on Jesus like a dove was gentle and peaceful. By contrast, the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost sounded like a “violent rushing wind.” The occasion emphasized the power of God.

What an appropriate fulfillment of the words of Jesus about the Holy Spirit in Acts 1:8; “but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you...” Those baptized by the Holy Spirit were endowed with power. They were changed. They were no longer merely religious.

Second, there was no fire present at the baptism of Jesus. Why? John baptized with water, but Jesus was going to baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. John the Baptist repeatedly made this

distinction between Himself and Jesus. (See Matthew 3:11-12; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33; Acts 1:4-5) It is very important to highlight that distinction. There is no record that Jesus Himself baptized anyone with water. (Read John 4:1-2) His baptizing ministry is with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

The presence of God is often associated with fire. A prime example is Exodus 3:1-4 and Moses at the burning bush. He was on the mountain of God and encountered the fire of God's presence.

I am shocked at how many churches urge water baptism which was associated with the ministry of John the Baptist, but shun away from the baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire which is associated with the ministry of Jesus. Something is tragically wrong!

I personally want everything Jesus has for me. I make no apology, I want to be on fire for Jesus Christ! I don't want to be cold or lukewarm. I don't want to be religious but lost. I want to be hot, and that comes from the fire of the Holy Spirit. (Revelation 3:15-16)

Finally, there was only one language heard at the baptism of Jesus, but many languages on the day of Pentecost. Why? I suspect it was related to mission. Jesus as Messiah was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. By contrast, the Great Commission to the church is world evangelization. God wants us to reach every nation, tribe, and tongue with the Gospel!

Various Gifts of Tongues: Acts 2:5-13; 1 Corinthians 14:1-19

"5) Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven. 6) And when this sound occurred, the crowd came together, and were bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language. 7) They were amazed and astonished, saying, "Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8) And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born? 9) Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10) Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11) Cretans and Arabs—we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God." 12) And they all continued in amazement and great perplexity, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" 13) But others were mocking and saying, "They are full of sweet wine.""

We now discover an amazing phenomenon on the day of Pentecost. This manifestation of tongues represented known languages. The visitors in Jerusalem were hearing their own native languages and dialects being spoken without the need of a translator.

The day of Pentecost reversed what happened at the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1-9. People were able to clearly communicate the Gospel in languages they had not learned. God was sending a message to Israel that He had a plan for every nation, tribe and tongue. The gospel was no longer just for the Jewish people.

But this brings up a huge controversy that has divided the church for many decades. If tongues are known languages, how do you explain those who claim to speak in tongues, but they use unintelligible speech? This text in Acts seems very clear that they were speaking in known languages.

To answer this issue, more texts of Scripture must be studied. The New Testament talks about both “known languages” and “unknown languages.” Let’s unpack some things that might be helpful.

Acts 2:5-13 is clearly talking about known languages. They were the known languages and dialects of people visiting Jerusalem from surrounding countries. It was a unique phenomenon. No translation was needed.

By contrast however; 1 Corinthians 14:1-19 is clearly talking about unknown languages. Where do we glean that from the text? Verse 2 says; “For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men, but to God; for no one understands, but in his spirit he speaks mysteries.” Notice that Paul said “no one understands.” The person with the gift is not speaking to men, but to God. In his spirit he is speaking mysteries. (See also 1 Corinthians 14:14-15)

It took me a number of years to concede this point, but Paul was describing an intercession prayer gift. “Prayer” by definition is speaking to God. For this gift to be used in public it needed an interpretation. By contrast, what happened on the day of Pentecost did not need translation or interpretation. People were hearing their own known languages being spoken very clearly. We must conclude there are two different kinds of “tongues” presented in the New Testament.

Let me briefly touch on an argument from those who believe that some spiritual gifts were temporary and have ceased. Their main argument says: “If the purpose for which the gift was given was fulfilled, then the gift is no longer needed.” Then they say that the tongues in Acts 2:1-13 were for a sign to Israel and that mission was fulfilled, therefore the gift of tongues is no longer needed.

The problem is that Paul said the gift of tongues in 1 Corinthians 14:2 was primarily for prayer and intercession. So, using their own logic and argument, let me pose a question; “Is prayer and intercession no longer needed today?” Has its purpose been fulfilled? Let that question sink in!

This may be a small issue for some, but coming from a conservative evangelical background that was dogmatic that the gift of tongues had ceased, this was a huge turmoil for me. I had some Bible College professors openly teach that modern tongues were from the devil. When I confronted them with Scriptures like 1 Corinthians 14:1-19 and 14:39-40, they confessed theological prejudice and pointed to their Doctrinal Statement.

I was not persuaded by them, but I did become timid about the ministry of the Holy Spirit. God used three things to help me resolve this conflict.

First, I had memorized many chapters and even books of the Bible. I had memorized the book of 1 Corinthians in high school for our church's Bible Quizzing team. It was very clear to me that my Bible College professors were not rightly handling Scripture related to this subject. I graciously pointed out that they were violating their own principles of biblical interpretation in order to embrace their conclusion, yet doubt and cold water was thrown on my spirit. It hindered my freedom in the Spirit for years.

Second, as we launched into itinerant ministry and sought seasoned prayer warriors, many of them had a personal prayer language. They did not publicly speak in tongues, but they were seasoned intercessors and had extraordinary discernment. They were godly, biblically rooted, and very mature spiritually. I could not deny their anointing, fervor in prayer, or amazing insights about what and how to pray. It was obvious that the Holy Spirit was leading them.

Finally, we started working interdenominationally and internationally. We met people from a broad cross section of the body of Christ. Our eyes were opened. We discovered godly and mature people in many churches. We also discovered sinful, worldly, and carnal people in every Christian circle. The mystique came down and the rose colored glasses were removed from every group, including charismatic and Pentecostal. They all struggled with the same stuff!

But one thing became very obvious, the mature, godly, and consecrated men and women in every group had a deep relationship with Jesus Christ and cultivated a personal walk in the Spirit. Their Bibles all looked the same... they were nearly worn out. They did not argue about spiritual gifts or doctrinal differences, instead they developed a deep personal walk with God.

Do I believe every gift of tongues is real? By no means. The Bible commands us to test the spirit. Nor am I persuaded by hype, emotionalism, or showmanship. Every spiritual gift can be faked or even counterfeited by Satan.

But that does not nullify the genuine work of the Holy Spirit. I personally align myself with 1 Corinthians 12-14 on the subject of spiritual gifts and tongues. Godly, Spirit-Filled, and gifted people are welcome at my campfire anytime! I consider myself as one of them! I seek, welcome, and cherish the fire of God's presence in my personal life, during prayer meetings, in corporate worship services, and during our ministry events.

The Sweet Wine of the Spirit: Acts 2:11-13

“11) ... we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God.” 12) And they all continued in amazement and great perplexity, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” 13 But others were mocking and saying, “They are full of sweet wine.””

The filling and control of the Holy Spirit is often compared to drunkenness, with none of the negative side effects. Some of those who saw and heard the believers on the day of Pentecost were mocking, and saying; “they are full of sweet wine.”

They were overflowing with joy as they were proclaiming the mighty deeds of God. They were excited and without inhibition. These are the two of the most common side-effects of “sweet wine.”

Ephesians 5:18 makes a similar comparison; “And do not get drunk with wine for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit.” The next three verses fill in the picture of the positive influence the Holy Spirit has on people; “19) speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; 20) always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; 21) and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ.” These people are set free by the Holy Spirit to joyously worship God and serve others. Day-dreams during worship are replaced with well-springs!

1 Thessalonians 1:5-6 makes a similar observation about the new believers in the city of Thessalonica; “5) for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. 6) You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit,”

This chapter confirms the powerful and positive influence of the Holy Spirit on these new believers. They had “Joy in tribulation.” Their joy was a disconnect with the natural and normal response to their negative outward circumstances of persecution. When they were squeezed by tribulation, the joy of Jesus oozed out from them.

Galatians chapter five also zeroes in on the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Paul observes that the Holy Spirit empowers people to live in freedom over the sinful compulsions of the flesh. Then he describes the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-24. Look at this list: “22) But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23) gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. 24) Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”

Again, we see positive qualities like love, joy, and peace. What a stark contrast to the misery, guilt, and condemnation of the legalistic Pharisees. By comparison, the merely religious people come across as bitter, angry, and grumpy. They were not free. They were not loving or joyous. They are preoccupied with the mundane things of this life. They are fixated on the world, the flesh and the devil.

Spirit filled believers are very different from merely religious people. There is living water flowing from within them. (See John 7:37-39) They worship the Father in Spirit and in truth. (John 4:22-24) They are not forcing it, faking it, or fabricating it. It could be called “enthusiasm”, which literally means “God within!” They are overflowing with God.

The baptism of the Holy Spirit affects the temperament, priorities, and focus of people. It changes them! It lights a fire within them! It imparts new life to them! It replaces a timid spirit

with boldness and confidence! It fills them with love, joy, and peace! A River of Life begins to flow from deep within them! They are in love with Jesus! It is real! They no longer look or act like they were baptized in pickle juice. They are not controlled by deception, rebellion, anger or bitterness, immorality, cursing or foul speech, chemical addictions, pride, greed, or demonic influences. They are free in Christ. They dance to a radically different drummer.

Three Groups of People: Acts 2:12-15

“And they all continued in amazement and great perplexity, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others were mocking and saying, “They are full of sweet wine.” But Peter, taking his stand with the eleven, raised his voice and declared to them: “Men of Judea and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and give heed to my words. For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only the third hour of the day;”

This text holds an amazing lesson on the Christian life. There were three groups of people in this story:

1. Those who received what God was doing!
2. Those who watched what God was doing!
3. Those who mocked what God was doing!

The same holds true about the gospel and the ministry of the Holy Spirit today. Some receive Jesus Christ and eagerly embrace the ministry of the Holy Spirit. This is where I live today with biblical seat belts in place. I want everything done decently and in order according to Scripture, but I embrace the Holy Spirit.

The second group believes in the gospel but are very rational and even cautious about the ministry of the Holy Spirit. They are usually open and ask good questions like; “What does this mean?” But they stand at a distance.

I was in this group for many years. I had good convictions and loved Jesus, but I depended on self-effort to live my Christian life. I questioned if God did miracles today and ran to the doctor rather than embracing James 5:13-18. By the way, many in this group became the second wave to embrace the Promise of the Holy Spirit.

The final group openly mocks the gospel and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. They can be religious, but they make up their own rules, write their own morals, reject the authority of Scripture, and know little or nothing about the Holy Spirit. They are fleshly and worldly-minded. They are often chained to religious traditions, ceremonies, and rituals. This religious group were the ones who opposed and openly persecuted the early Christians.

Luke 11:9-13 became very important in my personal walk in the Spirit. In the context, the asking, seeking, and knocking in prayer related to asking about the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus was preparing the disciples to trust the goodness, character, and promise of God about the Holy Spirit. He said not even an earthy father if his son asked for a fish would give him a snake, or if he asked for an egg would give him a scorpion. Now look at verse 13; “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?”

Isn't that interesting? The subject matter relates to the ministry of the Holy Spirit. These words of Jesus do not square with those who say we are not to seek or ask for the Holy Spirit. His emphasis was if you sincerely seek the Father about the ministry of the Holy Spirit, He will not pull a bait and switch and give a snake instead. He can be trusted!

(The way I read Luke 11:13, Jesus was teaching that we should ask for the Holy Spirit as often as we ask for our daily bread –in other words, every day!) -dj.

So, let's take a moment and talk about some basic biblical concepts about the ministry of the Holy Spirit. I personally believe the “sealing ministry of the Holy Spirit” happens at the moment of salvation. (Ephesians 1:13-14) I also believe every new Christian is baptized into the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit at the moment of salvation. (1 Corinthians 12:13) However, I see the filling and anointing of the Holy Spirit being an ongoing and growing process. (Ephesians 5:18) As such, I believe there is one baptism of the Holy Spirit but many fillings. (Ephesians 4:4-6; 5:18) I also believe the Holy Spirit can be grieved and quenched by doubt, sin, and carnality in the life of the believer. (Ephesians 4:30-31; 1 Thessalonians 5:19) Christian's can backslide and encounter the loving but firm discipline of God. (Hebrews 12:4-17) (Ok... that was a lot to digest... just take your time, open your Bible and study each text.)

This leads into one final observation for this discussion: Acts 4:29-31 makes the strong point that the filling, unction, and power of the Holy Spirit can be recurring, deepening, and growing in the life of a believer. The group that earnestly prayed and sought God in this text were led by Peter and John who were partakers of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. This was not a second baptism of the Holy Spirit, rather it was a fresh anointing and filling of the Holy Spirit and power.

The forty days Moses spent on the mountain with God caused his face to glow, but from that day onward he continually went to the tent of meetings daily to seek the presence of God. I maintain that the filling of the Holy Spirit is a continual and growing process. Each day is new. Never be satisfied with yesterday's encounter with God. Seek Him daily and continually!

The Prophecy of Joel: Acts 2:16-21

“16) but this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: ‘17) And it shall be in the last days,’ God says, ‘That I will pour forth of My Spirit on all mankind; And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, And your young men shall see visions, And your old men shall dream dreams; 18) Even on My bondslaves, both men and women, I will in those days pour forth of My Spirit And they shall prophesy. 19) And I will grant wonders in the sky above And signs on the

earth below, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke. 20) The sun will be turned into darkness And the moon into blood, Before the great and glorious day of the Lord shall come. 21) And it shall be that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Peter used the phenomenon of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit to preach the gospel to the crowds gathered in Jerusalem for the festival. He quoted Joel 2:28-32 as the opening text for his message. Underline in your mind that he was anchoring his message and teaching in the Word of God.

The book of Joel explains the terrible judgment God was bringing on His people because of their sin and apostasy. The devouring locust was ravaging the land because Israel had forsaken God. From the priest to the common man, everyone had turned away from God. Yet Joel was bringing a message of revival, deliverance, and hope if they would repent and turn back to God. (See Joel 2:12-17) Joel called for a time of seeking God with a broken and contrite heart, starting with the priests and religious leaders.

Then Joel promised a time of restoration when God would return with favor toward His people and restore the land. Joel said that this movement of God would be accompanied by something new that was never experienced previously. According to Joel 2:28-32, God was going to pour out His Spirit on all mankind and their sons and daughters would prophesy, old men would dream dreams, young men would see visions, and even male and female servants would have the Holy Spirit poured out on them.

These words of Joel were nearly heretical. The anointing of the Holy Spirit in this way was reserved for kings and priests. It happened to Moses, David, high priests, and prophets, but not ordinary people. This was unknown in Old Testament history. He was speaking of a new time or epoch not previously experienced in the Bible. (See the conversation between Jesus to His and His disciples in Acts 1:6-7. Jesus was preparing them for something new.)

When the Holy Spirit was poured out on the followers of Jesus Christ on the Day of Pentecost, Peter immediately connected it to the words of Joel. A new time, epoch, or movement of God had been inaugurated. The promise of the Father had come. (Acts 1:4-5) The age of the indwelling Holy Spirit had begun. (John 14:14-16:15) Jesus was building His Church. (Matthew 16:17-20)

The full mystery of the church age, salvation through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ and the ministry of the Holy Spirit including spiritual gifts are developed throughout the rest of the New Testament. Transitions are difficult, especially one of this magnitude. We are still in this amazing age prophesied by Joel. The old wineskins of the Law were being replaced because the new wine of the Holy Spirit had come. New wine skins were needed. (Matthew 9:17)

The sermon Peter preached on the day of Pentecost was astounding. He was starting to unpack the mystery of the church age. The religious leaders were jealous and filled with rage. Like Judas, they had forfeited their office and were being replaced. The book of Hebrews explains

this transition in depth. God was not discarding the old. Rather every figure, analogy, type, shadow and form of the Old Testament was being fulfilled!

Peter and the early believers were the first leg of a long relay race. I believe we are the anchor leg to complete the task of world evangelization before the return of Christ. We must run with endurance the race set before us according to Hebrews 12:1-3. We need to set aside every weight and fix our eyes on Jesus.

Our task can only be completed through reliance on the grace and the power of the Holy Spirit Jesus has provided. As they began well, we must finish well. The baton has not changed. The gifts and anointing of the Holy Spirit on every believer remains the same throughout the whole church age. God is not fickle nor does He change the rules in the middle of the race.

God wants every believer to study His Word and cultivate their walk in the Spirit. The gifts, anointing, and unction of the Holy Spirit grow and multiply as we go deeper in our maturity and consecration to Him. These are very exciting days and God is working in extraordinary ways around the world. Beware lest you minimize Him or put Him in a small box. His Spirit can be both quenched and grieved.

Pointing People to Jesus Christ: Acts 2:22-24

“22) Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know— 23) this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. 24) But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power.”

The sign of the Holy Spirit being poured out on the day of Pentecost was used by Peter to preach about Jesus and the Gospel. He focused on the three parts of Jesus Christ that make up the gospel message. Look at this small outline that grows out from the above three verses:

1. Vs 22 The life of Jesus Christ
2. Vs 23 The death of Jesus Christ
3. Vs 24 The resurrection of Jesus Christ

Why is this important? These are the three components of the gospel message. (See also 1 Corinthians 15:1-5) The primary ministry of the Holy Spirit is to lift up Jesus Christ and advance the gospel. Peter got it right in his short but powerful message.

The death of Jesus was not because He was a victim of the Jewish religious leaders. By no means. He fulfilled God's predetermined plan for the redemption of mankind. He was in control

of His own destiny. The resurrection brought an end to the agony of death. Jesus conquered both death and the grave.

I get concerned in any context when the Holy Spirit is lifted up and Jesus is ignored. The Holy Spirit was not given to bring attention to Himself. His mission is to glorify Jesus Christ. (See John 16:12-15) This certainly happened in Peter's message.

Keep this basic principle in mind. The inner ministry of the Holy Spirit is to deepen your relationship with Jesus Christ. If this is not happening, something is tragically out of balance in your life. Avoid the danger of obscuring Jesus and the gospel through an obsession with signs and wonders or spiritual gifts. They are never to be an end in themselves. God uses them to confirm and advance the gospel. (See Hebrews 2:1-4)

This comes back to the words of Jesus in Acts 1:7-8. The Holy Spirit would give power to the witnesses to advance the gospel. His ministry would undergird the work of world evangelization. He would point people to Jesus Christ and personal salvation. I've seen some people more obsessed with getting people healed than getting them saved. When this occurs, the outcome is usually that neither happens. Why? They are off mission.

Let me share a spiritual secret: The power of the Holy Spirit is unleashed most on the front lines of world evangelism. God does miracles to advance and confirm the gospel. This was certainly the case in the book of Acts. Jesus and the gospel were the main focus of Peter's message on the day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit invisibly but powerfully worked in the background convicting and converting thousands. He was fulfilling His role as Helper!

Zeroing in on the Resurrection: Acts 2:25-32

“(29) Brethren, I may confidently say to you regarding the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. 30) And so, because he was a prophet and knew that God had sworn to him with an oath to seat one of his descendants on his throne, 31) he looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that He was neither abandoned to Hades, nor did His flesh suffer decay. 32) This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses.”

Peter supported this portion of his message by quoting Psalm 16:8-11. He quickly used this passage to undergird the claim of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Acts 2:29, He pointed out that David was not talking about himself since he died and was buried and had been entombed for centuries.

Then he quickly shifts the focus to Jesus Christ. In the next two verses, he states that David was a prophet and knew that one of his descendants would sit on his throne. The phrase “one of his descendants” implied that this king would have an eternal reign. There would be no end to His Kingdom.

Verse 31 becomes very significant. Peter states that David was prophesying about the resurrection of Christ. He was not abandoned to Hades nor did His flesh undergo decay, because God raised Him from the dead. He then drives home a key point – they were all witnesses of the resurrection. They had spent forty of the previous fifty days with the resurrected Christ. Their cups were full and overflowing.

Let's pause for a moment and review his message. Peter used the phenomenon of Pentecost to preach the gospel. He pointed to Joel's prophetic teaching about the giving of the Holy Spirit, then he pointed to David talking about the resurrection. His whole message was about the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But he really zeroes in on the resurrection. Why?

Let's be pragmatic, people have died and been placed in graves for all of recorded history. Both good and bad, righteous and wicked, rich and poor, young and old, male and female... Death and the grave ends the life of all people. It is permanent. Dead people are finished. It's over for them. Death is a curse. Humanity has tried for centuries but has not found a cure for death.

That's why Peter zeroed in on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The resurrection is what separates Jesus Christ from every other religious leader, philosopher, or human that has ever lived. If the resurrection is true, Jesus is the hope of eternal life. He is indeed "the resurrection and the life." (See John 11:25) He is the Promised Messiah and King of Israel. He will reign forever as King of kings and Lord of lords. He is the Savior of the World. The resurrection validates His claim of Deity.

The message Peter preached on the day of Pentecost was simple but profound. He took the current events of the public ministry and senseless crucifixion of Jesus Christ at the Passover 50 days earlier and fit it into the context of Old Testament prophetic revelation. He preached Jesus to them and the Holy Spirit added illumination, power, and persuasiveness to His words. God used a common fisherman from Galilee to launch His plan for human redemption by faithfully preaching the Gospel. As we shall see, the results were Supernatural.

Both Seen and Heard: Acts 2:33

"33) Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear."

Peter now includes the ascension and glorification of Christ in his message. He proclaims that Jesus has been exalted to the right hand of God. It is His rightful position. This was a significant claim of Jesus about being the Christ, and it infuriated the Jewish religious leaders. This claim sealed His condemnation by the chief priest. (See Matthew 26:63-65)

Then Peter again speaks of the promise from the Father related to the Holy Spirit in his message. As mentioned previously, this is a consistent theme in the early chapters of the Book of Acts. Take a moment and compare Acts 1:42; 2:33 and 2:38-39 and Galatians 3:14. This promise was foretold by John the Baptist (Matthew 3:12) and by Jesus in John 14-17.

A beautiful outline now emerges about the progression of the gospel. Look at following three points:

1. The Father sent Jesus.
2. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit.
3. The Holy Spirit sends believers.

You can add many Scriptures and fill in sub points to this outline, but it speaks volumes. All members of the Trinity and the body of Christ are connected to the gospel. It must be very important. Be willing to be sent, even if it's to your neighborhood, workplace, or community.

Peter then emphasizes another point about the pouring out of the Holy Spirit in this verse. It was both “seen and heard.” It was not obscure or done in secret. It was not hidden. It became a public spectacle. In fact, it became momentous and spread rapidly.

Satan and the world has the church gagged and silenced today around the lie that “faith is a private and personal matter.” Many have bought into this deception, but it doesn't fit the biblical narrative. I will not argue that many precious encounters with God happen in the prayer closet or in times of solitude, but the great outpourings and workings of the Holy Spirit happen in the open.

Signs and wonders are to be seen and heard. They are God bearing witness of Himself and the gospel. (See Hebrews 2:4) The signs and wonders performed through Moses were in the open. They were intended for all to see and hear. The same is true of much of the public ministry of Jesus. Take a moment and review what Peter said earlier in this very message in Acts 2:22. The miracles, wonders and signs performed through Jesus were done openly and in public. They were seen and heard by many people.

Let me emphasize; God wants His works to be seen and heard. He wants to bear witness of Himself and confirm the gospel message. God is the main character on the stage of world evangelism. We are merely the narrator on the side of the stage. This might stretch you, but one of the secrets of experiencing the power of God is to live out your faith openly and in public. By doing so, you turn the stage and spotlight over to God!

The Identity of Jesus Christ: Acts 2:34-36

“34) For it was not David who ascended into heaven, but he himself says: ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand, 35) Until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.” 36) ’ Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified.”” Acts 2:34-36

These verses are a great example of how the early church leaders became Old Testament Scholars. Peter closed his message on the Day Of Pentecost by quoting another Psalm from David. This time it's Psalm 110:1.

In this verse, David points to the Deity of the Christ. When he said; "The Lord says to my Lord" it almost sounds like double talk, but apparently David had a personal relationship with the second member of the Godhead. He knew Jesus Christ.

Notice also that he mentioned the ascension and His position at the right hand of the Father; "Sit at my right hand, until I make all Thine enemies a footstool for Thy feet." Verse 36 directly ties this into the glorification of Jesus Christ; "God has made Him both Lord and Christ— this Jesus whom you crucified." Peter left no doubt of the Deity of Christ.

In Matthew 22:42-45, Jesus used Psalm 110:1 in His debate with the Pharisees. It utterly silenced them! Jesus pointed out that even David called Him Lord.

There are three more profound references to Psalm 110:1 in the New Testament. 1 Corinthians 15:25 refers to it in passing. But Hebrews 1:13 is a direct quote in a passage that is defending the Deity of Christ. The whole chapter is worthy of detailed study.

Then the writer of the book of Hebrews again points to Psalm 110:1 in Hebrews 10:12-13. This quote from David has far-reaching implications. It became the spike Peter used to close His sermon on the Day of Pentecost.

Again, I want to emphasize that Peter's entire message on the Day of Pentecost was about Jesus Christ and the Gospel. Jesus was the One who poured out the Holy Spirit. The ministry of the Holy Spirit is to lift up Jesus Christ and empower the Gospel message. He illuminates the Gospel.

What was the outcome to Peter's message on the Day of Pentecost? Stay tuned.

Pierced to the Heart: Acts 2:37

"Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?"

Ok, it's time for a serious conversation. This verse exposes some serious problems with the modern gospel. Pour a cup of coffee, sit down, and open your heart, mind, and spirit. Don't feel rushed. This is important. Ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you!

In this verse we see a ministry of the Holy Spirit that is tragically minimized in today's approach to evangelism. When Peter finished his message; "they were pierced to the heart!" Another rendering could be "smitten in their conscience." Something very deep was happening in these people. This wasn't shallow.

According to John 16:7-11, the Holy Spirit was going to “convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment.” Apart from the deep conviction ministry of the Holy Spirit related to personal sin, it is doubtful that true conversion takes place.

People cannot be talked into becoming a Christian. Salvation is far more than merely making a “decision” to trust in Jesus. The Holy Spirit does a deep work of conviction and conversion in the heart of those being truly born again. He stops people, gets their full attention, and wrestles with them about their sinful and lost condition.

Listen to these words Paul wrote to the Christians in the city of Thessalonica; “5) for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.”

This does not sound like Paul was talking them into “making a decision for Christ”; rather the Holy Spirit was wrestling inside of them with deep conviction. He was bringing them to the repentance that leads to true conversion.

I have heard numbers as high as 85% of those who make “decisions for Christ” at modern evangelism endeavors do not go on to live a Christian life. In fact, nothing changes. They continue as lord of their own lives and Jesus merely becomes a good luck charm they can make a wish upon when they get in trouble. We talk about “reaching the unchurched.” The Bible talks about “converting the lost.”

The New Testament was filled with people who were religious but lost. The role of the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts was to deeply convict and thoroughly convert people. It was powerful and it was life-transforming. People turned from sin and to God on His terms. They were thoroughly converted by the Holy Spirit.

Not only is our modern gospel watered down, but we don’t allow people to weep, grieve, or mourn over personal sin and lostness. Contrition is no longer in our vocabulary. We seldom hear preaching about sin, nor do we hear calls to repentance. Modern evangelism appeals to either human emotions or intellect rather than the human conscience.

What happened on the day of Pentecost stands in stark contrast to the way we count decisions for Christ today. I have no question that the Holy Spirit is converting people today, but we spend a lot of time and effort trying to give assurance of salvation to lost people. They jumped through our “decision for Christ hoop” or “my church background hoop”; but they were never truly converted by the Holy Spirit.

When someone comes to me and says; “I have doubts about my salvation, what should I do?” My response is usually something like; “Let’s review the Gospel and make sure you’ve been born-again by the Spirit of God!” More often than not, their doubts were real. If the Holy Spirit is “piercing their heart” about their true lost condition, I’m not going to hinder the process.

Over the years, I have seen numerous pastors, elders, and even seminary professors finally yield to the Holy Spirit in true conversion. There is nothing unusual in the Bible about people being religious but lost. In fact, that was the condition of most people both among the Jews and also among the Gentiles in Bible times. The same is true in our modern world.

However, I am equally ready to discern if the accuser of the brethren is working people over with condemnation and shame. One of Satan's schemes is to torment genuine believers. The recourse for both groups of people is to point them to Jesus Christ and the inner work of the Holy Spirit.

If the Holy Spirit is wrestling with you through this verse, cry out to Jesus. If you are living in sin, do as Peter said and "repent." The more you rationalize, excuse, and justify your sin, the further you are running from God. Put your faith in Jesus Christ and trust Him alone to save you! Salvation is on His terms and not yours.

The Promise 2:38-39

"38) Peter said to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39) For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself."

The word "repent" means regret accompanied by a true change of heart toward God. It is a change of mind and heart. It includes a change of morals and direction in life. It is an aligning with God's morals, character, and holiness from our own sinful ways.

The importance of baptism is that it is an outward expression of something inward. Peter said this baptism in the name of Jesus Christ was for "the forgiveness of your sins." By contrast, those baptized by John the Baptist were most likely baptized in the Name of the Father strictly as an expression of repentance. Something very beautiful is starting to take shape.

When Jesus gave The Great Commission in Matthew 28:19, He talked about baptizing in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Here we see the Trinity. This is the threefold baptism started in earnest after the Day of Pentecost. I believe it involves a unique relationship with God through each member of the God-head.

Repentance is best pictured by the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32. He had a genuine change of heart and mind. He humbled himself and went back to his father with no demands or conditions. True repentance was the basis of everything else that happened in the story. As a result, he received the following three things: 1) Acceptance illustrated by the embrace from the Father, 2) Forgiveness illustrated by new clothes, and 3) Power illustrated by the family ring.

(A family ring bore the crest of the family. It was used to make an impression in wax on legal documents. That seal was a guarantee that the document was authentic and legitimate. By giving the prodigal son the family ring, he was restoring full legal rights to him. That seal is also mentioned in Ephesians 1:14 where Paul writes that the Holy Spirit is the seal or guarantee of our inheritance in heaven.) -dj

This is more than coincidental. These line up with baptism in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. They represent three very important aspects of salvation that are an immediate reality at the moment of salvation, but need to be worked out in depth over time in the life of the believer.

Let me say it another way. Your growing relationship with the Father will enable you to embrace total acceptance and family identity. Your growing relationship with Jesus will enable you to enter into the full realization of forgiveness and freedom. Your growing relationship with the Holy Spirit will enable you to experience power and anointing. Relationship with each member of the God-head is important.

I see all three of these promises being offered in Peter's message. Receiving the gospel results in a relationship with God unknown in Old Testament times. Only through the gospel can people be fully reconciled to God.

This Promise is for everyone who receives the gospel. Let me emphasize; "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." (John 3:16-17)

Exhorting People To Respond To the Gospel. Acts 2:40

"40) And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation!"'" Acts 2:40

As Peter closed his message, the text says he "kept on exhorting" or repeatedly urged people, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation!" He was calling them to repentance and faith in Christ. He preached toward a response!

This verse opens the door for a brief discussion about the role of giving an invitation for people to respond to the preaching of the gospel. Unfortunately, there is considerable tension among scholars on this issue.

One side argues that the elect are saved by the sovereignty of God with no human initiative being involved. The other side argues that saving faith is a human response to the conviction and promptings of the Holy Spirit.

I believe strongly in the sovereignty of God, but I also see the Bible consistently calling for a human response. Let me give some biblical examples while consciously keeping this short.

Isaiah 55:6-7 calls for significant human response. It includes “Seek the Lord”, “Call upon Him”, “forsake his way”, and “return to the Lord.” This is one of many Old Testament calls for a human response or action by the prophets. They preached toward a response.

John 1:12 says; “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.” This verse talks about “receive” and “believe.” These are both human responses.

John 3:16 says; “... whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.” Again we see a human response to the Divine initiative of God sending His only begotten Son.

Our text for this study in Acts 2:38-40 includes “Repent”, be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ”, and “Be saved from this perverse generation.” Again, we see a human response to the gospel.

Ephesians 1:3-14 talks about the work of all members of the Trinity in our salvation. Verses 1-6 talks about the work of the Father in our salvation. It includes both choosing us and predestining us to adoption as sons. He planned our salvation. Verses 7-12 talks about the work of the Son in our salvation. In grace He redeemed us by dying on the cross for our sins. He performed everything needed for our salvation. Verses 13-14 talks about the Holy Spirit sealing us. He perfects our salvation. But wait, verse 13 also talks about the human role in salvation. We listen to the gospel of truth and believe. Again there is a human response to the Divine initiative.

Ephesians 2:8 clarifies that salvation is not earned or merited by our good works. It is “by grace through faith.” Again, we see faith being the human response to the Divine initiative of grace. This principle is taught throughout the New Testament.

But what about the concept of giving an invitation or urging people to respond? This is often the point of contention. Let me briefly cite numerous “invitations” or “calls for response” in the New Testament. This is by no means a complete list.

Jesus invited the disciples to “Follow Me” and the thirsty to “come unto Me!” (Matthew 4:18-22; 8:22; John 7:37-38)

After his message, Peter kept on exhorting the people to be saved. (Acts 2:40)

Paul “persuaded men” and “begged” people to be reconciled to God. (2 Corinthians 5:11; 20-21) He told the jail keeper to “believe in the Lord Jesus Christ”, along with his whole house. (Acts 16:30-31)

James urged people to both “submit to God”, and “Draw near to God.” (James 4:6-19)

It is not our job to save people. That is the role of the Holy Spirit. But we are called to clearly preach the gospel and urge people to repent and put faith in Christ. Some people object to calling people to repent. But look at the next text.

In Acts 26:19-20, Paul explains his consistent practice of preaching the gospel. Notice, he always called people to repentance and to put faith in Christ. He preached toward a response.

Also, take some time and study Romans 10:1-15. Look at the goal of Paul's preaching. Again, he preached toward the response of people putting personal faith in Jesus Christ or at least confessing Him as Lord.

When preaching the gospel, I follow the example of Paul. I urge people to respond to Jesus Christ. I have no problem inviting people to repent, believe, or put their faith in Jesus Christ. I encourage them to "receive" Jesus Christ into their life.

I believe it is both negligent and irresponsible to preach the gospel and not urge a response of personal faith in Jesus Christ. Preaching toward a response leaves the results with the Holy Spirit. He will both call those He wants to save and He will save those who are called through the clear preaching of the gospel.

We will not resolve all the mysteries behind this tension, but we can follow the example of Jesus and the early preachers of the gospel. They preached the gospel while urging people to respond.

The Instant Mega-Church Acts 2:41

"41) So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls."

The response to Peter's message on the day of Pentecost was unfathomable. 3,000 people responded to the gospel, received his word and were baptized. The crowd that rushed together was huge.

This is on par with Jesus feeding the 4,000 and the 5,000, with the exception that this crowd was multinational. They came from many countries and spoke many native languages. Let that sink in for a moment. The multitudes that Jesus fed were localized gatherings. They were regional gatherings. Following this festival at Pentecost, the gospel was about to be carried in many directions and to many places. This had explosive potential.

Another pattern also emerges, baptism in the New Testament was always for believers. They received or believed in the Gospel first and then were baptized. Assuming that each of the 12 apostles assisted with the baptizing, they each had to baptize 250 people. This may have taken several days! It captured the focus of the festival.

(There has been some debate over the years as to where the disciples could have found enough water to baptize 3,000 people but this would not have been a problem. Judaism had long included the use of the mikvah, or ritual cleansing bath. This is a stone bath large enough and deep enough for full immersion of an adult. Archeologists have found evidence of about 200 in Jerusalem itself, of which approximately 50 are associated with the Temple mount.) -dj.

This was a God-sized movement. In Acts 2:33, Peter said that Jesus “poured forth” the Holy Spirit. What an apt description of the giving of the Holy Spirit. When water or wine is “poured out” it spreads or disperses quickly. The only way it can be contained is if it is poured into cups, glasses, jars, or other containers. On the day of Pentecost, people became the containers. They were “filled” to overflowing with the Holy Spirit!

It is impossible to calculate how many of the 3,000 dispersed back to their own towns after the festival and how many remained in Jerusalem. It appears that some lingered longer in Jerusalem than others. The rigid daily temple service was now matched by lively daily activities for believers. They lacked formal structure and organization, but as we will see in the next few verses, they overflowed with activity, a sense of awe, enthusiasm, and excitement.

This was an organic movement from its inception. It was alive. The church is often compared in the Bible to a living building, a body, or even a flock of sheep. It is important to observe that Jesus did not start another static organization. He breathed His Spirit into a living organism!

There are no equivalent books to Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy in the New Testament. Moses was a micromanager with detailed instruction on everything, including marriage relationships during the wife’s monthly cycle and how to use a spade to cover up one’s daily bio duties. The Law was extensive, rigid, detailed, and controlling. The Law literally sucked the life and energy out of people.

By contrast, what Jesus started on the Day of Pentecost was very alive, liberating, and fluid. Let me stress again, the church was a living organism and not a static organization. It was holy, morally pure, and had doctrine, but it was not weighed down with detailed and extensive policies and procedures. Unlike the Law which imparted death, the Spirit imparted life. (Read 2 Corinthians 3:12-18)

Becoming A New Testament Church: Acts 2:42

“42) They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”

There it is in one verse! We have the prescription of what it takes to be a New Testament Church. But before saying, “Amen” and closing your Bible, let’s take a deeper dive into the evolution of the early church.

At the inception of the church, the believers embraced five essential activities. They continually devoted themselves to: 1) the apostles teaching, 2) fellowship, 3) the breaking of bread, and 4) prayer. It can be assumed from Acts 1:8 that 5) they also spontaneously witnessed and preached the gospel to unbelievers. They focused on both “in-reach” and “out-reach.” These were the two basic functions of the early church.

It is easy to lose balance between “in-reach” and “out-reach.” When this happens, the church usually becomes introverted. It gets so absorbed with inner activity that it becomes a subculture movement and closes its eyes to the needs of the world around it.

The New Testament stresses that every believer needs to be plugged into a local church. (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12-14, and Ephesians 4) This is where a sense of community develops, a support network is formed, solid doctrine is taught, corporate worship is lifted up, spiritual gifts are exercised, the ordinances are observed, and leadership is developed. The church is the primary place for disciple-making. Every believer needs to be plugged into a local church to maximize spiritual growth and development.

Yet Jesus has a mission for His church. They were to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. (Matthew 5:13-16) They were to carry the gospel from Jerusalem where the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, to all Judea, and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth. (Acts 1:8) Jesus never intended for His church to remain as a holy huddle in Jerusalem.

To remedy this tendency, God allowed persecution to disperse the believers and launched the phenomenon of planting local churches even in predominantly Gentile regions. (See Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-5) These churches became autonomous, self governing, and had the freedom to develop their own personality within accepted theological and moral boundaries. (1 Corinthians 12:4-7) They embraced the basic dynamics of Acts 2:42, but developed their own identity and community life.

These New Testament churches embraced the same gospel message, had recognized leadership, developed basic organization and structure, shared defined doctrine, and ascribed to moral holiness – but they remained flexible with methodology. They retained the identity of being a living organism rather than a static organization. They were not “cookie cutter” churches. They did not strive to be “the same.” They had freedom to develop their own church personality.

This phenomenon allowed the church to adapt to local culture but continue as salt and light in the world. The tendency of the western church in missions is to export western church traditions, form, function, and architecture rather than the pure gospel. A western church in Asia, India, or the jungles of South America is cumbersome and awkward. It is anti-cultural.

In many places, people are not rejecting the gospel but they are resisting being westernized. This is a serious problem. World evangelization is very different from trying to westernize the world under the banner of Christianity. I maintain that the early church got it right.

They embraced a common gospel message, insisted on sound biblical doctrine, and held to a high and holy moral code, but they granted the freedom to contextualize church format and structure to the local culture. Thus, the Gentile Church in Antioch was different from its Jewish counterpart in Jerusalem. This tension led to the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. It was decided to grant freedom and flexibility to Gentile churches.

This whole discussion grows out from the early chapters of the book of Acts. It begs the questions; “What does a Christian church look like?” “How is it organized?” “Does it have to embrace a certain building architecture?” “What should be included on the weekly activity calendar?” “Is Sunday the only day prescribed for corporate worship?” “What is the purpose and mission of the local church?” I think you’re getting the idea. The quest to be a New Testament church is not an easy task.

Losing a Sense of Awe: Acts 2:43

“Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles.”

This verse lines up with Acts 2:22; “Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know—”. It seems that the Holy Spirit picked up where Jesus left off. Being the third member of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit has the same power and attributes as the Father and Son.

Though no description is given in this verse of the kinds of wonders and signs that were taking place, it can be assumed that they lined up with those performed by Jesus during His public ministry. Hebrews 2:4 connects this with God giving confirmation to their preaching and teaching. Acts 5:12-16 includes healing and casting out unclean spirits.

At first glance, it appears that on the day of Pentecost the signs and wonders were restricted to the twelve Apostles. As the church grew and spread out, we see in the book of Acts that these manifestations extend to others. By the time we get to Acts 6:8, we discover that leaders like Stephen were also performing great wonders and signs among the people. Acts 8:6 describes that Philip the evangelist also performed signs. We later discover that similar signs also accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journeys.

Some question if miracles still happen today or were these unique powers and works done through the Apostles and early church leaders? It is a good question and has some biblical precedent. The signs and wonders done through Moses in Egypt were restricted to his calling and ministry. However, there were men like Elijah and Elisha who also performed extraordinary miracles though not on the level or magnitude of Moses.

But, keep in mind, Pentecost marked a new age or epoch which Joel said would be accompanied by the Holy Spirit working through ordinary people. (See Acts 2:15-21) That's what makes the church age unique. The Holy Spirit would indwell every believer and give them power and gifts. Pentecost marked the beginning of a new era.

It must be emphasized that the Holy Spirit was the one performing these signs and wonders through these men. In fact, in Acts 14:11-18, Paul and Barnabas went to considerable lengths to attribute signs of healing to God and not themselves. At Lystra, the sign of healing caused the people to call them gods. They started calling Barnabas Zeus and Paul Hermes. They wanted to offer sacrifices to them, but the missionaries cried out that they were ordinary men. They quickly attributed the miracle to God.

In 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, Paul gives a list of spiritual gifts given within the body of Christ. He emphasized that these gifts were "manifestations of the Holy Spirit." The list includes things like faith, healing, and effecting of miracles. In fact, all of the gifts listed are extraordinary. Why is this significant? By this point in early church history, signs and wonders had spread beyond the Apostles. In keeping with biblical prophecy, the Holy Spirit was working in and through many believers.

The rhetorical questions Paul asked in Galatians 3:3-5 are even more intriguing. Look at verse 5; "So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?" What an amazing question. It appears that the Holy Spirit was working in miraculous ways among the believers scattered throughout Galatia.

So now we are faced with a modern dilemma. The bigger question might be: "If we are still in the church age and signs and wonders are manifestations of the Holy Spirit, why is nothing happening in some segments of the Christian Church today?" I maintain the problem is not with God, rather it is with us.

God has not changed! The Holy Spirit is not running low on power or burning out as we approach the end of this age. Let's be honest, the whole notion that God no longer does miracles borders on blasphemy. It is equivalent to saying; "God is no longer Divine!" Or, "God has limited power." Or, "God is no longer sovereign."

But there may be another potential cause for the problem. The biblical answer is that we are most likely grieving or quenching the Holy Spirit. (See Ephesians 4:30, and 1 Thessalonians 5:19) How does that happen?

Maybe we are quenching the Holy Spirit by stuffing God in the small box of naturalism and holding the Holy Spirit at arms length. Or maybe we are grieving the Holy Spirit because we are full of sin and compromise. Could it be that in keeping with Romans 1:18-32, God is standing back? Or maybe, we are preaching a message of doubt instead of faith. Or maybe we have become so affluent and self-sufficient in the western church that we have become like the

church of Laodicea! We no longer need God. (Revelation 3:14-22) Or maybe it's a combination of all of the above! There is no doubt that we have lost our sense of awe toward God.

When word from the Lord was rare and visions were infrequent in the days of Eli the priest, it pointed to a tragic spiritual problem among God's people. (1 Samuel 3:1) It wasn't because "God no longer worked that way!" It was because God's people were in spiritual decline! God's silence was sending them a strong message. What is God trying to say to the western church by His silence today?

Christian Community: Acts 2:44-47

"44) And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; 45) and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. 46) Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, 47) praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved." Acts 2:44-47

As we study these four verses, we discover that the early church became an organic living body. They developed a strong bond because of their common love for Jesus Christ. There were three primary characteristics that described them:

1. A deep commitment to Christian Community typified by interdependent relationships.
2. Unity in the Spirit expressed by daily fellowship and worship of God in awe and holiness.
3. Abundant fruitfulness described by favor with all the people and spontaneous growth on a daily basis.

It can be concluded that these characteristics were based on the genuine fruit of the Spirit among them. (Galatians 5:22-26) They fulfilled the words of Jesus recorded in John 13:34-35; "34) A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. 35) By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

Many groups over the years have tried to emulate the early believers. They usually become exclusive rather than inclusive and often take on cultish tendencies. Because Jesus Christ and agape love was the glue that held the early believers together, they were not dominated by a charismatic dictatorial leader that emotionally controlled and spiritually abused the people. Everyone from the Apostles to the newest believer practiced mutual servanthood.

I see this text as being descriptive and not prescriptive. I do not believe God wants every local church to become communal. I believe Ephesians 4:1-16 captures the essence and spirit of Christian community that God wants to create in every local church. This text in the book of Ephesians should be studied side by side with Acts 2:41-47.

Continual and Spontaneous Growth. Acts 2:47

“47) ... And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.”

Acts Chapter Two closes with reference to “The Law of the Sower.” The principle says, “As you sow you reap.” If you sow sparingly, you will reap sparingly. If you sow abundantly, you will reap abundantly. If you sow continually, you will reap continually. If you seldom sow, you will seldom reap. The Law of the Sower says; “As you sow you reap.”

The Law of the Sower is anchored in several portions of Scripture. Jesus based His parable of the sower in Mark 4:1-25 on the Law of the Sower. Paul based his philosophy of giving on the Law of the Sower in 2 Corinthians 8-9. He also based his teaching on personal morals and resulting blessings or consequences on the Law of the Sower in Galatians 6:7-8.

But this begs the question; “Does the Law of the Sower apply to witnessing and evangelism?” Does it factor into church growth? Did the Lord add to their number “day by day” because they were continually sowing?

Paul seems to support that reasoning in 1 Corinthians 3:6 when he said, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth.” Romans 10:14-15 adds to the case when Paul asked the questions; “How shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?” He was stressing the point that without sowing there will be no harvest.

Notice that all of these texts attribute the growth to God, but the sowers were very busy. They sowed continually. The Law of the Sower says the harvest will not exceed the sowing.

Jesus added substantial weight to this discussion in John 4:34-38 when He talked about the harvest. His disciples had just come from spending much of the day shopping in the city of Sychar and they came back empty-handed related to spiritual harvest. Why? They hadn’t talked to anyone about Jesus.

Meanwhile, Jesus invested His day witnessing to the Samaritan woman. What happened? She left her water pots and went into the city and told everyone about Jesus. She was sowing abundantly. John 4:39-42 records the story that she returned to Jesus bringing many people from the city in tow to meet Jesus. Her harvest was abundant and plentiful.

What was the difference between the barren disciples and the very fruitful Samaritan woman? Answer: The Law of the Sower!

The big difference between churches that grow and churches that stagnate and die is rooted in the Law of the Sower. The truth is that when churches stop sowing they start dying.

It is amazing how several churches in the same geographical region can have totally different results. Some may be stagnant and dead while others are thriving and growing. One church is closing its doors and boarding up its windows while down the street another church is in the midst of a thriving building program. Why?

The answer comes down to the Law of the Sower and the underlying inner dynamics of the church. Let's try to wrap our minds around the full context of this chapter in the book of Acts.

The inner dynamics of the early church are recorded in Acts 2:42-47. They focused on solid biblical preaching and teaching, prayer, meaningful fellowship, inspiring worship, fostering encouraging community life, godly character, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

The outer dynamic was that the people were in awe of God and were spontaneously and continually sowing the gospel message. The people were on fire for God. The result was: "And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved."

Instead of trying to become an illusive "New Testament Church", it might be more productive to embrace the Law of the Sower. Then undergird abundant, spontaneous, and continual sowing of the gospel in the world with the inner dynamics of body life as described in Acts 2:42-47. I highly suspect the results will be very similar.

Extraordinary Healing of the Lame Beggar: Acts 3:1-10

"1) Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the ninth hour, the hour of prayer. 2) And a man who had been lame from his mother's womb was being carried along, whom they used to set down every day at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, in order to beg alms of those who were entering the temple. 3) When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he began asking to receive alms. 4) But Peter, along with John, fixed his gaze on him and said, "Look at us!" 5) And he began to give them his attention, expecting to receive something from them. 6) But Peter said, "I do not possess silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene—walk!" 7) And seizing him by the right hand, he raised him up; and immediately his feet and his ankles were strengthened. 8) With a leap he stood upright and began to walk; and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God. 9) And all the people saw him walking and praising God; 10) and they were taking note of him as being the one who used to sit at the Beautiful Gate of the temple to beg alms, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him." Acts 3:1-10

God got huge mileage out of this one miracle. Most of the preaching and witnessing in Acts 3-4 was the result of this one miracle. Healings and miracles happened in the book of Acts, but they were not ordinary and they seemed to always pave the way for the gospel. There is no way of estimating how many needy people Peter and John passed on their way to the temple that morning, but only this lame beggar was healed. Let's take a moment and look at this healing:

First, it was extraordinary. The healing was performed on a man who had been lame from birth. His condition was long term and severe. He had zero mobility. He had to be carried everywhere he went.

Second, it was very public. It happened at the ninth hour at the Beautiful gate of the temple. Crowds passed through this gate every day. The daily sight of this beggar had become part of the decor.

Third, he wasn't seeking healing, he was seeking money. His healing actually ended his lucrative career. He had to vacate the best begging spot in Jerusalem because he was healed.

Fourth, the initiative for the healing came from Peter and John. They fixed their eyes upon him and pronounced healing.

Fifth, the healing happened in "the name of Jesus Christ, the Nazarene." Acts 3:16 gives all credit to faith in the name of Jesus Christ for this healing. The healing was used to validate the resurrection and identity of Jesus Christ.

Sixth, the healing happened instantaneously. His feet and ankles were strengthened immediately. He started "walking and leaping and praising God."

Seventh, God got all the credit for the healing. The healing became the platform to preach about the person and work of Jesus Christ. It opened the door for the gospel.

Eighth, the healing was self-validating and publicly confirmed. The people took note of him as being the one who used to sit and beg at the entrance of the temple. They were all filled with wonder and amazement.

Finally, Peter immediately began to preach an open air meeting with the subject matter being the person, work and identity of Jesus Christ. This is important; he didn't preach about healing and he didn't start teaching about the Holy Spirit – he preached about Jesus Christ. Faith in the Holy Spirit is not the avenue of salvation. He is the helper for those who have been saved.

Everything about this healing stands in stark contrast to many modern "faith healers." They organize huge rallies, glorify, and promote themselves, often stage fake healings, leave Jesus and the gospel out of the message and use the occasion to exploit money from people. They are fakes and frauds. I utterly despise them!

Do I believe that God performs healing today? Yes, but they have to be measured by the standard of Scripture. They need to pass the test of glorifying God, advancing the gospel, being offered freely, being genuine and self validating, pointing people to Jesus Christ for salvation, and not making healing an end in itself. I reject the health, wealth, and prosperity gospel that turns the preacher into the beggar at the gate of the temple and exploits poor and vulnerable people.

Miracles are miracles because they are extraordinary and not ordinary. They serve a Divine purpose. They are door-openers for the gospel or matters of affirmation and edification for the body of Christ. Miracles are miracles because they are miracles. That's what got the attention of the crowd as they went into the temple at the hour of prayer. Something extraordinary had happened. They wanted to know, "Why?" Peter preached the gospel to them.

Introduction to Peter's Second Message: Acts 2:11-15

"11) While he was clinging to Peter and John, all the people ran together to them at the so-called portico of Solomon, full of amazement. 12) But when Peter saw this, he replied to the people, "Men of Israel, why are you amazed at this, or why do you gaze at us, as if by our own power or piety we had made him walk? 13) The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified His servant Jesus, the one whom you delivered and disowned in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release Him. 14) But you disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, 15) but put to death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses."

Peter seized the moment to preach His second message. He did not have time to retreat to his office and write a sermon. It was impromptu and it was very anointed. We need to be ready whenever the Holy Spirit opens a door to share the message of the gospel.

As we analyze this message, there is much to learn about biblical preaching and the gospel. Let's take a moment and study the introduction to Peter's Second Message.

First, the sermon was delivered in the "portico of Solomon." This was the very location recorded in John 10:22-42 where the crowd demanded that Jesus tell them plainly if He was the Christ. That event and Peter's sermon seem to be connected. They are worth reading side-by-side.

Second, Peter tied his sermon to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. (Vs 13a). In doing so, he underlined the fact that Jesus was from God and fulfilled the typology of Abraham offering up Isaac in Genesis 22.

Third, Peter pinned the rejection and crucifixion of Jesus on the crowd. (Vs 13b) He pointed out that Pilate had decided to release Him! The guilt was not on Pilate. He washed his hands of the whole ordeal.

Fourth, Peter reminded them that they disowned the Holy and righteous One, and asked for a murder to be granted to them in His place. (Vs 14) This might stand as the single greatest enigma of the trial and crucifixion of Christ. They embraced a violent sinner in place of the Savior. So does everyone who rejects Christ to embrace a life of sin.

Fifth, Peter pointed out that they put to death the Prince of life. (Vs 15a) By demanding the release of a murderer in place of Jesus, they became murderers.

Sixth, Peter pointed out that they were witnesses of all the events that transpired around the rejection, trial, and crucifixion of Jesus. (Vs 15b) The boldness of Peter in this message is a stark contrast to the coward that denied Jesus three times.

The direct and hard-hitting nature of his introduction is almost frightening. It has been said that you need to get people lost before you can get them saved. The demeanor of Peter can only be attributed to the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It utterly transformed him.

The second part of his message is even more profound. We will look at it in the next section. But I want to highlight, underline, emphasize, and drive home an important point about his message: It was all about Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ was the subject, theme, and focus of his message. Let me say this clearly, the gospel is not being preached when the work of Jesus Christ on the cross dying for the sins of the world is left out! The gospel is not being preached when people are not convicted of sin or called to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ!

These three messages in Acts 2-4 are the standard of true gospel. Take time and study them carefully. In 1 Corinthians 15:1-5, Paul defined the gospel. He nailed down the message that is the basis of salvation. Let me make a bold point: Apart from personal faith in the work of Jesus Christ on the cross and His resurrection, there is no salvation and no conversion by the Holy Spirit. People can be religious but lost!

I beg you to evaluate the foundation you are trusting in for your salvation. If it is baptism, a church ceremony, church attendance, good works, a miracle, a warm fuzzy religious experience, or mere "trust in God," then you have not been born-again through faith in Jesus Christ and the gospel. You have not been sealed or filled with the Holy Spirit. You have not been converted by the power of God. You might be religious but you are deceived and lost.

Before you take offense, please note that the crowd that disowned Jesus and demanded His crucifixion was religious. Peter was preaching to religious but lost people. They needed to clearly hear, understand, and receive the gospel of Jesus Christ. There is no salvation apart from faith in Jesus Christ and the gospel. (See Acts 4:8-12)

As much as I welcome miracles and enjoy the ministry of the Holy Spirit, Peter was not preaching about miracles or the Holy Spirit. He was preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. Receiving Jesus Christ and the gospel is the starting point for everything that follows in the Christian life. Do not skip the gospel!

Some of our frustration and dismal results with discipleship may be that we are pouring our time and efforts into unconverted people. Those who are in Christ become new people. (2 Corinthians 5:17) The Holy Spirit changes them. It does no good to send a duck through eagle

school. In the end it's still a duck. Make sure you're pouring your discipleship efforts into eaglets. Start with the gospel.

The Meaning of Faith in Jesus Christ: Acts 3:16-18

“16) And on the basis of faith in His name, it is the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man whom you see and know; and the faith which comes through Him has given him this perfect health in the presence of you all. 17) “And now, brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, just as your rulers did also. 18) But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled.”

Peter continued to make His Message about Jesus Christ. He pointed out that the healing done to the lame beggar was through faith in the name of Jesus Christ. It was not Peter or John who performed the healing, rather it was Jesus Christ.

Peter then forces the issue about the person, work, and identity of Jesus Christ. In verses 14 and 15, Peter called Him “the Holy and Righteous One” and “the Prince of Life.” He then pressed the point that Jesus is “the Christ” and that His suffering fulfilled the words of all the prophets.

Peter was preaching to the very crowd that had disowned Jesus as Messiah and pressed for His crucifixion. He came to His own, but they rejected Him. (See John 1:10-15)

Peter presses an important point: Though they acted in ignorance, God was at work through them. We must go back over and over again to Acts 2:22-24. Their actions did not put an end to Jesus Christ. Death did not stop Him. The grave could not keep Him. God raised Him from the dead. God's plan was fulfilled despite human ignorance.

This sign of healing performed through faith in the name of Jesus Christ proved Jesus Christ is still alive and that He is still doing signs and wonders because He is God!

But let's make a greater connection:

The argument that John made in John 1:1-18 was far greater than the ability of Jesus to perform signs and wonders such as healing people. John pointed out that Jesus Christ is the Creator. Yes, He is Healer and miracle worker, but that is because He is Creator God! The sign performed on the beggar proved that Jesus Christ is alive and still in His office.

Peter stresses that death on the cross did not end Him – rather His suffering and resurrection validated everything the Old Testament prophets said about Him! Peter's message was not about healing or the Holy Spirit – it was about Jesus Christ who is the Savior of mankind!

The healing opened the door to preach the gospel about the person and work of Jesus Christ. Peter used it as tangible proof that Jesus is alive and that He has a far greater plan than just

healing people. He came to redeem humanity from the curse of the fall and reconcile them to God!

I want to make a point that must not be missed: Peter was not saying; “have faith in Jesus so that He might physically heal you!” Instead, he was saying “have faith in Jesus Christ so that He might eternally save you!” The healing merely served as evidence that Jesus was alive and had stepped into His greater office of Savior of the world!

Let me emphasize that the gospel does not say, “believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be healed!” It says: “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.” (John 3:16-17; Acts 2:38; Acts 3:19; Acts 4:12; Acts 5:31-32; Acts 10:42-43; Acts 9:35-37; Acts 16:30-31; Romans 6:22-23; Romans 10:8-10... we could go on and on with many more passages.)

What is my point? There is no doctrine of universal healing taught in the Bible, but it does present a gospel of universal salvation to all who put faith in Jesus Christ! Peter was preaching the gospel of salvation and not a message of healing.

Do I believe God still does miracles today and heals people? Yes! Do I believe the gospel is about physical healing? No! The gospel is about the work of Jesus Christ on the cross to redeem sinful humanity and open the door for eternal salvation.

Peter and John used the healing of the lame beggar to preach the gospel of salvation. They did not use it to start a healing service. Please understand that physical healing is temporal, but salvation is eternal. They are not synonymous.

The angels in heaven do not celebrate when someone gets healed, but they celebrate every lost sinner that gets saved. (See Luke 15:7 & 10) Do not obscure the gospel through an obsession with physical healing.

(What we see in this passage of Acts is God using one incidence of physical healing to bring about spiritual healing in untold numbers! As usual, when we truly understand God's plans, they are far greater and grand and glorious than they first appear on the surface!) -dj

Peter, John, and the early church focused on preaching the gospel and in the process watched God perform signs and wonders to validate the message. (See Hebrews 2:1-4) Healing is optional, but salvation is mandatory!

The Coming Time of Restoration: Acts 3:19-21

“19) Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; 20) and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, 21) whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time.”

Peter boldly called them to repentance. He invited them to return to the Lord that their sins might be wiped away and that times of refreshing might come from the presence of the Lord. They needed to be reconciled to God.

Times of refreshing always come from being in the presence of the Lord. This is true of a nation, a church, a marriage, or an individual. Those who seek the Lord will find Him! These times of refreshing are connected to the ministry of the Holy Spirit. It is a small foretaste of what is to come when Jesus returns to complete His full promise of redemption. (See Ephesians 1:13-14)

Peter then talked about the return of Jesus, the Christ, and a corresponding period of restoration. This is the literal return of Jesus to earth and His thousand-year reign. Revelation 20:1-10 talks about His earthly kingdom. It is during this time-frame that every prophecy about the Messiah will be fulfilled. Not one word will be left undone.

Many today talk about global warming, the new green deal, and trying to save planet earth. Antichrist will use this as a cover to manipulate, control, and destroy people. Jesus offers the only plan to save the world. He starts by saving and changing people. He will ultimately change the earth back to its pre-fall glory.

Paul briefly talked about this in Romans 8:18-25. In this text he talked about the “anxious longing of creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God.” (Vs 19) The whole created realm of planet earth is currently subjected to futility. It is under the curse of the fall. During the period of restoration, this whole planet will take on the Garden of Eden kind of glory. Verse 21 says; “the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of a God.” I can only imagine.

Moses and the Promised Land Analogy: Acts 3:21-26

“21) whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time. 22) Moses said, ‘The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren; to Him you shall give heed to everything He says to you. 23) And it will be that every soul that does not heed that prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.’ 24) And likewise, all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and his successors onward, also announced these days. 25) It is you who are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’ 26) For you first, God raised up His Servant and sent Him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways.”

It is very important that Peter’s second message was focused entirely on Jesus Christ. After looking at His public ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection, Peter then boldly proclaimed that the entire Old Testament pointed to Jesus Christ and His future time of restoration of all things.

In verses 22-23, he quoted Moses promising a future prophet and restorer that was even greater than himself. Think about this: God raised up Moses to deliver His people from slavery

to Egypt and lead them to the promised land. By contrast, Jesus delivered all mankind from slavery to sin, Satan and death and is leading them to a future eternal Kingdom. This is the true Promised Land for the future redemption of all mankind.

Then Peter included all the prophets from Samuel onward. (See verse 24) He pointed out that their unified voice and message pointed to Jesus Christ and a time of restoration. In other words, all the Old Testament prophets pointed to Jesus Christ.

Over time this mystery became clearer and clearer to Peter. Look what he said in 1 Peter 1:10-12; “10) As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful searches and inquiries, 11) seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow. 12) It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look.”

Don't go too fast lest you miss the significance of what Peter was saying. The Old Testament prophets faithfully pointed to the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow, but they could not grasp it.

But wait! In Acts 3:25, Peter takes another giant step backward. He pointed to Abraham and the covenant God made with him. Listen to the specific words of the covenant: “And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” The “seed” that was going to bless the whole world was and is Jesus Christ!

Look at how Peter wraps up this message: “26) For you first, God raised up His Servant and sent Him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways.”” Peter was saying to the crowd, “Everything the Old Testament promised is happening right before your eyes.” Jesus wants to save you from your wicked ways.

Let me take a moment and dig a little deeper: Are you ready for this? Every example, analogy, sign, type, shadow, festival, promise, and prophecy in the Old Testament is being fulfilled in Jesus Christ. (Hebrews 8:5; 9:24) Does that mean that the Exodus under Moses, the wandering in the wilderness, and the conquest of the Promised Land might be a pattern for what God is doing right now and in the future? Watch and see!

Have you noticed the signs and wonders that took place under Moses? The same wording is attributed to the public ministry of Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts. So let's see if the Old Testament analogy fits and speculate where we might be in the story:

The signs and wonders under Moses in Egypt right through the Passover meal obviously related to the ministry of Jesus Christ, including His death, burial, and resurrection. He was the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world and He was crucified on the Passover.

Entering the promised land under Joshua may look forward to the future period of restoration referred to by Peter in Acts 3:21. That will be fulfilled in the millennium kingdom with the future reign of Jesus Christ on earth.

What was between these two events in the Old Testament? Forty long years of wandering in the wilderness and learning how to walk with God. This time was accompanied by the pillar of fire to lead them and amazing provisions by God. There were many signs and wonders during this time as well, including crossing the Red Sea and daily manna. This may be a picture of the current church age and ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is working to cleanse and purge the bride of Christ for His return, just like God purged the whole generation that came out of Egypt under Moses.

So where are we on the Old Testament calendar right now? After 2,000 years of wandering through the wilderness of church history, I suspect we are standing at the Jordan River ready to enter the Promised Land. Jesus is about to return and fulfill what Joshua failed to deliver – a totally Restored Kingdom. Ironically, the analogy fits and fulfills everything Peter was saying in his second message.

There is a lot of depth here. Trust the Holy Spirit to open the eyes of your heart to the mysteries and wonders in the Word of God and your walk in the Spirit. We are living in amazing days!

The Public Confrontation: Acts 4:1-4

“1) As they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to them, 2) being greatly disturbed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. 3) And they laid hands on them and put them in jail until the next day, for it was already evening. 4) But many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.”

Peter’s second message took place on the temple ground. By way of review, the healing of the lame beggar paved the way for an open-air gospel meeting. As the crowd gathered, Peter seized the opportunity to preach the gospel. The people were very attentive because the Holy Spirit was working.

This provoked wrath from the priests, the captain of the temple guard, and the Sadducees. The scene had all the elements of a great open-air meeting. There was a miracle that caught the attention of the crowd, a vocal preacher who eloquently shared the gospel, intense opposition from adversaries of Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit at work persuading people.

The group that opposed the preaching of Peter and John were the key players in crucifying Jesus. Let’s briefly look at the motives of each of the opposition parties. What motivated them?

The priests were there fighting for their jobs. Jesus was about to displace them as the new High Priest and His sacrifice totally fulfilled the sacrificial system, making it obsolete. This transition from the old to the new is the core focus of Hebrews 3-10. They were trying to stop the gospel because it pointed to the new and living way for people to go directly to God through Jesus Christ without a human mediator.

The captain of the temple guard was there fighting for his reputation. He had been entrusted with the task of guarding the tomb and then paid to spread the rumor that the disciples had stolen the body of Jesus. (Matthew 27:62-66; 28:11-15) Now he was desperately trying to stop the preaching of the gospel, because its core message focused on his failure.

The Sadducees were there fighting for their theological dogma. Their core belief system was based on denial of life after death, a resurrection, or any form of eternal judgment. (See Acts 23:8) The message of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the gospel challenged, exposed, and obliterated their false teachings.

God not only allowed their opposition, He used the controversy to draw greater attention to the gospel. What a contrast! When Jesus or His disciples laid hands on people, it was to anoint or heal them. When this group laid hands on people it was to assault or arrest them. Peter and John preached faith. The religious leaders resorted to force. The crowd could clearly see the difference.

The end result was the direct fulfillment of the words of Jesus in Acts 1:8. The power of the Holy Spirit was unleashed to undergird the preaching of the gospel so that thousands were converted. Look at Acts 4:4; "But many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand."

So many were becoming believers that they resorted to a different counting system. Instead of counting every conversion, they now start counting the men. When the women and children are factored into this verse, a conservative estimate might be 15,000 to 20,000 believers. The gospel was exploding and many were coming to saving faith in Jesus Christ.

How can this be explained? There is only one answer. As Jesus pointed out in Acts 1:8, the primary ministry and power of the Holy Spirit would be to undergird the spread of the gospel. This observation is consistent throughout the whole book of Acts. Every extraordinary movement of the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts was in some way connected to the spread of the gospel.

I fully recognize the Holy Spirit has numerous roles, but His primary ministry is connected closely to the spread of the gospel. If your spiritual life is mundane and dry, it's probably because you have distanced yourself from actively sharing the gospel. The power of God always shows up on the front lines of spreading the gospel, just as Jesus said in Acts 1:8.

Let me give a clarification: You can be busy with good stuff and even do humanitarian work with a packed schedule and still be dry, powerless, and barren. You can be religious and empty. You can play church and still seldom see God work. You can even be a theologian and still be an agnostic about the power of God. That describes the priests and Sadducees in this story! They were on the wrong side of the gospel.

The Holy Spirit is most active and the power of God is most evident when Jesus is being lifted up and the gospel is actually being shared through God's anointed messengers! God doesn't waste miracles, signs, or wonders. They are not for human entertainment; they are for Divine engagement! (Consult Matthew 12:38-39 & Matthew 16:1-4) The New Testament screams that signs, wonders, and miracles are very purposeful and are used to promote Jesus, advance the gospel, or confirm God's approved messengers. (Hebrews 2:1-4)

These four verses at the beginning of Acts 4 set the stage for Peter's third message and a showdown between the religious elite and the Spirit-anointed disciples of Jesus Christ. Stay tuned as the drama builds!

The Council of Intimidation: Acts 4:5-7

"5) On the next day, their rulers and elders and scribes were gathered together in Jerusalem; 6) and Annas the high priest was there, and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of high-priestly descent. 7) When they had placed them in the center, they began to inquire, "By what power, or in what name, have you done this?" Acts 4:5-7

This reads like the guest list to the Emmy Awards. They took their time, waited until the next day, and assembled with pomp and confidence. There may have even been some formal protocol to celebrate Annas, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander as they entered the council chambers. This was the same Sanhedrin that had assembled and conspired to crucify Jesus a few months earlier.

But there was a growing rift among them. Joseph, a member of the Council, prepared the body of Jesus for burial. (Luke 23:50-54) Nicodemus "the ruler of the Jews" had become a secret follower of Jesus and even helped prepare His body for burial. He personally contributed a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes to wrap the body. (John 19:39) Even Gamaliel "the teacher of the Law" was beginning to suspect much deeper significance to what God was doing through Jesus Christ and His followers. (Acts 5:33-40) The seeds of the gospel were beginning to take root and sprout even in a growing number of the priests. (Acts 6:7) The Holy Spirit was at work even among their ranks.

It was in this assembly that Peter and John were ushered in and placed in the center for interrogation. Jesus Himself stood in that very spot during His trial. What a powerful reminder that we are called to share in the sufferings of Christ! (Philippians 3:10)

Their questioning was aimed at intimidation. They demanded to know “by what power or in what name have you done this?” (Vs 7) They were referring to the healing of the lame beggar.

The question was actually profound, because what had happened was beyond the scope of their authority and power. They could not perform miracles, signs, or wonders. It was like the magicians of Egypt standing before Pharaoh and concluding that “this is the finger of God.” (Exodus 8:18-19) Biblical history has a way of repeating itself. Unfortunately, a number of the religious leaders were as blind and hard as Pharaoh.

We are now beginning to see one of the purposes for signs and wonders accompanying the preaching of the gospel. I point you once more to Hebrews 2:4. Throughout biblical history God has always filled the role of bearing witness of Himself through the use of signs and wonders. He alone sits in the seat of “God.” He judges and humiliates all challengers and skeptics of His glory, majesty, and power.

The context of Hebrews 2:1-4 changed me from a skeptic to a believer of signs and wonders accompanying the spread of the gospel. I cannot deny the clear teaching of the Word of God! I now expect God to work and validate the gospel. My personal faith and motto has become; “It is our job to tell the story, it is God’s job to move the mountain.”

I no longer quench the Spirit nor do I put God in the small box of my theological bias. He is sovereign and powerful to do whatever, wherever, and whenever He wants within the boundaries of His own moral character. The Bible puts no limits on His will, power, sovereignty or timing. However, He defines Himself as holy, righteous, and pure. There is no sin or compromise in Him. He is the measure of truth, justice and morality. He is the Judge.

This text contains an eerie shadow of many scholars, theologians, seminaries, and denominations today. They celebrate themselves while falsely thinking that God bends to their rationalism, ideologies, theological bias, morals, and control. Like many of the religious Jewish leaders of first-century Judaism, they merely exempt themselves from the glory and power of what God is doing all around them.

They are blind guides of the blind dressed in religious garb while having no presence or power of the Holy Spirit in their own lives. They willingly twist scripture to embrace anti-Christ morals and values. They fail to measure themselves by texts like 1 Corinthians 2:4-5.

The spokesman for the Sanhedrin was throwing the best pitch he had! Peter, through the filling of the Holy Spirit, was about to knock it out of the ballpark. Stay tuned for the third message from Peter recorded in the Acts 2-4.

A Spirit-Filled Demeanor: Acts 4:8

“8) Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers and elders of the people,”

Before moving into Peter's message, I want to pause and make a crucial observation. Pentecost had radically changed Peter. The filling of the Holy Spirit changed his demeanor. A few months earlier, Peter melted when two different servant girls accused him of being with Jesus. Shortly thereafter, when a few other bystanders associated him with Jesus, Peter started cursing and denied that he even knew Jesus. (See Matthew 26:69-75)

Yet in this text in Acts 4:1-12, Peter and John were standing before the Sanhedrin and they were trying desperately to intimidate them, but it had zero negative effect on them. They were bold, courageous, and filled with confidence. What had changed?

The answer points to the Promise of the Father. They had been baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire. As Jesus said in Acts 1:8, the Holy Spirit filled them with power to be witnesses. They were anointed and had unction. The tables were totally turned on the elite religious leaders. Peter's words penetrated them like a sword.

Let me make an observation: According to Matthew 16:13-20, Peter believed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God. His theology was right. Then, according to John 21:15-17, he told Jesus three times that he loved Him. His heart was right. What was missing? His spirit was empty. He was living according to the flesh.

The baptism of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost radically changed his demeanor. He was like a new man. Acts 4:8 says; "Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them..." Do not miss the significance of that phrase.

Two things came together in his messages. First, his focus on the gospel was right. His message had the right content. He was speaking the word of God in truth. But second, he was filled and anointed by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God was working through him with power.

The combination of these two things are usually present when the Holy Spirit works in extraordinary ways. The message has to be right and the messenger should be right with God and dependent on the Holy Spirit.

However, Jonah was an exception to this principle. He was out of step with God and yet God accomplished great things. Philippians 1:15-18 also gives an exception to this principle. Paul said that some were preaching from wrong motives, yet the gospel was going out. God is not limited by the messenger. After all, He used a dumb ass to speak to Balaam in Numbers 22. Sad to say, but some preachers fit that description only too well. But Balaam proved to be a total disaster. Have you noticed that there is no record that Jonah had any ministry after Nineveh? There is no value for being in the flesh instead of the Spirit. It is counterproductive.

The book of Acts shows what amazing things that can happen when both the message and the messenger are anointed by the Holy Spirit. There is no excuse for fleshly ministry. When people are distracted, bored, or sleeping during the message it is self-evident that the Spirit of God has been grieved, quenched, or ignored by the messenger. Prayer-less ministry is powerless

ministry. After over 45 years of ministry, I am more desperate for the filling and anointing of the Holy Spirit than any time in my past.

Only One Name: Acts 4:8-12

“8) Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers and elders of the people, 9) if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, 10) let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this name this man stands here before you in good health. 11) He is the stone which was rejected by you, the builders, but which became the chief corner stone. 12) And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.””

Peter addresses the Rulers and elders of the people with a very bold and direct charge. He turns the tables and puts them on trail. He goes on offense.

He insinuated that being put on trial for healing a lame man was both spiritually and morally repugnant – especially because the man had been lame from his mother’s womb. Even infrequent visitors to Jerusalem knew him, because he had sat for years at the Beautiful Gate of the temple begging for alms.

The miracle had an uncanny resemblance to the man born blind from his mother’s womb whom Jesus healed as recorded in John 9:1-41. The disciples asked Jesus; “2) ... Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?” Jesus then set the stage for the miracle: “3)... it was neither that this man sinned , nor his parents; but it was in order that the works of God might be displayed in him.” His healing turned into the same kind of scrutiny by the religious leaders. History was repeating itself.

Peter seized the opportunity to preach Jesus Christ and the gospel to them. In doing so he made three strong points:

First, in verse 10, he pointed out that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene the healing happened. He was the very one they had crucified but God had raised from the dead. To drive his point home, he said: “... by this name this man stands here in good health!”

According to the text, the formerly-lame man was standing next to Peter and John. The evidence was obvious and indisputable. A lame man cannot stand or walk on his own. But the man was totally whole and in good health – and standing right in front of them!

Second, Peter quoted from Psalm 118:22-24 and charged that the rulers and elders had fulfilled this prophetic text by rejecting Jesus Christ. Acts 4:11; “He is the stone which was rejected by you the builders, but which has become the very corner stone.”

The story of the healing was spreading far and wide. So was the crucial detail that he was healed “In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene.” (Compare Acts 3:6 and Acts 4:10) Jesus Christ had indeed been rejected by them, “the builders,” but He was now quickly becoming the very cornerstone. He was the focus of Peter’s message!

Finally, in verse 12, Peter makes the bold claim that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation! “And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12) Make no mistake, the gospel is very exclusive. Peter stated that faith in Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation!

This verse is equivalent to John 10:7-9 where Jesus claimed to be both the door of the sheep and the good shepherd. All who enter through Him are saved. How could He be both the door and the shepherd? Because at night the good shepherd would lay down as the door of the corral. There was only one way in – and it was through Him!

Peter was saying the same thing in Acts 4:12. Salvation is only through faith in Jesus Christ! His point was absolutely clear to the rulers and elders of the people. Salvation is not through the name of Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob. It is not through Moses, Joshua, or Elijah. It is not through David, Daniel, or John the Baptist. All of them pointed people to Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation. It is not through Buddha, Mohammad, or the Dalai Lama. It is not through the Catholic Church, the Lutheran Church, or the Baptist Church. It is not through the philosopher, psychologist, or politician. It is not through the medicine man, witch doctor, or warlock. It is not through Christian Science, Mormonism, or Scientology. It is not through mythology, mysticism, or new-age religions. It is not through good works, religious rituals, or philanthropy. Salvation is only through personal saving faith in Jesus Christ. He alone died on the cross to pay for the sins of humanity and He alone rose from the dead proving His claim of Deity. Have you put your faith in Jesus Christ for your salvation?

Peter exposes and explodes a common myth and lie that says, “All roads lead to God!” Let me close by quoting him one more time; “(12) And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12)

Stamped by the Presence of God: Acts 4:13

“13) Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus.”

Spending time with Jesus has an effect on people. As the council listened to Peter and John, they understood they were untrained and uneducated men, but they had unusual confidence, passion, and profound insight into the Scriptures. They reminded them of Jesus. The anointing of the Holy Spirit was upon them.

To grasp the difference, it may be helpful to review how the crowd responded to Jesus after He delivered the Sermon on the Mount. Listen to their reaction; “28) When Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching; 29) for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.” Matthew 7:28-29: His teaching with authority and the confidence of Peter and John was related. It was not the punchless style of the highly educated scribes and Pharisees.

There is a difference between a “God-trained man” and a “man-trained man.” There is also a difference between people “sent from God” and those who are merely doing a job or hired for a position. Paul made this point about himself in Galatians 1:1. Take a moment and read his credentials.

Those whom God sends He also anoints. There is a holy unction upon them. There is a fire burning within them. They are clothed with the fruit of the Spirit. Like Moses coming down from the mountain, there is a radiance stamped on their countenance. They are empty vessels that God works “in” and “through” for His glory and purpose in the world.

This quality cannot be learned or acquired by reading books or taking classes. It comes from spending time in the presence of God and being filled with His Spirit. It is not rational, it is spiritual. It is not an acquired skill, it is the mark of God’s presence.

Paul made the case for these men and women in 1 Corinthians 1:26-31. God works through them to shame the wise and display His power. While the world looks for a great resume to fill positions, God has a better plan. God raises up men and women stamped with His Spirit, power, and glory.

I am not impressed with human credentials when looking for a leader. Yes, I look for men and women who have the right skills, but are also anointed by the Holy Spirit and have godly maturity from spending quality time with Jesus.

I do not care how impressive the academic resume is if there is no fire for Jesus burning from within – they are not qualified! They need to be stamped by the presence of God!

I am not moved by men or women who are carnal-minded, worldly-trained and void of Spirit. Such was the case of the rulers and elders of the people. They were empty wells. They were blind guides. They were wolves in sheep's clothing. They lacked God's presence and anointing. They were not qualified to lead God's people or pour fuel on the movement of the Spirit.

Do not recruit them to lead your church or Christian organization. They promote self and not God. They have their own agenda and not God's agenda. They get man-sized results instead of God-sized results. There is no fire within them.

Introduction to the Doctrine of Suffering: Acts 4:14-17

“14) And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they had nothing to say in reply. 15) But when they had ordered them to leave the Council, they began to confer with one another, 16) saying, “What shall we do with these men? For the fact that a noteworthy miracle has taken place through them is apparent to all who live in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. 16) But so that it will not spread any further among the people, let us warn them to speak no longer to any man in this name.””

It is counter-productive to threaten those who are mighty in spirit with physical harm or punishment. They have already crucified the flesh in order to walk in the Spirit. They have set their minds on things above and not the things on earth. They have made Jesus Christ Lord and Master of their lives.

The rulers and elders of the people should have learned this lesson from their dealings with Jesus. He chose the cross above their threats. The resolve of His followers was multiplied many times over after Pentecost. Those truly filled with the Holy Spirit function at a different level than carnal men.

It is here, in the face of threats of physical harm and punishment, that Satan's ploys are exposed. He can only threaten on the level of the physical, but the redeemed have already forsaken the fleshly pleasures of this life to pursue God and what is called “Zoe” life in the Spirit. They have moved beyond mere “bio” life.

Jesus said; “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) Satan's reach is limited. It is temporal and not eternal.

I must concede that all of the disciples feared for their own lives and safety before Pentecost., but being baptized in the Holy Spirit radically changed them! This fact was instrumental in my reconsidering the meaning and importance of the Promise of the Father as recorded in Acts 1:4-5. I believed in Jesus and loved Jesus, but I lived by my own fleshly efforts. I often failed and lived in fear.

Peter and John were no longer carnal. After Pentecost, they began to live and function on the level of the Spirit. They exemplified the teaching of Paul found in 1 Corinthians 2:1-3:3. God used this text to cut me open and expose that I was void of Spirit.

In this text, Paul argues that there are three kinds of people. There is the 1) spiritual man, 2) the natural man, and 3) the carnal man. Physical threats like those coming from the religious rulers are very effective against the natural man and the carnal man, but they are counter-productive and useless against the spiritual man or woman.

Paul presented the case that inner ministry of the Holy Spirit separates the spiritual man from the carnal man. They can share the same basic theology, but the inner man is very different. The carnal Christian is dependent on self-effort, intellectual reason, and self-discipline to live the Christian life. The spiritual Christian is dependent on the inner ministry of the Holy Spirit for personal transformation and power for living.

The western church fears persecution. The persecuted church values persecution because it separates the sheep from the goats. Leaders in the underground church in China are not honored because of academic achievements, they are revered based on the suffering they have endured for the cause of Christ. Those tested by fire have a purity of devotion to Christ.

Acts 4 contains the introductory material on the doctrine of suffering for the Christian Church. Sadly, the doctrine of suffering is absent from the modern western church. Carnality reigns in the absence of teaching about crucifying the flesh to embrace the walk in the Spirit.

An Antichrist Agenda: Acts 4:14-20

“14) And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they had nothing to say in reply. 15) But when they had ordered them to go outside of the Council, they began to confer with one another, 16) saying, “What shall we do with these men? For the fact that a noteworthy miracle has taken place through them is apparent to all who live in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. 17) But so that it will not spread any further among the people, let us warn them to speak no longer to any man in this name.” 18) And when they had summoned them, they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. 19) But Peter and John answered and said to them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; 20) for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.””

The healing of the lame beggar was so complete and noteworthy that not even the critics could deny its authenticity. “They had nothing to say in reply.”

All of God's works are that way! Creation is a great example. The deeper you dive into what God created the more order, design, and beauty unfolds. From the microscopic to the telescopic, everything points to God's superior intelligence, power and glory. The Laws of Physics shout praise to the character and nature of the Creator.

So it was with the healing of this lame beggar. A noteworthy miracle had taken place. You would think the Council would yield to this sign from God. It was undeniable! Instead, what they did was very clever. They simply rejected the premise that it was done in the name of Jesus Christ or added any validity to the claim of His resurrection. They defended their anti-Christ bias.

Let me make a strong observation from the text: The Council had no problem with the miracle, they simply refused to connect it to faith in Jesus Christ. They rejected the gospel. They believed the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob performed miracles. The Old Testament is full

of them. They were objecting to Peter and John tying the miracle to Jesus Christ and the gospel.

Let me underline this in your thinking one more time! In the New Testament, God performed signs and wonders for the sole purpose of validating Jesus Christ and the gospel. (Study Hebrews 2:1-4 to punctuate this point)

Do you doubt me? Let's examine the nature of the threat by the Council against Peter and John. Ironically, they did not command them to stop healing or performing miracles. Instead, they commanded them to stop teaching and preaching in the name of Jesus Christ. They wanted them to stop sharing the gospel. Beware of any ministry that minimizes the importance of sharing the gospel.

This story punctuates my deep conviction that the primary purpose of healings and miracles in the early church was to undergird the preaching of the gospel! Satan has no problem with signs and wonders as long as Jesus Christ and the gospel are set aside.

In fact, in the end times, Satan is going to give all kinds of false signs and wonders to mislead people. Just take a moment and study 2 Thessalonians 2:3-10. The antichrist agenda is getting people fixated on signs and wonders apart from any focus on Jesus Christ and the gospel. This translates to deception and confusion.

Some of my Charismatic and Pentecostal friends accuse me of limiting the power of God because I do not embrace a doctrine of universal healing. I simply observe that God did not heal everyone in the New Testament.

However, we do see that signs, wonders, and healings were deeply connected to the exaltation of Jesus Christ and the spread of the gospel. Even the context of Acts 5:16 is connected to the exaltation of Jesus Christ and the spread of the gospel.

I refuse to put God in any box or within parameters that the Bible does not clearly establish. One example is found in James 1:13 where it says; "God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone." We also know that God does not lie. These are biblical parameters God puts around Himself.

When it comes to miracles, signs, and wonders, the Bible drops us off at the sovereignty and providence of God. It is equally as erroneous to say, "God does not do miracles today," as it is to say, "God's will is to heal everyone." Neither view is taught or illustrated in the Bible.

However, there is one truth that seems constant in the New Testament: When God did perform signs, wonders, or miracles, they consistently exalted Jesus Christ or were used to spread the gospel. Again, this is the point of Hebrews 2:1-4.

So let's come back to our text. I stress again that the Council did not dispute the miracle. What they objected to was tying the miracle to Jesus Christ and the gospel.

We learn from this text that miracles are not about miracles. Healing is not about healing. They are given for two reasons. First, they validate the identity of Jesus Christ and His resurrection. Second, they open doors for the gospel and underline the importance of faith in Jesus Christ. They are powerful and amazing affirmations from God to glorify Jesus Christ and advance the gospel.

We need to adopt this New Testament standard today. It is prudent to stand apart from any ministry that focuses on signs and wonders but totally ignores Jesus Christ and the gospel. As shown earlier, this agenda is the end time scheme of the antichrist.

The Secret to Unshakable Faith: Acts 4:18-20

“18) And when they had summoned them, they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. 19) But Peter and John answered and said to them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; 20) for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.””

This text captures the power, confidence, and boldness imparted by the Holy Spirit. They were not concerned about their own thoughts, feelings, or personal welfare. They did not conduct an opinion poll to see what the majority of Christian's thought. The only opinion that mattered was Gods!

They had spent close to three years with Jesus during His public ministry. The Living Word Himself had taught them the written Word. They watched Jesus willingly suffer and die on the cross at the hands of this same Council. Jesus had spent forty days with them on numerous occasions after His resurrection. They were baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit.

Peter's response was classic; “Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard!”

This response became the standard for the New Testament Doctrine of suffering. Take a moment and read 1 Peter 4:12-19. When we suffer for the name of Christ while doing right and displaying godly character, then the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon us. (See 1 Peter 4:14-16)

There is a big difference between suffering for stupidity sake and suffering for the gospel. Joseph and Daniel both suffered for their unwavering godly convictions, but they did it with respect and honor. They were not mouthy, rebellious, or rude. The same was true of Peter and John in this story. They made their stand based solely on what was right in the sight of God. They were willing to suffer for their convictions.

Notice Acts 4:20; “for we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard.” John used these same words in 1 John 1:3; “what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also might have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.”

This takes the conversation to the next level. They were driven by something higher than personal convictions. They were motivated by intimacy and fellowship with God. They were walking with God and therefore were wrapped in agape love.

They were consistent. They were willing to suffer for Christ and the gospel because they were living every day for Christ and the gospel. Their focus was not on dying for Christ, their focus was on living in sweet communion with Him. Their mindset was not “suffering for Christ”; their mindset was “fellowship with Christ.” As Paul said in Philippians 3:8, his surpassing value was knowing Christ... and that intimate relationship took the sting out of suffering.

On the rare occasions that I have been privileged to associate with the underground church, I observed that moment-by-moment intimacy and fellowship with Jesus Christ was the common denominator among them. They were deeply rooted in personal fellowship and intimacy with God. They sincerely loved Jesus Christ and walked in His Spirit.

This invitation is for every believer. We are called into deep fellowship and communion with God irregardless of our outward circumferences. The walk in the Spirit can be summarized as intimacy with God.

There was no mystical secret behind the boldness of Peter and John as they stood before the Council. Acts 4:13 says they were marveling at their confidence and then began to recognize them as having been with Jesus. Their demeanor was the overflow of their inner fellowship and relationship with Jesus Christ. The Doctrine of Suffering is rooted in the greater calling to intimacy with God.

The Unforeseen Benefit of Persecution and Suffering: Acts 4:21-22

“21) When they had threatened them further, they let them go (finding no basis on which to punish them) on account of the people, because they were all glorifying God for what had happened; 22) for the man was more than forty years old on whom this miracle of healing had been performed.”

God does not bow to human threats, nor should His disciples. In Matthew 28:18-20, the resurrected Christ gave authority to His disciples to go into all the world and make disciples and teach all that He had commanded them. He promised to be with them.

Here, in Acts 4:19-23, we encounter a battle between two authorities. The command of the Council not to teach or preach in the name of Jesus Christ was in direct opposition to the

command of the resurrected Christ to preach and teach the gospel to the whole world. To obey one was to deny the other.

Peter and John put the Council on notice that they were going to obey God rather than man. They refused to back down. (See Acts 4:18-20) When we align with God rather than men we trigger the principle that God steps up and does the fighting for us. But let me give a caution – doing this means that we are prepared to suffer for righteousness sake. This is the hallmark of disobedience to false or liberal religious authorities for the sake of obedience to God.

Daniel 3:13-30 is the foundation text for religious disobedience. When King Nebuchadnezzar built his image and issued a command for all to bow down and worship, it placed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego in opposition to the religious order of the king.

Their answer to the king was classic. It is found in Daniel 3:16-18. Let me quote; 16) “Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego replied to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to give you an answer concerning this matter. 17) If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. 18) But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.””

Sure enough, the king accepted their challenge and bound them hand and foot and had them thrown into the furnace of fire. They were willing to suffer and die for allegiance to God. That’s when God stepped up and intervened. But what if he hadn’t? Obeying God with a clear conscience was a higher value to them than life. This is the cornerstone to the doctrine of suffering. God meant more to them than life.

There is a subliminal subtext to this doctrine. It comes in the form of two words for “life” in the Greek language. There is a difference between “bio-life” and “zoe-life.” The first refers to mere physical life. The second refers to Spirit life.

The early Christians were willing to give up physical life for the greater value of embracing the higher spiritual life found through faith in Jesus Christ. “Zoe” is the word for life found in John 1:4; “in Him was life, and the life was the light of men” Jesus had deeper life in Him than mere physical life. The concept of “eternal life” in texts like John 3:16 is also based on the Greek word “Zoe.”

When I first heard the concept of “Zoe life,” it seemed strange and even awkward for me. Over time it has become very precious. I now equate Zoe life with the walk in the Spirit. This is the deeper, abundant, inner spirit life Jesus promised to give His followers in John 10:10.

So what does “Zoe life” have to do with the doctrine of suffering? The early Christians understood that threats against biological or physical life could not affect the deeper “Spirit life” found “in Christ.” Persecution and martyrdom could destroy the physical body, but they had no effect on the soul or spirit. To the contrary, outward suffering can enrich the soul and spirit. This

physical suffering principle also applies to physical ailments and aging. (See 2 Corinthians 4:16-18)

We could spend considerable time on this theme, but this is why the threats from the council had no negative effect on Peter and John. They were no longer living according to the flesh but rather according to the Spirit. To the contrary, they understood that physical suffering throws spiritual gasoline on inner spirit life. This can happen no matter the source of physical suffering. Pruning the flesh always produces fruit in the spirit – if we respond to it properly.

After they were released, we discover the full extent to which the threats from the Council fueled the awakening that was unfolding. The next section of the story is very profound and enlightening. It shows how to cry out to God in the face of persecution and suffering. God is always magnified through the storm!

Seeing The Bigger Picture: Acts 4:23-38

“23) When they had been released, they went to their own companions and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. 24) And when they heard this, they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said, “O Lord, it is You who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them, 25) who by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of our father David Your servant, said, ‘Why did the Gentiles rage, And the peoples devise futile things? 26) The kings of the earth took their stand, And the rulers were gathered together Against the Lord and against His Christ.’ 27) For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, 28) to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.”

Upon being released from the Council, they went to their companions and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. When you squeeze the text about the meaning of the word “they,” something beautiful emerges. The broader context indicates that Peter and John were accompanied by the former beggar when they stood before the Council. He was most likely included in the word “they.” This reunion included the healed beggar meeting his new family for the first time as a believer. He was being assimilated into the family of God.

After reporting the warnings from the chief priests and elders to their companions, the group with one accord lifted their voices to God. They didn’t call a committee meeting, instead they launched into a spontaneous prayer meeting. They were a praying church! They brought the matter to God.

This prayer meeting focused on two things. First, they focused on God and His extraordinary works. They called upon Him as the Lord who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and all life forms that inhabit these three realms. They addressed Him as both Creator and Supreme Lord. Instead of focusing on the size of their opposition, they zeroed in on the immensity of God!

This point should not be minimized. Like Joshua and Caleb, they measured their opposition by the size of God. This is the starting point of prevailing faith. Make God and not your external circumstances your focus.

Second, they focused on the Word of God and its prophetic significance to their situation. In their case, the Holy Spirit brought Psalm 2:1-2 into focus. They understood that biblical prophecy was unfolding in front of them. They were actors in a drama much bigger than their immediate problems. Divine Providence had written the script. God's plan of human redemption was being fulfilled.

This is always the case. We are involved in a story much bigger than ourselves. We may not understand our circumstances, but faith recognizes that God is at work behind them. It is crucial to yield ourselves to the greater plans and purposes of God.

I will resist the temptation of going off on a tangent, but current events today are very similar to the days of the early church. They were key actors in the first advent of Christ and His birth, earthly ministry, death on the cross, resurrection, ascension, and the beginning of the church age. The Holy Spirit helped them perceive the greater spiritual and prophetic climate unfolding around them.

By contrast, we are standing on the threshold of the second return of Christ and all the prophecies related to the end times. Things are happening in our world today of epic proportions. We are also part of a prophetic story much greater than ourselves. It is crucial for the church today to again cry out to God for grace, power, and understanding. You are not an island unto yourself. Let me emphasize again, we are part of a much bigger story. We have come full circle. Current events are again major prophetic events. It is crucial that we set our focus on God and His Word. We need to adopt a biblical worldview that includes the signs of the times unfolding around us.

It is important that we learn from the early church. We need to pray like they prayed... and in the days to come we will need to discover the importance of Christian community. The book of Acts contains vital insights for our days.

Profound Prayer: Acts 4:29-30

“(29) And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence, 30) while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus.”)

These are some of my favorite verses in the book of Acts. The early church faced opposition through prayer. They asked for grace and confidence in speaking the Word while they trusted God to step up and confirm their message with His mighty deeds.

As my years in ministry have extended into five decades, my philosophy of ministry has changed. It has gotten much simpler, more biblical, less stressful, and more joyous. I now firmly believe that it is my job to tell the story, but it is God's job to move the mountain. It is my job to share the gospel, but it is God's job to save people. It is my job to share the vision, but it is God's job to provide in miraculous ways. It is my job to pray for healing, but it is God's job to heal people. It is my job to invite people to join us in ministry as supporters or volunteers, it is God's job to move them to action.

I now recognize that I am small, but God is big. I am weak, but God is powerful. I am restricted to time and space, but God is omnipresent. I have limited knowledge and strength, but God is infinite in both. I cannot fix people or their circumstances, but God can transform both. I am called to point people to God, but He has to prove to them that He exists, that He cares, that He is powerful, and that He invites them into personal relationship with Himself. I stopped trying to play god in people's lives.

All of this is wrapped up in this simple prayer recorded in Acts 4:29-31. They were asking God for the courage and grace to go on preaching and teaching the Gospel, while leaving the healings, miracles, signs, and wonders to Him. They anticipated, expected, believed, and trusted that He would not abandon them. In this text, they were accepting their job description to preach and teach while reminding God that His Job description was to extend His hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of Jesus.

This simple formula has been true for God's servants throughout biblical history. Review Psalms 78:43; Psalm 135:9; Isaiah 8:18; Jeremiah 32:16-22; Daniel 4:3 and Daniel 6:25-27. His servants were called to share His message while He stepped up and confirmed His existence and power.

Actually, times of silence from God and periods of inactivity in the Old Testament were indications of judgment. The way Elijah humiliated the prophets of Baal was through calling fire down from heaven. His God did what their god could not. It should not surprise us that fire came down at Pentecost.

Let's dig a bit deeper. What was the difference between the ministry of Jesus and the scribes, priests, and Pharisees? It came down to the manifestation of the power of God through Him. He performed signs and wonders while they were absolutely impotent.

The same thing happened in the book of Acts. The rulers of Israel had clout, institutional authority, and dominion over the people, but zero spiritual power. The lame beggar had sat for years at the gate of the temple under their jurisdiction and they could do nothing to help him. But then one day Peter and John came along in the name of Jesus, and everything changed!

God was confirming His anointed leaders. Just like the rod of Moses and Aaron blossomed overnight, so the ministry of the apostles was blossoming. (Numbers 17) God was confirming

His messengers in extraordinary ways. The contrast between the Sanhedrin and the Apostles was obvious for everyone to see.

This prayer in Acts 4:29-30 was both profound and simple. They were saying; “God, give us the confidence to keep preaching and teaching while You continue to confirm the gospel message with your great signs and wonders.” Another way of saying it might be; “Give us the grace to write the sentences while You add the punctuation marks!”

(Your editor likes this analogy.) -dj

These two verses have challenged me for years. Early in my ministry, I was a “fix it” pastor. I wanted to help people, but soon realized my strength and resources were tragically limited. I almost burned out! Then God graciously used verses like these to reveal my sin and self-sufficiency.

That’s when I developed the motto; “It is my job to tell the story, it is God’s job to move the mountain.” My praying changed. My preaching changed. My faith changed. My focus changed. Instead of trying to explain away these verses, I started aligning myself with the biblical principle taught in Acts 4:29-30. I started seeking God’s grace in fulfilling my calling while trusting Him to fulfill His promises. To my surprise, mountains started moving in extraordinary ways!

It is now up to you to capture the spiritual principle exemplified in this simple but profound prayer. This is where faith meets the power of God. This is where we become co-laborers with Christ!

The Filling of the Holy Spirit: Acts 4:31

“And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness.”

I like earth-shaking prayer meetings. I confess, I’ve never been in one where the physical ground trembled, but I have been in numerous prayer meetings where the presence of God was powerfully felt. During some of these prayer times, I am confident that the powers of darkness were shaken. Never underestimate the importance of prayer and worship in the spiritual realm.

The key phrase I want to zero in on in this verse is, “and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.” Peter and John and their companions for the most part represented the group that were present on the day of Pentecost and were baptized by the Holy Spirit. This illustrates the biblical teaching that there is “one baptism” of the Holy Spirit but “many fillings.”

This can be established by looking at Ephesians 4:5 and 5:18 side by side. The Greek in Ephesians 5:18 should be translated “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be continually filled with the Holy Spirit.”

Jesus wants to freshly fill and anoint His servants with the Holy Spirit for every task, witnessing opportunity, or preaching event. Notice in Acts 4:31, the filling of the Holy Spirit was directly connected to prayer and seeking God's power. I maintain that prayerless ministry is powerless ministry. When we neglect seeking God in prayer, we are automatically trusting our fleshly talents, abilities, or clever programs for the results.

This is why much church activity today leaves people bored as compared to the sense of “awe and wonder” felt by people in the early church. (See Acts 2:43) They took prayer and seeking the filling, anointing, and outpouring of the Holy Spirit seriously.

Modern ministry is often void of sincere and urgent prayer. I watch this as I am invited to speak at many churches and events. I am always pleased when leadership meets to pray with me as the speaker for a few minutes before a service, But honestly, I don't expect much of the presence of God during the service from this kind of shallow praying. I am more blessed when they actually lay hands on me and pray for the filling and anointing of the Holy Spirit over me and my message. It shows they are on the target.

On the rare occasions when the intercessors are on duty and the prayer warriors are watchfully praying over the venue during the service, I expect a kiss from heaven. During these services the presence and power of God is so strong that the Holy Spirit wrestles with people before the message begins and long after the service has ended. I relish being in the presence and power of God. Some churches build this kind of “God seeking” into their fabric. The church at Antioch certainly did. (See Acts 13:1-4) I have been in churches like this and experienced the sense of awe and wonder because of the presence of God.

Like the manna in the wilderness, the bread of heaven must be sought daily. Yesterday's filling and anointing runs out. The inner cup goes dry and must be filled again. Yesterday's filling does not carry over into the next day or week. I seek the filling of the Holy Spirit every time I preach or teach, no matter how big or small the event. Those occasions when I neglected seeking God in this way have been dry, empty, and disastrous.

But there is another secret. We can pray for divine appointments and the filling of the Holy Spirit every day and throughout the day. I don't want to go through the motions of life and miss what God is doing around me.

This is what happened to the disciples in John 4:1-45. They spent much of the day shopping in the city of Sychar and didn't talk to a single person about spiritual things. They concluded the town was closed to God.

Meanwhile, the Samaritan woman spent so much time with Jesus that her spiritual cup was overflowing. She left her physical water pots behind and went into the city and talked to everyone about Jesus. She soon returned with a crowd that was eager to meet Jesus.

Here is the point – ordinary days can become extraordinary days when our spiritual cups are full. I believe this daily walk in the Spirit accounted for the mystery recorded in Acts 2:47; “... and the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.” Don’t be deceived into thinking that the Holy Spirit cannot work through you or that He is only on duty for an hour on Sunday morning.

The Holy Spirit is not restricted by time or space. He is always present and active, but we are not always “tuned in.” Acts 4:24-31 says praying might not be as much about inviting God into our midst as it is about us entering into His presence and power. Whatever the mystery, we are called to seek God through prayer and there is a notable difference between prayerless living and prayerful living. The difference is the filling and anointing of the Holy Spirit!

Speaking the Word of God with Boldness: Acts 4:31

“31) And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness.” Acts 4:31

The end result of being filled with the Holy Spirit was that they “began to speak the Word of God with boldness.” The confidence and courage they pleaded for in prayer was granted. They were no longer timid, fearful, or ashamed of the gospel.

This is a direct fulfillment of the promise of Jesus in Acts 1:8; “ “but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.” The mission is world evangelization. The means is the power of the Holy Spirit. The message is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

At some point, God wants His people to start talking about Jesus Christ and verbally share the gospel. The emphasis in Acts 4:31 is on “speaking” the Word. This was the validation of being filled with the Holy Spirit.

I have emphasized this point previously. Miracles and signs and wonders are not random. They are given by God to either open the door for a verbal gospel witness or confirm the message and the messenger.

If your Christian life or church has become mundane and powerless, I guarantee two things have happened. First, prayer has been displaced and squeezed out by other “stuff.” Second, the gospel has been set aside and ignored.

Satan doesn’t care how spiritual you look or how busy you become as long as you neglect prayer and never open your mouth to verbally share the gospel. The filling and power of the Holy Spirit is generated through prayer and aimed at speaking the word of God with boldness. It’s that simple! It’s that powerful! It’s that profound! It’s that important! It’s that biblical!

Let me quote Hebrews 2:3-4 one more time; “3) how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, 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.” It’s our job to speak and tell the story of salvation, it’s God’s job to miraculously confirm the message and save lost people.

Stop separating God’s miraculous power from the spread of the gospel. They walk hand-in-hand through the New Testament. Stop being timid and ashamed of the gospel!

In Acts 1:8, Jesus connected the power of the Holy Spirit to the spread of the gospel. In Romans 1:16, Paul connected the gospel with the power of God. In 1 Corinthians 1:18, Paul again connected the word of the cross with the power of God. In 1 Corinthians 2:1-4 guess what happens? Paul again connects the gospel message to the power of God. I will resist the temptation to again connect Hebrews 2:1-4 to this discussion.

If you are zealous to see signs and wonders, start praying like the early Christians and ask God for boldness to speak the gospel. Then catch every wave God sends past you for sharing the gospel. Soon you will be surfing on the wake of the Supernatural just like the early church did in the book of Acts.

One Heart and Soul: Acts 4:32

“And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them.”

The wording of “one heart and soul” was an ancient expression of deep bonding, trust, and friendship. The old Hebrew definition of true friendship was “two bodies, one soul.” Even Aristotle when being asked what is a friend, answered; “it is one soul dwelling in two bodies.”

It can be concluded that the quality the ancients longed for in just one true platonic friendship the early Christians experienced. But in this verse, the ancient value of “two beings of one soul” was being stretched to an unfathomable level. It was present in the whole congregation of believers. Luke was treating this as “extraordinary!”

This phenomenon was so present and real among the early believers that Luke placed it in the category of the power of the Holy Spirit through the apostles in the very next verse. (Read Acts 4:32 and 33 together.) The expression of genuine agape love among the early Christians was indeed a validation of the “extraordinary” work of the Holy Spirit among them.

Jesus foretold this phenomenon in John 13:34-35; “34) A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. 35) By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.””

Paul also describes the phenomenon of an outpouring of agape love by the Holy Spirit in Romans 5:5; “and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.”

I can biblically make an argument that the spontaneous flow of genuine agape love from the indwelling Holy Spirit became one of the measuring sticks of true conversion in the early church. In fact, it became more important than the manifestation of sign gifts as the New Testament unfolds. This is exemplified by 1 Corinthians 13 being right in the center of Paul’s discussion of spiritual gifts. Agape love became his measuring stick of Christian maturity.

If you want to pursue this concept, take some time and study Philippians 1:9, Colossians 1:4, 1 Thessalonians 1:3, 2 Thessalonians 1:3; 1 Timothy 1:5 and 2 Peter 1:5-7. Add to this list the discussion of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-24 and Paul’s dialogue on agape love in 1 Corinthians 13 and this argument becomes very compelling.

But let’s get back to our context in the book of Acts. If you take time and carefully read Acts 2-4, Luke was very moved by this phenomenon of agape love and fellowship among the early Christians. He described it in Acts 2:42-47 and then returned to it again in Acts 4:32-37. He actually placed it on the level of signs and wonders in the early church. He treated being of “one heart and soul” as being truly miraculous!

If this level of agape love and fellowship is missing in your life or church, you have compelling reason to pray for revival and awakening. For some reason, you are out of step with God and the Holy Spirit.

The Focus of the Early Church: Acts 4:33

“And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all.”

This verse is worthy of careful study. Let me state the obvious; the “great power” was tied to the message of Jesus Christ and His resurrection. These two are intimately connected in this verse. But you ask; “Why the resurrection?” What makes it so important? Let me give a few brief insights:

First, it is the resurrection that separates Jesus Christ from every other world religious leader. Romans 1:4 tells us that Jesus Christ was declared to be the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead. In other words, the resurrection is the proof of His Deity. The founder of every other world religion is dead and decayed.

Second, it is the resurrection that validates the gospel message. This is what adds the punch to John 3:16-17; “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 did not leave His Son in the grave.

Third, it is the resurrection that highlights the mission of Jesus Christ to give life to those who believe in Him. Take a moment and review John 11:25-26; “(25) Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, (26) and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?”

Finally, it is the resurrection that seals Jesus Christ as the only way to God. This was the message of Peter and John in Acts 4:9-12 to the religious leaders. It might surprise some people, but there is only one way that leads to God and that is through Jesus Christ. The gospel is very exclusive.

No wonder the “great power” was directly tied to giving witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This should not surprise us. This is exactly what Jesus said in Acts 1:8. He clearly stated that the power of the Holy Spirit would be intimately tied to the spread of the gospel.

God’s grace and power always converge at validating the identity of Jesus Christ and spreading of the gospel. To the extent that Jesus Christ is left out of the message, the manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit diminishes and abundant grace evaporates.

I want to state the obvious one more time; healings, miracles, signs and wonders in the book of Acts and the New Testament were directly tied to lifting up Jesus Christ and the spread of the gospel. They were not an end in themselves.

The problem with powerless Christianity today is not a lack of faith, it is a lack of focus! Jesus Christ and the gospel are being displaced and obscured by all kinds of stuff. Hebrews 12:2 tells us to “fix our eyes on Jesus the author and perfecter of faith.” This verse has the cure for spiritual impotence today!

Agape-Based Christian Community: Acts 4:34-35

“34) For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales 35) and lay them at the apostles’ feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need.”

In the development of Christian community, agape love translated into action. It happened inwardly toward fellow believers and outwardly toward the world. In the process it dignified people. They quickly took on more value than monetary possessions.

It seems that the sale of excess lands and houses was voluntary and it may have been a fulfillment of the words of Jesus to the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:21. He turned away grieved because he was one who owned much property. He valued much property more than God or people.

It appears that this sense of agape-based Christian community emerged in opposition to the Jewish practice of exploiting people for personal profit. The Jewish business model would often gain wealth by charging excessive interest on loans while quickly seizing the property of widows, orphans, and the poor for lack of payment. The practice perpetuated poverty. Meanwhile, the Jewish merchants would exploit strangers and aliens visiting Jerusalem for festivals with excessive prices on everything. It can be assumed that Joseph and Mary paid a premium for their humble abode in the manger.

The tragic usury of Nehemiah 5:1-13 had become rampant within the Jewish nation again. As you read this shocking text, you discover it included the trafficking of the poor and needy. The rise of agape-based Christian community in the first century led to the eradication of slavery, human trafficking, forced prostitution for debt payment, and orphan exploitation.

A survey of the whole New Testament reveals that the early church stressed both caring for the poor and needy while at the same time stressing the development of a noble work ethic. James talked about faith taking action in the face of genuine needs. (James 2:14-26) Paul stressed dealing with exploiters and freeloaders by giving them a job so they could learn self-sustainability. (2 Thessalonians 3:7-13; Ephesians 4:28) It takes both sides of the coin for agape-based Christian community to thrive.

The development of agape-based Christian community also prepared the early church for coming persecution and suffering. This allowed the church to endure severe stretches of persecution and injustice. This is the biblical recipe for the suffering church. We need to learn how to provide and care for one another.

As the modern church debates how to deal with social injustice, the answer is right before our eyes. Things will not change until we as Christians return to the model of agape-based Christian community. Secular government and social welfare started as a biblical value, but they are not fueled by agape love. The world will never be able to replace the church.

The Son of Encouragement: Acts 4:36-37

“36) Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), 37) and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.”

Joseph, who went by the name Barnabas, was the real deal. He was a born-again Levite who came to faith in Jesus Christ through the gospel. The very translation of his name meant, “Son of Encouragement.” He went on to become a leader in the early church and was “sent out” to help the church in Antioch. (See Acts 11:22-26)

As to the significance of him selling a tract of land and laying it at the apostles feet, it appears that this showed that he was both sincere and single-minded in following Jesus. What he did

was voluntary and in response to the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit. He was a giver and not a taker. It proved that he was not motivated by greed or self-interest.

Later in Acts 11:24, he had the reputation of being “a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.” This brief mention in Acts 4:36-37 of him selling a tract of land displayed his single-minded devotion to live by faith. He was “all in” when it came to following Jesus.

The condition of many today is more like Ananias and Sapphira in the next paragraph. We want to present the picture of being “sold out” for Jesus, but the truth is that we are double-minded and inwardly embrace fleshly and worldly values. These two were motivated by greed and deception and not faith and truth. They wanted recognition and leadership bestowed on them but they were fakes and frauds. They were motivated by a false and twisted agenda.

By contrast, Barnabas was honest, sincere, and genuine. He wasn’t campaigning for recognition or self-promotion. He was following the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit. He was a humble servant of Jesus Christ. As his name indicated, he became a source of great encouragement to the early church. He was the man that embraced Saul and mentored him into ministry. (See Acts 9:26-30; Acts 11:25-26; Galatians 2:1) Barnabas was an effective disciple-maker.

I am motivated by leaders who are willing to sacrifice much to follow and serve Jesus. At some point the glamor of living by faith can wear thin. Barnabas most likely was not married and was free to follow Jesus with unusual freedom, flexibility, and abandonment. He was willing to work when needed to pay his own way in ministry. (1 Corinthians 9:4-7) It is no wonder that he was sent out with Paul by the Holy Spirit to carry the gospel to the regions beyond.

Reverence For God: Acts 5:1-11

“1) But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, 2) and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife’s full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles’ feet. 3) But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? 4) While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.” 5) And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it. 6) The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him. 7) Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8) And Peter responded to her, “Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?” And she said, “Yes, that was the price.” 9) Then Peter said to her, “Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out as well.” 10) And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. 11) And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things.”

This story is shocking! It stands in stark contrast to the story of Barnabas at the end of the previous chapter. They both voluntarily sold a piece of property and laid the proceeds at the apostles' feet. There seemed to be something about this public act that indicated total consecration to God.

But there was a problem with Ananias and Sapphira. They wanted the public honor and recognition of this act of consecration to God, but they were deceitful. Like Judas, they were secretly stealing from God. They made a pact to keep back a portion of the money for themselves. They were worse than double-minded, they were lying to both God and men! They practiced premeditated deceit, deception, and fraud.

When questioned by Peter, they boldly and outrightly lied about their actions. Peter made it clear that they were free to do whatever they wanted with their land and the proceeds, but they were not free to lie to God and treat Him as unholy. Their offense of lying to God was in the same category of the sons of Aaron who burned strange incense on the altar and Uzzah who reached out to stable the ark which was wrongly being transported on a cart. They were all met with instant death.

This biblical comparison may include a hint that Ananias and Sapphira were publicly saying they were being set aside for full time ministry. That was true of Barnabas in the previous chapter. It was also true of the sons of Aaron and Uzzah. James made it clear that teachers will be held to a higher standard. (James 3:1) If leaders have no integrity or reverence for God, there will be no moral restraint by the people.

God is holy and must be treated with fear and reverence. Peter addressed this theme in 1 Peter 1:14-19) He made it clear that addressing God as "Father" is no excuse for irreverence, because He impartially judges according to each man's work. To the contrary, those closest to God should have greater fear and reverence for God.

The conclusion to this story catches my attention; "13) And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things." The early church stood in awe of more than just the power of God. This event sent shock waves through the entire region. They quickly developed fear and reverence for the holiness and justice of God.

At some point our focus must shift from "what God does" to "who God is!" This event accelerated that vital shift in the early church.

Momentum Builds: Acts 5:12-16

"12) At the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people; and they were all with one accord in Solomon's portico. 13) But none of the rest dared to associate with them; however, the people held them in high esteem. 14) And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number, 15) to such an extent that they even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on cots and

pallets, so that when Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on any one of them. 16) Also the people from the cities in the vicinity of Jerusalem were coming together, bringing people who were sick or afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all being healed.”

Solomon's portico was a stone porch that ran the full length of the eastern side of the temple and was open to the court of the Gentiles. It made for a perfect stage for open air meetings facing the court. The stone wall of the temple on the inner side of the porch made for perfect acoustics for large crowds to hear the preaching and teaching of the apostles. This is where the crowd gathered to see the lame beggar and where Peter preached to the crowd. (See Acts 3:11)

The open court was large enough to accommodate several thousand people. This is where many tourists visiting the temple mount loitered about and where merchants tried selling their goods to the crowd. It was the hub of much activity and was not considered holy as the name “court of the Gentiles” implies. Activity there was not closely monitored by the religious leaders. It was for all people from any nation. Isn't that coincidental!

By default, this became the initial gathering place for the early believers. Throughout the day, the apostles would preach and minister to the crowds. There was usually a constant turnover of the crowd, but a phenomenon started taking place. It quickly became the destination of people seeking healing and listening to the gospel. Those who believed were most likely directed to home churches that were springing up throughout the city for teaching, fellowship, worship, prayer, and keeping the ordinances. (See Acts 2:42-47)

God was working in extraordinary ways through the Apostles. Many signs and wonders accompanied the preaching of the gospel. Like in the case of all awakenings, momentum was building day by day. This became the new attraction and destination of people visiting the temple. Multitudes of both men and women were added to the number of the believers.

The text seems to draw a contrast between two kinds of healings in verses 15-16. The first, described in verse 15, could be understood as relating to healings from natural causes. These were conditions stemming from such things as diseases, viruses, germs, bacteria, or injuries. Because Jesus is the Great Physician, these healings are well within His power, but not necessarily universal. God created the human body with a natural healing ability for many of these conditions.

The second were healings related to conditions caused by unclean spirits. The wording in verse 16 is unique. These healings extended to the sick “or” those afflicted by unclean spirits. (Vs 16) The wording indicates that all sickness or affliction caused by unclean spirits were healed. It was universal! It happened in every case. It should be noted that the body has no natural defense or healing ability against these afflictions. They will persist until the unclean spirit or spirits are dealt with.

This second category of healing is based on the fact that Jesus utterly destroyed and disarmed all the works of the devil and unclean spirits on the cross. (Colossians 2:13-15; 1 John 3:7-8)

They can be overcome, renounced, resisted, rebuked, and removed by the authority “in Christ” given to every believer.

There should be no exception to these healings because there is no exception to the defeat of Satan or his workers by Jesus Christ. This is a theological issue! Anyone who rejects this notion rejects the sufficiency of the cross. These conditions persist only because of ignorance or an unwillingness to recognize the enemy and take authority in the name, blood, and cross of Christ. (James 4:7)

Angelic Deliverance: Acts 5:17-20

“17) But the high priest rose up, along with all his associates (that is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with jealousy. 19) They laid hands on the apostles and put them in a public jail. 20) But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the gates of the prison, and taking them out he said, “Go, stand and speak to the people in the temple the whole message of this Life.””

When God is working in extraordinary and fruitful ways, it often sparks jealousy in some people. In this case, it was other religious leaders who became jealous. The result was that they “laid hands on the apostles and put them in public jail.”

Have you ever noticed how frequently biblical leaders spent time in jail? The trend started in the book of Genesis with Joseph and continues through the book of Revelation. The adversaries of the gospel can lock up God's people, but no prison is secure or strong enough to contain God.

Sometimes God sends an angel to open prison doors. Other times the prison leads to the gallows for God's choice servants. God is sovereign. He can be glorified by either deliverance or death. Every Apostle but John eventually died a martyr's death.

The text is not clear if there were a few of the apostles or all of the apostles gathered into the public jail, but God had big plans for them. An angel opened the prison doors and told them to go stand in the temple and preach to the people “the message of this life.” Angelic activity was common in the New Testament.

Stop for a moment and imagine the scene in these verses. They include a contrast between life and death. The apostles were offering the people new life in Jesus name while the high priests and his associates were threatening the apostles with death. The people were choosing the road that leads to life.

Upon hearing this, the apostles entered the temple about daybreak and began to teach. They had a commendable work ethic!

I can only imagine the stir of activity around the temple. Merchants were busy preparing their goods for the daily crowd. The Levites were putting their final touches on cleaning the temple

grounds. A few lower-ranking priests were changing the show bread and preparing the morning sacrifice. The crowds were already buzzing with chat about current events and the arrest of the Christian Leaders. The apostles were on duty and teaching about anyone who would listen about Jesus Christ and the gospel. Where was the chief priest and his associates? They were still in their bed chambers with soft pillows wrapped around their ears.

Answering the call to follow Jesus does not lead to a life of ease. To the contrary, there will be plenty of sleepless nights followed by early mornings. Give your best to the Master.

The Divine Script-Writer: Acts 5:17-26

“17) But the high priest rose up, along with all his associates (that is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with jealousy. 18) They laid hands on the apostles and put them in a public jail. 19) But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the gates of the prison, and taking them out he said, 20) “Go, stand and speak to the people in the temple the whole message of this Life.” 21) Upon hearing this, they entered into the temple about daybreak and began to teach. Now when the high priest and his associates came, they called the Council together, even all the Senate of the sons of Israel, and sent orders to the prison house for them to be brought. 22) But the officers who came did not find them in the prison; and they returned and reported back, 23) saying, “We found the prison house locked quite securely and the guards standing at the doors; but when we had opened up, we found no one inside.” 24) Now when the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them as to what would come of this. 25) But someone came and reported to them, “The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!” 26) Then the captain went along with the officers and proceeded to bring them back without violence (for they were afraid of the people, that they might be stoned).”

This is one of those amazing stories of deliverance in the book of Acts. It is similar to Acts 12:6-9 when an angel orchestrated the release of Peter, but not as many details are provided in this story.

It should be noted that more precautions were taken for Peter because he was sleeping between two soldiers. In the Acts 5:22-23, story the apostles were in a cell together with no soldiers in the cell. These guards developed a bad track record, but they tried learning from their mistakes. They lost the body of Jesus, now they lost the Apostles. Each time they double down their efforts. Do you suppose God was trying to get their attention?

We are left with speculation as to how the angel pulled off the Acts 5 deliverance. Did he open and close doors with a deep sleep coming upon the guards? Were they snatched away and translated to another location the way Phillip was in Acts 8:38-40? We have no answer.

What we do know is that God is sovereign and powerful. He can do whatever He wants, whenever He wants, wherever He wants, and however He wants! He does not need to explain

Himself. Very seldom does He do things the exact same way. He is creative and original in all of His ways. He writes the scripts and He is the movie director.

Every script sets the stage for us to advance the gospel, experience personal growth, and point people to God. Our role in the story is to listen to the Holy Spirit, obey His leading, and walk by faith. I am convinced that God is as active in our stories today as at any time of biblical history. What a joy to walk through life hand in hand with the Almighty.

Unstoppable: Acts 5:27-32

“27) When they had brought them, they stood them before the Council. The high priest questioned them, 28) saying, “We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.” 29) But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men. 30) The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross. 31) He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. 32) And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him.””

The religious leaders were not only jealous that God was working through the Apostles but had abandoned them, they were also trying to escape their responsibility of crucifying Jesus. Verse 28 says; “We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and behold, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.”

How quickly they had forgotten the words they incited the crowd to cry out before Pilate; “His blood be upon us and upon our children!” (Matthew 27:25) Peter and the apostles would have no part of it. They responded to them with shocking boldness.

First, they informed them that they intended to obey God rather than men. They had no respect for the high priest or his associates, the Sadducees. (See verse 17) He had forfeited his office when he led the charge to put Jesus to death. Peter informed him they were going to obey God rather than men. Peter charged them with the crucifixion of Jesus.

Second, Peter recounted the fact of the resurrection and credited it to the work of the God of their fathers. He went on to say that God had exalted Him to his right hand as Prince and Savior. This is a direct reference back to the words of Jesus as He was on trial before Caiaphas the high priest.

(Many people who visit Israel say they want to walk where Jesus walked, but almost all of Jerusalem has been built over many times. In most cases, the streets where Jesus walked have ten feet or more of something built on top of them. There is one place, however, where we are quite certain that we know Jesus' feet actually touched – and that is in the dungeon below the house of Caiaphas. Archeologists have carefully excavated this place and, although it is behind plexiglass panels, one can see and be very near to where Jesus was held prior to His death.) -dj

Let's review Matthew 26:63-66; "63) But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest said to Him, "I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God." 64) Jesus *said to him, "You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven." 65) Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has blasphemed! What further need do we have of witnesses? Behold, you have now heard the blasphemy; 66) what do you think?" They answered, "He deserves death!" Exactly what Jesus said had been fulfilled. Caiaphas did not stop it and because of the resurrection he could no longer deny it. The only group that remained loyal to him were the Sadducees who denied life after death or a resurrection. In a strange twist of events, Caiaphas was now the one being tried.

Third, Peter informed the religious leaders that because of the resurrection, Jesus now reigned as Prince and Savior at the right hand of God. He was in charge and He had fulfilled the plan of redemption for Israel. With repentance He was eager to grant forgiveness of sins. Jesus always fulfills His promises.

Finally, Peter informed Caiaphas and his council that the apostles were merely witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and so was the ministry of the Holy Spirit who had been given to those who obey Jesus. (See Vs 32) The many signs, wonders, healings and deliverances from unclean spirits validated the identity of Jesus Christ. The hand of God was at work doing all of these things.

It was no longer a task of stopping the twelve. There were now many thousand believers who were filled with the Holy Spirit and testifying on behalf of Jesus. The gospel was spreading like a wildfire in every direction and into surrounding countries. The visitors who had been in Jerusalem for Pentecost took the message back to their homes with them. An earth-shaking awakening was unfolding. It was unstoppable!

The Deadly Power of Jealousy and Rage

"17) But the high priest rose up, along with all his associates (that is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with jealousy... 33) But when they heard this, they were cut to the quick and intended to kill them."

I am taking a big step by tying two verses together. Notice that jealousy can feed anger, rage, and death. This text became predictable back in verse 17 when the high priest and his associates were filled with jealousy.

Listen to what James said about the subject; "14) But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. 15) This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. 16) For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing." James 3:14-16

I have seen many carnal meetings among believers reflect these verses. I have seen spouses driven by fits of jealousy and rage. Those led by the flesh cannot produce the fruit of the Spirit. The chief priest was out of control as were his associates. He was being demonically driven.

By contrast, the apostles were calm and calculated. They reflected the next two verses in James 3. Listen to these verses; “17) But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. 18) And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”

Beware lest jealousy takes root in your heart. It will drive you to terrible conclusions. Many incarcerated people are spending life in prison because of fits of jealousy and rage. If you have a jealousy and anger issue, you are in need of a personal encounter with Jesus Christ and His Spirit.

The Power of Obedience to God: Acts 4:18-20

“18) And when they had summoned them, they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. 19) But Peter and John answered and said to them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; 20) for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.””

“27) When they had brought them, they stood them before the Council. The high priest questioned them, 28) saying, “We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.” 29) But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men.” Acts 5:27-29

The comparison between the above two texts is astounding. The chief priest and the council continued with their threats. They had every intention of making good on them. The apostles were unmovable in their resolve to obey God rather than men. They had every intention to make good on their commission to reach the world with the gospel. What can we learn from comparing these two texts? I shall briefly touch on two points:

First, the chief priest and his council were not fighting against the apostles, they were fighting against God! Gamaliel warned them about this in the next paragraph. “38) So in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action is of men, it will be overthrown; 39) but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God.”” Acts 5:38-39

He started to recognize the finger of God. This movement was not of man. The Holy Spirit was at work. Beware that you never align yourself against God! It is a losing proposition.

Second, the apostles were letting God do the fighting for them while they focused on spreading the gospel. They simply obeyed God! The absolute best position we can take in life on any

issue is to obey God! This single act positions us under His Word, His authority, His power, His favor, His grace, His love, and His sovereignty. Instead of the apostles trying to defend God, He stepped up to defend them!

Every battle in life has these two sides. Those against God and those for God. Those according to the flesh and those according to the Spirit. Those aligned with darkness and those aligned with light. Those who oppose God and those who obey God. I confess, I have been on the wrong side of some battles. If you want to walk with God, learn the power of simple obedience!

Worthy to Suffer for Jesus: Acts 5:40-42

“40) They took his advice; and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and then released them. 41) So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name. 42) And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.”

What does it take to silence you? At what point do you shrink back from sharing the gospel or talking about Jesus? Do you fear ridicule, rejection, or public rebuke? All of these things can be numbing.

Though the council accepted the advice of Gamaliel not to slay the apostles, they nevertheless flogged them. This was a whipping of 39 lashes. It was meant for both pain and public shame. But it had an unexpected effect on the apostles.

They went their way rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for Jesus. The punishment poured fuel on their resolve and added credibility to their message. Instead of being a deterrent, it had the opposite effect. They experienced the fulfillment of 1 Peter 4:14. They were blessed because the Spirit of glory and of God rested upon them. It amounted to a fresh unction and anointing.

They undoubtedly remembered the words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:10-12 He spoke of the blessing on those who suffer for His sake. It is a tangible blessing unknown by cowards.

The chapter closes with them keeping their resolve to obey God rather than men. “42) And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.” They kept preaching Jesus both publicly and privately. They signed their resolve with their own blood.

There is no greater validation of the resurrection of Jesus than the fact that all of the apostles were martyred for their faith except John. He suffered and endured much for the cause of the gospel, but he died of natural causes accompanying old age.

The Dance: Acts 6:1-4

“1) Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. 2) So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. 3) Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. 4) But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

The gospel continued to be dynamic, it produced exponential numerical growth. The number of disciples was increasing very rapidly.

This automatically challenged their system of caring for growing needs. Sure enough, the Hellenistic Jews observed that their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. The complaint proved to be valid. It exposed a weakness in the organizational structure of the early church.

They were faced with two possible solutions. First, they could expand the job description of the twelve apostles. But they were already being stretched by taking care of the spiritual needs of the congregation. There was no end to the need for prayer, worship, teaching, and preaching. These values embodied the Great Commission to make disciples.

Second, they could create a new position and appoint godly men to care for the physical needs of the congregation. Ironically, this solution matched the model of having both priests and levites in the Old Testament. At some point both will be needed.

The whole congregation gave hearty approval to the second idea. Though I cannot say this established a congregational form of church government, I will observe that the apostles were servant leaders. They both listened to the people and communicated well in decision making.

Their suggestion was to select seven men of good reputation who were full of the Spirit and of wisdom whom they could put in charge of this task. They did not micromanage them. They turned the task over to them. Responsibility must come with decision-making authority.

Meanwhile, verse 4 is absolutely paramount. The apostles “devoted themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word.” They could not afford to neglect these two priorities.

They were getting bogged down with a lot of “stuff.” Granted, it was good “stuff”, but they were being stretched and distracted. They were becoming so busy “for God” they had no margins left to spend time “with God.” It was time for an urgent reset. They needed help!

I marvel at this chapter. Growing ministries require flexibility in expanding organizational structure. Momentum can be lost when the “God focus” is blurred. It can also be stifled when organization and structure becomes an end in itself.

The dance between fruitful ministry and effective organization can be challenging, but it is so marvelous when they glide across the floor in perfect step with each other. Gold metal dance partners are patient with each other and never stop learning, developing, and adding to their routine. The problem is that they make it look easy. It takes a long time to build a great dance.

Every effective church, ministry, and movement of necessity must pass through Acts Chapter Six. You cannot skip effective organization.

Moses and the children of Israel had to pass through this chapter. Every king in the Old Testament had to pass through this chapter with his administration. As the gospel spread to new regions as recorded in the New Testament, every local church had to master “the dance.”

I beg you not to skip over this chapter too quickly. No dance is exactly the same. The dance partners are different and the routine is constantly changing, but the dance can be glorious.

The Commissioning: Acts 6:5-6

“5) The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. 6) And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.”

Though the apostles were the spiritual leaders, the congregation had input into the direction of the ministry. The idea to open new positions of leadership came through the apostles, but it looks like the people approved of the idea and actually chose the seven prospects for the position.

I like the qualifications mentioned especially for Stephen; “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.” They picked well! They had high standards and high expectations. They wanted Spirit-filled men.

It is important to observe that they brought these seven men to the apostles for approval. They had the final say.

They first prayed. I believe they were praying for wisdom and discernment about these men. They prayed “about them” before they prayed “for them.” Jesus did the same thing before appointing the twelve. (See Luke 6:12-19)

Second, they laid hands on them. This was a formal commissioning for service. The church at Antioch did the same for Paul and Barnabas as they sent them on their first missionary journey. (Acts 13:1-3) I believe strongly in laying hands on and praying over those called for service.

Unfortunately, there was still a bad apple among them. Just as Jesus appointed Judas, so the apostles appointed Nicolas. He went on to start false teachings in the early church. Revelation 2:6 & 15 called it: “the deeds of the Nicolaitans” and “the teaching of the Nicolaitans.”

He basically promoted the idea that flesh and the spirit were separate and that sins of the flesh had no bearing on justification by faith. It resulted in an excuse for sensual, immoral, and indulgent living with no bearing on salvation.

His teaching did to the early church what the teaching of Balaam did to the children of Israel in the wilderness. In Revelation 2:6, Jesus said He hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans. His error nullified the call to holiness in the life of believers. Many were deceived and led astray by his false teachings.

This may be why Paul laid down strict qualifications for church leadership in writing to both Timothy and Titus. He was taking pains to prevent anyone like Judas or Nicolas from slipping into leadership. (See his warnings in Acts 20:29-30)

There Shall Be Thimbles of Blessing: Acts 6:7-8

“7) The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith. 8) And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.”

Ok, let's have a serious talk. If you want showers of blessing stop coming before God with tiny cups or thimbles! Look at the text!

Things continued to happen in Jerusalem. God's word was spreading, people were getting saved, the Holy Spirit continued to do great signs and wonders and the staff was expanding. They added the seven to help with the logistics which included property management, feeding programs, housing, and event scheduling. They were stretching to keep up with the blessings.

The early church leaders did whatever it took to accommodate what God was doing and anticipate future blessing. They were praying, seeking God, and working diligently.

Saint Augustine got it right when he said, “Pray as if it all depends on God; work as if it all depends on man.” We become co-laborers together with Christ. William Carry said; “Attempt great things for God, Expect great things from God.”

Some argue that the early church did lots of ministry but were not distracted by building programs. Yet there is a principle that runs through the entire Bible: Whenever God was working, He involved His people in building programs – and they were always very big.

It was true of Noah's ark. It was true under Joseph in Egypt. It was true for Moses and the tabernacle. It was true for David and Solomon and the first temple. It was also true of Ezra and Nehemiah and the second temple. It is also true of Jesus right now as He has gone to prepare a place for us! God seems to like building programs.

A work of faith is always God-sized and not man-sized. We often build for hundreds while the number system in the Bible is always in the thousands. When God is at work, it is always big! Our faith should be stretched just to keep up with what God is doing.

(He is the God of multiplication. He told Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply. He told Abraham his descendants would be "as numerous as the stars in the sky." Jesus fed thousands with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish. And, He told us we will do much more than that!) -dj

The early church initially met on the temple grounds and in multiple home groups for discipleship and teaching. They were creative and used every resource available.

With persecution, the church soon scattered around the world. As they did, they often met in local synagogues until they were kicked out. Eventually local church buildings began to spring up to accommodate the local congregations.

But there is a problem with buildings –they always define our vision in concrete, mortar, and walls. They define, shrink, and often quench what God desires to do. They become thimbles way too small for the rivers of blessing God wants to pour out.

I've seen God's blessings and anointing end because congregations had no faith to think and act big. God will only fill the size cup we lift up to Him.

I celebrate churches that start in school auditoriums, theaters, or huge shopping malls with unlimited space to expand. This is in keeping with what God asked Isaiah; "1) Thus says the Lord, Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where then is a house you could build for me? And where is a place that I may rest?" (Isaiah 66:1) Our building programs define our true view of God!

Have you ever looked at the numbers related to early church growth? In Acts 1:15, there were 120 persons. But then suddenly the Holy Spirit showed up and things changed drastically, rapidly, and continually.

In Acts 2:42, there were suddenly 3,120. In Acts 2:47 God was adding to their number daily those who were being saved. In Acts 4:4, the number of men came to be about 4,000. (They

were no longer counting women and children) Then here in Acts 6:7; “the number of disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.” Someone must have been counting.

So what did the early church leaders do? They got creative and used whatever facilities were needed and available to accommodate gatherings at many times throughout the day and week. They met day by day!

Churches make two mistakes today: They restrict God to time and space! It’s usually a few hours every Sunday morning in our little thimble-sized buildings. Then we wonder why God isn’t working in BIG ways! It’s because we’ve limited Him to our small thimble thinking.

Our faith is pathetically small – and that’s usually what we get! Don’t ask God for rivers of blessing while restricting Him to thimble-sized time and space. If you want to see God work in BIG ways, then throw away your pathetic little thimble thinking.

The Case Study of Stephen: Acts 6:8-10

“8) And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. 9) But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen. 10) But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.”

Though Stephen was not an apostle, the Holy Spirit worked through him in extraordinary ways. Some teach that the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit were restricted only to the twelve apostles. Stephen, Philip, Paul, and Barnabas more than invalidate that foolish notion. Supernatural manifestations of the Holy Spirit were rooted in the third person of the Trinity, and were not restricted to the human agents. (See 1 Corinthians 12:4-11). He has not changed.

Paul taught that the power of the Holy Spirit should accompany the preaching of the gospel, so that faith should not be anchored in the power of God. Carefully study 1 Corinthians 2:1-5. I am also captured by Galatians 3:2-5. The Holy Spirit was very active as the gospel spread among the Gentiles far beyond the reach of the apostles. Do not limit, quench, or muzzle the Spirit of God!

I value solid biblical doctrine, Hebrew, and Greek word studies, sound expository preaching, hermeneutical eloquence, good reason, rational discussions, and even bullet-proof apologetics, but they do not and cannot replace the power, presence, and anointing of the Holy Spirit as essential for good preaching and teaching! I have heard many good and rational sermons over the years that were absent of anointing by the Holy Spirit. I have even preached a share of them myself. I repent! There is no excuse for fleshly or powerless preaching or teaching. This has become the curse of the modern western church.

As was the case with Stephen, anointed preaching and teaching will face opposition. Preaching against sin and calling people to repentance and faith in God is not popular. When you study the messages preached in the early church, they resembled the words of the Old Testament prophets. They had substance! They called people to get right with God! They did not mince words. They were anointed by the Holy Spirit.

Stephen faced stiff opposition in Acts 6:9-10; “and yet they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.” He laid his life on the line rather than compromising the message. This courage and boldness planted seeds in Saul who was active in the background of this story. (Acts 8:1) . I suspect he may have been a leader in the group mentioned in Acts 6:9. After his conversion, he became the Apostle Paul, who in turn laid down his life to defend the gospel

Never mistake the filling and anointing of the Holy Spirit with shallow emotionalism. It is more measured by boldness, courage, and the grace to suffer for the sake of Jesus and the gospel. Stephen became the first case study of what it meant to be an ordinary disciple of Jesus Christ who was filled with the Holy Spirit!

Mob Mentality: Acts 6:10-15

“9) But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen. 10) But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. 11) Then they secretly induced men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.” 12) And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council. 13) They put forward false witnesses who said, “This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; 14) for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.” 15) And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.”

Because they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which Stephen was speaking, they resorted to subversion. They stirred up the crowd with lies, emotional hype, and hysteria.

Solomon made a profound observation in Proverbs 29:9 when he said; “When a wise man has a controversy with a foolish man, The foolish man either rages or laughs, and there is no rest.” The same has been true throughout human history. Facts, truth, logic, good science, reason and fair discussion are always trampled under foot by the wicked. Satan recognizes no rules. That’s how wickedness enslaves the masses.

The scheme against Stephen had but one goal: They wanted to stir up the people. They wanted to “spin a story.” Their goal was to start a riot. They wanted to destroy him. The religious leaders used this same ploy against Jesus. The subversive “Synagogue of the Freedmen” used this

ploy against Stephen in this text. In Acts 19:24-41, Demetrius the silversmith used this same tactic against Paul and the church in Ephesus.

Why is this important? Scripture exposes “mob mentality” as a demonically-driven scheme against the righteous. Many godly martyrs throughout history have died at the hands of “mob mentality.”

Mob mentality hears no reason, recognizes no truth, has no logic, plays by no rules, has no morals, and is void of common sense. It is fueled by the demonic realm.

By contrast, righteousness never resorts to mockery, belittlement, threats, emotional hype, deception, violent demonstrations, destruction, subversion, or the need to hire instigators. Does this tyranny sound familiar in our modern era? Stay tuned, there might be a biblical reason!

This battle between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness is seen throughout the whole Bible. But be forewarned, this frenzy of wickedness will be ramped up as we move deeper into the end times. Paul warned about the mystery of lawlessness in scriptures like 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12 and 2 Timothy 3:1-12. Both of these Scriptures relate to the end times. These things are happening right before our eyes.

Study the fate of Stephen in Acts 6:9-7:60. He was the first, but by no means the last Christian to suffer and die at the hands of “mob mentality”; or as Jesus called it in the book of Revelation; “the synagogue of Satan.” (See Revelation 2:9-10 and Revelation 3:9-10) They were by no means “the Synagogue of the Freeman.” They were mindless slaves. They were pawns in a much bigger and more lethal battle.

So, what can we do?

The Apostles got it right. They devoted more time and attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word! They focused on spreading the gospel, but they expected opposition. Jesus forewarned them that persecution would come! Spiritual warfare was a reality in the early church. It is growing exponentially today. Ignorance is not bliss. It is time to seek God earnestly and focus on spreading the Gospel!

Glowing For Jesus: Acts 6:15

“And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.” Acts 6:15

This verse stands out! Suffering for Jesus is an honor. The glory of God rested upon Stephen in his hour of trial and suffering and his face shined like that of an angel.

We must ask why the writer included this small observation in the text? I believe God wants His people to know they are never alone when they stand for Jesus and the gospel.

The face of Moses shined from being in the presence of God. (2 Corinthians 3:5-18) Paul stressed the point that the Holy Spirit changes the countenance of every true believer. If you are a true believer, please inform your face. Don't walk about looking like you were baptized in pickle juice.

The joy of the Lord is our strength. God wants us to radiate for Him. You cannot fake the presence of God in your life. His glory is especially radiant through those who suffer according to the will of God.

But Peter went further than Paul. Keep in mind, Peter was writing to the persecuted church. He talked about the Spirit of glory and of God that rests on those called to suffer as Christians. (See 1 Peter 4:14-16)

I cannot fully explain the significance of Acts 6:15, but this observation about the face of Stephen glowing like the face of an angel is important. The glory of God rests on those who suffer for Jesus!

As things in the world are getting darker and persecution is mounting, a glory through the true bride of Jesus Christ is shining brighter and brighter. These truly are glorious days!

Even the council noticed the glow on Stephen's face. Why was Luke able to record this point? He was not present. I believe some of those present were won over for Jesus because of the witness of Stephen. But it wasn't merely the words he shared that pierced them, it was also the glory of his countenance. His face was like the face of an angel.

Be honest with yourself! What do you look like? Are you glowing from focusing on Jesus or do you look like a dried up old raisin? Take your eyes off from yourself and this broken world and fix your eyes on Jesus!

Here is some wise counsel from a survivor of the Nazi Concentration camps. Corrie Ten Boom used to say:

"Look within and be depressed.
Look without and be repressed.
Look to Jesus and be impressed."

Stephen's Foundation: Acts 7:1-5

"1) The high priest said, 'Are these things so?' 2) And he said, 'Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, 3) and said to him, 'Leave your country and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you.' 4) Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, God had him move to this country in which you are now living. 5) But He

gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground, and yet, even when he had no child, He promised that He would give it to him as a possession, and to his descendants after him.”

At first glance, Stephen’s message looks long and rambling. But keep the charge against him in mind from Acts 6:13-14; “13) They put forward false witnesses who said, “This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; 14) for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.”” From his opening remarks, the defense of Stephen was masterful.

We quickly learn three things about Stephen from these opening verses. First, he was a man of the word. He knew the Old Testament well. This was an amazing accomplishment in his day since there were no printed Bibles. Scrolls were kept and read every week in the Synagogue. Ephesians 6:17 says the sword of the Spirit is the word of God. If you want to be mighty in faith and Spirit you need to be a man or woman of the word of God.

Second, Stephen possessed a biblical view of history. His world view was based on the Bible. It was built on the backdrop of supernaturalism. He saw God as the Creator and was keenly aware that He interacted in the affairs of mankind and guided the nation of Israel through the whole Old Testament. He saw God as active and not passive. He was far from being an atheist, naturalist, evolutionist, or mystic. If you want to be mighty in faith and Spirit you need a biblical worldview.

Third, Stephen pointed people to Jesus Christ. Keep in mind who Stephen was addressing. He was speaking to the Sanhedrin. What he did in these opening verses is profound. He went back and anchored his message in the Abrahamic Covenant.

According to Genesis 12:1-3, God promised Abraham three things. They were: 1) a land, 2) a seed of many offspring and 3) a blessing which would extend to all people on earth. This Covenant contains one of the earliest promises of the Messiah as a direct descendant of Abraham. From his opening remarks, Stephen pointed people to Jesus Christ. If you want to be mighty in faith and Spirit you need to point people to Jesus Christ.

I take the above three points seriously. They expose three tragic weaknesses in the modern church. Many Christians today are biblically illiterate, have no comprehensive biblical worldview and fail to focus on the supremacy of Jesus Christ. We have “faith” but we don’t know what we believe... or why. We are building a house without a foundation. The collapse of modern Christianity is inevitable.

Faith and God’s Timeline: Acts 7:2-5

“2) And he said, “Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, 3) and said to him, ‘Leave your country and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you.’ 4) Then he left the

land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, God had him move to this country in which you are now living. 5) But He gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground, and yet, even when he had no child, He promised that He would give it to him as a possession, and to his descendants after him.”

Stephen began his exposition by talking about the God of glory appearing to Abraham. At that time, Abrahams ancestry was tied to the land of Mesopotamia. It had become a wicked land full of idolatry and pagan religious practices. Nevertheless, according to the flesh that’s where Abraham’s earthly inheritance was located. It was the land of his forefathers. If he wanted to cash in on his inheritance, he had to stay in Mesopotamia and lay claim to what belonged to him according to the flesh.

But God called him to leave the land of his birth and follow Him. God gave him a promise that he would inherit a new land and have many offspring. But according to verse 5, there were two problems. First, he had no inheritance in this new land. He did not even own a foot of ground. Second, he had no children. Sarah was barren. The whole promise of a new land and a new way of life following the God of glory looked impossible.

Nevertheless, this was the starting point of the Judeo-Christian tradition and the ultimate birth of the Messiah. It was anchored in faith and the promise of God. That’s all Abraham had for a foundation. He left everything to follow God! He set his eyes on the promise.

Abraham was far from perfect, but his walk with God was real and sincere. He lived with God as His inheritance. God became His portion in this life. This is true of every man and woman who answers the call to walk with God. (See Lamentations 3:22-25)

Let me make an observation from the life of Abraham: If you want God to be your portion in this life, you need to leave your Mesopotamia behind, *whatever* that represents to you. You need to turn your back on sin and the pleasures of this world. A life of faith and following after God is very different from life in the flesh and embracing this world. You cannot have both at the same time.

But a life of faith includes delayed gratification. The full blessings of walking with God are not immediate. You will be living to establish a legacy for generations to come. Abraham never owned the land of promise. He lived as an alien in a foreign land. He even walked with God for many years before Isaac was born. His anchor was faith in the promise of God. He was establishing a legacy of faith for future generations.

The basic principle of faith started by Abraham is still the same for us today. We must leave our Mesopotamia and follow God and His promises. Faith in Jesus Christ must be personal, packed with obedience, somewhat radical, and set the direction for our life.

But let's be honest. There are discouraging times for all of us just as there were for Abraham. The promises look so far off and impossible. Some days it looks like evil is winning. Welcome to a life of faith!

Wait a minute. Let's hit the pause button and survey the timeline. Abraham left Mesopotamia based on a promise. God became his only portion in this life. And then one day, Isaac was born, 400 years in Egypt happened, the Exodus unfolded under Moses, the Law was given, the Promised land was entered, the Messiah was born, the crucifixion happened, Jesus was raised from the dead, He ascended into heaven, the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, the Gentiles embraced the good news, the Gospel is being preached to all nations, the antiChrist is trying to take over – but Jesus has a different plan!

Do you realize what you just read? That's a summary of Stephen's message. He was making the point that the timeline of history follows the Promises of God! He wanted them to see where they were on the timeline of God's promises lest they missed what God was doing.

The same is true for us today. We are right at the end of the earthly timeline! Peter argued in 2 Peter 3:9 that the Lord is not slow about His promises. Faith is finding our place on the timeline of God and embracing it wholeheartedly. From that perspective, these are exciting and amazing days!

The Foreknowledge of Abraham: Acts 7:6-8

"6) But God spoke to this effect, that his descendants would be aliens in a foreign land, and that they would be enslaved and mistreated for four hundred years. 7) 'And whatever nation to which they will be in bondage I Myself will judge,' said God, 'and after that they will come out and serve Me in this place.' 8) And He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs." Acts 7:6-8

In the last post I made the statement that history has followed the promises of God. Another way of looking at that is that history has been running on the tracks of biblical prophecy.

God revealed much to Abraham. He foreknew the 400 years of bondage in Egypt that awaited his descendants. His people were identified by the Covenant of circumcision. This pointed to circumcised hearts accomplished by the Holy Spirit.

But more important, Abraham had a foretaste of the gospel in Genesis 22 when God called him to offer up his son Isaac. In that text, God promised to provide for Himself the lamb for the sacrifice. (Vs 8; 14) It was a picture of Jesus and the crucifixion.

Abraham also understood the doctrine of justification by faith. He believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. This happened 430 years before the Law was given through Moses. (See Romans 4 and Galatians 3)

Stephen was laying the groundwork for the gospel. He was saying; “If you claim to be descendants of Abraham, then walk in the faith of Abraham.” Everything God promised to Abraham either has been fulfilled in history or is being fulfilled in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. Don’t miss the Gospel. Abraham had foreknowledge of these things.

The Patriarchs and the Sanhedrin: Acts 7:9-16

“9) The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt. Yet God was with him, 10) and rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he made him governor over Egypt and all his household. 11) “Now a famine came over all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction with it, and our fathers could find no food. 12) But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers there the first time. 13) On the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family was disclosed to Pharaoh. 14) Then Joseph sent word and invited Jacob his father and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five persons in all. 15) And Jacob went down to Egypt and there he and our fathers died. 16) From there they were removed to Shechem and laid in the tomb which Abraham had purchased for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.”

The inclusion of Joseph in the message of Stephen to the Sanhedrin served two purposes. First, Joseph was a “type of Christ” in the Old Testament. He was hated by his ten brothers and because of jealousy they sold him as a slave into Egypt. In a sense, they put him to death.

Yet Joseph became as-it-were a prince and a savior to them. God had favor on him, rescued him from his afflictions and made him Governor over the land of Egypt. This served as a picture of the resurrection. He ended up saving his people from the famine.

Second, the Sanhedrin were filling the shoes of the ten brothers of Joseph. Because of jealousy, they united against Jesus Christ and had Him crucified. They rejected and killed the Messiah. Can you see the analogy?

In Genesis 37:8, after Joseph related his dream to his brothers, they responded; “8) Are you actually going to reign over us? Or are you going to rule over us? So they hated him even more for his dream and for his words.” The chief priests and elders of the people took the same stance against Jesus.

As Stephen was sharing this part of his message, God was as ready pointing His finger at the religious leaders. They were being exposed. They were guilty of an even greater crime than the ten patriarchs (brothers of Joseph). The Sanhedrin (the religious leaders of the Jews) had crucified the Messiah, but God had favor on Him and raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

When the Holy Spirit convicts you of sin, it can be intensely personal and very direct. You can either humble yourself and repent or you can harden your heart and resist God. The religious

leaders rejected the gospel and opted to harden their hearts and resist the Holy Spirit. (See Acts 7:51)

I believe this message was a pivotal point for Israel and human history. There is a reason why God devoted Acts 6-7 to this message from Stephen. The chief priests, elders of the people and in a sense the entire nation of Israel were being put on trial.

From the onset of this message, the error of their actions in rejecting the Messiah was obvious. We are going to discover that the condemnation heaped upon them by the end of this message grows even greater.

It is impossible to second-guess the Providence of God, but how different history would have unfolded had they humbled themselves, repented and embraced the Messiah.

The acceptance of the Messiah by Israel is one of the crucial factors in the second return of Jesus Christ to set up His earthly Kingdom. (Isaiah 60-65; Romans 11) What if they had repented and embraced Jesus Christ as their Messiah at the conclusion of Stephen's message? We can only speculate.

In Stephen's message, the full gospel was clearly laid out before them. Old Testament prophecy was developed in high definition right before their eyes. In this pivotal chapter, Stephen was calling for a verdict.

Tragically, they again rejected the grace of God and the Gospel. Here is an astounding observation; this is the last time the Sanhedrin is mentioned in the Bible. They sealed their own doom. They became irrelevant and were cast aside by God.

What happened next in the book of Acts? Don't miss this, because it explains the rest of the New Testament and the past 2,000 years of history. Are you ready?

Their rejection of the Messiah turned the focus from Israel and opened the doors of the gospel to the Gentiles. The transition from Israel to the Gentiles starts immediately with the next chapter in the book of Acts.

There is so much more to Acts Chapter Seven and the message of Stephen than a casual reading can reveal. I believe the mantle of authority was forfeited by the Sanhedrin in Acts Chapter Seven and transferred to the Apostles by the time of the Jerusalem Council in Acts Chapter Fifteen.

From this point onward, a new system of structure and authority takes over in the Bible. Jesus Christ begins reigning as head over His Church. The living mystery of the body and bride of Christ comes alive through His Spirit.

Understanding this transition of authority is vital in comprehending the current administration of God in the world. The book of Hebrews was written to color in this transition. Resist the temptation to skip quickly over this pivotal chapter in the Bible.

The Time of the Promise: Acts 7:17-18

“(17) But as the time of the promise was approaching which God had assured to Abraham, the people increased and multiplied in Egypt, 18) until there arose another king over Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph.”

History follows the promises of God. Just as God foretold to Abraham, the people went down to Egypt and there multiplied greatly. They were there for four hundred years.

But as the time of the promise was approaching, every piece of the puzzle started falling in place. A new king rose up over Egypt. He knew nothing of Joseph. He totally mistreated, enslaved, and exploited the Hebrew people. Favor turned into hardship. He even plotted the death of the male children.

But God was in control. His greater plan was unfolding. His timing was perfect. Moses was born and the details of the Exodus started falling in place. The whole life of Moses was part of the story, including his brief exile.

Faith includes lining our life up with the next big promise of God. History has moved from promise to promise. The future will unfold from promise to promise.

The question we must wrestle with relates to where we are on God's timeline? What pieces are coming together in our day to align the world with the next big promise of God? What smaller events have to come together for the next big promise to happen?

Many generations of people in history lived on the verge of the next big promise of God being fulfilled. Israel in Egypt was such a generation. Palestine during the birth, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ was such a generation. It included the Promise of the Father in giving the Holy Spirit. (Acts 1:4-5) Centuries often pass between the big promises of God. Time appears to stand still for many generations. And then... the time for the next big promise arrives.

From our place on the timeline, the next big promise of God relates to the second coming of Christ. According to Matthew 24-25 and other New Testament prophecies, many smaller events will happen rapidly in preparation for the next big promise to be fulfilled.

In this respect, Acts 7:17 again becomes important. The time of another big promise of God is upon the world. The pieces are coming together rapidly in our day to bring about the next big promise of God. Jesus is coming soon. The birth pangs are right on time.

I encourage you to align your life and faith with the next big promise of God. We are the generation that will see the world evangelized, the antiChrist deceive the nations, a one world government take shape, and many signs of the time fulfilled. Rather than living in denial, embrace this very unique and exciting time in world history. Wrap yourself for the glory of God around the times in which we are now living!

Opposition to Moses: Acts 7:20-29

“20) It was at this time that Moses was born; and he was lovely in the sight of God, and he was nurtured three months in his father’s home. 21) And after he had been set outside, Pharaoh’s daughter took him away and nurtured him as her own son. 22) Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds. 23) But when he was approaching the age of forty, it entered his mind to visit his brethren, the sons of Israel. 24) And when he saw one of them being treated unjustly, he defended him and took vengeance for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian. 25) And he supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand. 26) On the following day he appeared to them as they were fighting together, and he tried to reconcile them in peace, saying, ‘Men, you are brethren, why do you injure one another?’ 27) But the one who was injuring his neighbor pushed him away, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and judge over us? 28) You do not mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday, do you?’ 29) At this remark, Moses fled and became an alien in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons.”

The example of Moses requires more than one part. His example makes up the bulk of Stephen’s message. There is much to learn from the story of Moses.

The example of Moses starts with the observation that; “it was at that time.” (Verse 20) This lines up with verse 17 that said; “But as the time of the promise was approaching.” The Bible screams that God is in control of the times. The same is true today. It is also true in your life and my life.

Moses became the next example that Stephen used as an illustration in his message. Though God worked through him in extraordinary ways, he was constantly rejected, resisted, and opposed by the Jewish people. This was true in every stage of his life.

Again, we discover that the people as a whole were out of step with the plan and purpose of God. They rejected Moses and resisted God’s plan. During the first 80 years of his life, even Moses was out of step with God. It never surprises me who God might raise up to accomplish His will in the world.

Yet, when the story of the Exodus is studied carefully, Israel eventually left Egypt on the exact day to fulfill the promise and the prophecies. God is always in control no matter the human opposition or rejection. He is right on time!

Again, the story of Moses was used by Stephen as evidence against the Sanhedrin. The Jewish leaders and the people were opposed to Moses just as the rulers of the people opposed Jesus.

In the end, it was God and not Moses or the people who got the credit. God is not hindered by human opposition or rejection to fulfill His plan and will in the world. God raises up unlikely and the least expected people to carry out His plans in the world. He worked through Pharaoh nearly as much as He did through Moses. God is Sovereign and in control even when we do not understand what is happening in the world.

I am becoming more cautious and much slower on passing judgment on events and people or hold dogmatic views of how the end times will unfold. But one thing I know for sure, God is always at work whether it makes sense to me or not. We are called to walk by faith and not by sight.

Usually things do not add up when viewed through natural eyes. The children of Israel had concluded after 400 years of slavery that either the God of their forefathers had forgotten about them or that He did not exist. They were as unbelieving and hard-hearted as the Egyptians.

Not much has changed in the affairs of mankind. I suspect as the end times unfold, much of the church will be as out of step with God as the rulers of the Jews were during the birth, life, ministry, and crucifixion of the Messiah. It happens to every generation as the times and promises of God unfold in the world. Apostasy or “falling away” is upon us. (2 Timothy 2:3-4; 1 Timothy 4:1-3)

A New Life Formula: Acts 7:30-34

““30) After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in the flame of a burning thorn bush. 31) When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he approached to look more closely, there came the voice of the Lord: 32) ‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.’ Moses shook with fear and would not venture to look. 33) But the Lord said to him, ‘Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. 34) I have certainly seen the oppression of My people in Egypt and have heard their groans, and I have come down to rescue them; come now, and I will send you to Egypt.’”

After his rejection and flight from Egypt, Moses spent forty years as an alien in the land of Midian. Instead of leading people he spent his time tending sheep. It looked like the prime years of his life were wasted.

But again notice how verse 30 starts; “and after forty years had passed.” Timing was important. God had to work deeply in Moses before He could work greatly through Moses. God often uses adversity as bootcamp to mold and shape us for a meeting with divine destiny for our lives.

It was at the end of this time that Moses had a personal encounter with God. The burning bush was used to get his attention. It was there that God appeared to Him. This Divine encounter was the pivotal point in the life of Moses. He was changed into a new man. God became his portion and passion in life moving forward.

God was the missing factor in the life of Moses up to that point. No equation that leaves God out has sufficient means to accomplish anything extraordinary. That includes our formula to understand the origins of the universe, the origins of the laws of physics, the origins of life, and the meaning of human history.

Apart from God as the main factor, the equations do not compute. Billions of years of random chance does not have the power needed to pull off the origin and complexity of the universe. An intelligent designer must be added to the equation.

The same is true when seeking to embrace the meaning and purpose of life. Your life and my life will be ordinary and mundane until we encounter God and make Him the central factor of our life equation. Moses apart from God could not have engineered or pulled off the Exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt. It cannot be explained apart from Divine intervention.

God and not Moses was the central factor in the equation of the Exodus. The difference between an average or mundane life and an extraordinary life comes down to making God and not self the central focus. The same is true for a church, business, organization, or ministry.

When God becomes the central focus, then God-sized things begin to happen! That is the primary story of the book of Acts. When you deny the miraculous, you exclude the Divine. When God becomes your focus then miraculous things begin to happen. This was the difference between the Sanhedrin and the Apostles. It is possible to have religion void of God. The results are pathetic.

When timing and Divine Destiny converge, miraculous things begin to happen. It cannot be otherwise. The fingerprints of God are always extraordinary. The fingerprints of self or the flesh are always ordinary and mundane.

When Moses encountered God everything changed in his life. The same happens to every person who invites Jesus Christ into their life. The Holy Spirit begins to transform them, empower them and start working through them. The key is making Jesus Christ and His Spirit the new central factor in your life.

Dancing with the Devil: Acts 7:35-43

““(35) This Moses whom they disowned, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’ is the one whom God sent to be both a ruler and a deliverer with the help of the angel who appeared to him in the thorn bush. 36) This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness for forty years. This is the Moses who said to

the sons of Israel, 'God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren.' 37) This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness together with the angel who was speaking to him on Mount Sinai, and who was with our fathers; and he received living oracles to pass on to you. 39) Our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him, but repudiated him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt, 40) saying to Aaron, 'Make for us gods who will go before us; for this Moses who led us out of the land of Egypt—we do not know what happened to him.' 41) At that time they made a calf and brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. 42) But God turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, 'It was not to Me that you offered victims and sacrifices forty years in the wilderness, was it, O house of Israel? 43) You also took along the tabernacle of Moloch and the star of the god Rompha, the images which you made to worship. I also will remove you beyond Babylon.'" Acts 7:35-43

Truth can be painful. The Sanhedrin prided themselves in following in the steps of their fathers. Stephen pointed out that they were right, and that their fathers rejected both Moses and God. They were stubborn and obstinate.

Despite all the wonders and signs that God performed through Moses, they still rejected him and repudiated him in their hearts. They quickly made a golden calf and worshiped other gods. Their fathers treated Moses the same way these religious leaders treated the Messiah. They rejected and crucified the one God had sent.

It is at this point in the defense of Stephen that he turns the tables. He puts the Sanhedrin and the religious leaders on trial. He points out their guilt and sin. There were only two possible responses. They could respond with remorse or resentment. They could repent or retaliate.

The same is true today. The word of God always exposes sin and rebellion and calls for repentance. God's Word does not tickle ears, it tries the hearts of men and women.

Keep in mind, Stephen was addressing the religious leaders. He was calling them to get right with God. The same needs to happen in countless apostate churches today. This text screams that it is possible to be religious but lost. It is possible to give lip service to God while living in the flesh and dancing with the devil.

False gods and Fleshly Distractions: Acts 7:41-43

"41) At that time they made a calf and brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. 42) But God turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, 'It was not to Me that you offered victims and sacrifices forty years in the wilderness, was it, O house of Israel? 43) You also took along the tabernacle of Moloch and the star of the god Rompha, the images which you made to worship. I also will remove you beyond Babylon.'" Acts 7:41-43

With everything God did through Moses in signs and wonders in Egypt and during the Exodus, many of the people still served other gods. They made the golden calf and took along the tabernacle of Moloch and the star of Rompha. Their hearts were divided. They did not repent so as to seek God with a whole heart.

What happened? How did God respond? He turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven. He let them chase their own passions and spiritual deception. They forfeited fellowship with the one and only God. They filled their lives with empty and futile things.

We expect God's judgment to be immediate wrath like the fire and brimstone He reigned down on Sodom and Gomorrah. But that's not how He usually works. According to Romans 1:18-22, He just stands back and turns people and nations over to the consequences of their own actions and to seek their own passions. The inner void of man is filled with human depravity rather than God. Fellowship with God is cut off. Their lives are eaten up by vanity and futility.

Such was the condition of Israel during the time of Jesus. They had a form of religion but it was void of God. The people were empty, lost, sick, manipulated, oppressed by evil spirits and in bondage to sin. Jesus filled the void and offered living water, but the leaders rejected Him. They were walking in the footsteps of their forefathers.

It is not people who forsake God and hold Him at a distance, it is God who turns away and abandons people to vanity. He turns them over to the lusts of their own hearts.

God has made a way for us to have intimate fellowship and relationship with Him through Jesus Christ, but He does not force Himself upon any. God does not suffer from rejection nor does He have an identity crisis. He does not need us, we need Him! He leaves us to decide between Him and everything else. God doesn't get in a funk when people reject Him. He really doesn't need us, but He invites us into relationship with Himself.

We live with a man-centered view of reality. We assume the world revolves around us. But the universe is not man-centered, it is God-centered. He is Creator, Sustainer, and measure of all things. He is eternal while we are like a momentary blade of grass or wilting flower. We are very temporary.

The highest purpose in this life is finding true relationship with Creator God. But it must be on His terms and not ours. Mankind throughout history has been inventing gods according to fleshly passions. There are many distractions. But the true God has revealed Himself in His only begotten Son. He is not far off or hard to find. He has given us the Bible so that we might find Him.

What is displacing God in your life? What is your golden calf? To what god have you built a tabernacle in your heart? How long will you hold God at arm's length?

A House Way Too Small: Acts 7:48-50

“48) However, the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands; as the prophet says: 49) ‘Heaven is My throne, And earth is the footstool of My feet; What kind of house will you build for Me?’ says the Lord, ‘Or what place is there for My repose? 50) Was it not My hand which made all these things?’”

Moses made the tabernacle in the wilderness and it was with Israel for a long time. David found favor with God and sought to build Him a house. Solomon actually built the temple.

But there was one problem: No house made with human hands can contain God. Isaiah 66:1-2, as quoted in this text, captures the problem. Heaven is God's throne and the earth is but His footstool. He created the universe, but it cannot contain Him.

I just walked outside and looked into the expanse of the night sky. I could only see what was visible from the small perch of my doorstep with my naked eye. It put these verses into perspective. The realization of my minute size, perspective, knowledge, and understanding overwhelmed me. Just for fun, look up the literal definition of the word “minute.” It will help punctuate the problem.

People are forever trying to stuff God into boxes of their own making. Moses tried it. David tried it. Solomon tried it. The religious leaders in the days of Jesus tried it. What was the problem? The Son of God did not fit in their small boxes. So rather than smashing their tiny boxes, they crucified the Savior.

Beware, many today are doing the same thing. We limit God rather than begging Him to stretch us. God's word is exceedingly broad. It defines truth, righteousness, and holiness and points to God. It opens the door of salvation and paves the way for an unfathomable walk with God in the Spirit, but it leaves God in control.

He is sovereign, providential, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, holy, and just, filled with love, mercy, and truth, and ruler of all things. He is Creator, sustainer, owner, possessor of heaven and earth, and He is the Eternal Judge.

As Creator, He is bigger than what He created. He is beyond science, physics, theology, philosophy, and history. He has neither beginning nor end. Heaven is His throne and the earth is His footstool. Yet through His Spirit He dwells in every born-again and Spirit-filled believer.

Welcome to the four gospels and the book of Acts. The New Testament is the beginning of the box-shattering portion of the Bible. In these books we encounter the God of signs and wonders.

People ask me all the time if God still does miracles today? My response is “stop putting God in a box!” God is still God! He has not changed. The tabernacle could not contain Him. The

temple couldn't contain Him. The earth cannot contain Him. Heaven itself can not contain Him. Why do you think the little box of your limited perspective and understanding can contain Him?

I like the way Isaiah 66:2 reads; "For My hand made all these things, Thus all these things came into being," declares the Lord. "But to this one I will look, To him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word."

I want to be among that number. I seek to be humble and contrite of spirit and tremble at His Word. I beg Him to smash my tiny box as He reveals His surpassing glory and majesty to me through His Spirit and His word. I am but a speck of clay. He is the potter. "Mold me and make me!" is what I pray.

The Sanhedrin Exposed: Acts 7:51-53

""51) You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. 52) Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; 53) you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it.""

In these three verses, Stephen drives the nail home. He points out that the Sanhedrin was on the wrong side of history. They lined up with the Old Testament actors who constantly opposed God.

They followed those who resisted the Spirit, persecuted the prophets and killed those who prophesied about the coming work of Christ. They betrayed and killed the Messiah. They gave lip service to the Law where it empowered them, but they did not keep it. They used it to exploit and control people.

Beware who you follow as spiritual leaders. Some churches and denominations may be anchored in noble historical movements but have long since turned from God. Look at the now. Be a good fruit inspector. If it is not real and sincere, anchored in biblical truth, focused on Jesus Christ, filled with faith and the Holy Spirit, then turn and depart quickly.

Stephen was not about to yield to the Sanhedrin, instead he opted to expose them. They were aligned against God. They were opposed to the truth. When confronted, their true temperament came out. They were messengers of death.

The Vision: Acts 7:54-56

"54) Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him. 55) But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; 56) and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.""

A stark contrast takes place in these few verses. The Sanhedrin were filled with deadly rage while Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit. The flesh and the Spirit are always in opposition to one another. This might be the most poignant fulfillment of James 3:13-18 found in the whole Bible. The response of the religious leaders was earthly, natural and demonic, while Stephen was pure, peaceable and gentle.

But one more thing happens in this text that is worthy of special attention: Stephen, being filled with the Holy Spirit had a heavenly vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “56) and he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” With this revelation, they cried out and covered their ears as they rushed on him with deadly rage. Does this sound familiar?

I take you back several months earlier when Jesus was standing before the same religious leaders. In Matthew 26:63-64, the high priest looked at Jesus and said; “I adjure you by the living God, that you tell us whether you are the Christ, the Son of God.” Listen carefully to His response; “64) Jesus *said to him, “You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.”” With His response, the high priest tore his robes and accused Him of blasphemy. He concluded that Jesus was worthy of death.

We see one notable difference between the statement of Jesus and the revelation of Stephen. Jesus said the high priest would see Him “seated at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of Heaven.” But Stephen said; “Behold, I see the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” Why the difference in posture between seated and standing?

There may be several insightful answers, but certainly Jesus was not about to take the death of one of His choice servants sitting down! He was standing and at full attention.

But there is a second reason. Revelation 14:14-20 pictures the earth being reaped and the ungodly being thrown into the great winepress of the wrath of God. As you look carefully at verses 14-16, it says three times that one like the son of man was seated on the clouds. This is the way Jesus told the high priest that he would see the Son of Man.

Jesus was standing before the Father as an advocate for Stephen. He will be seated on a cloud as the judge of the ungodly when He returns at His second coming. The high priest and the Sanhedrin are neither judge nor jury. That seat is reserved for Jesus Christ.

I believe the Holy Spirit was delivering an important reminder to the Sanhedrin through Stephen with this revelation. The vision punctuated the Deity of Christ! This was the second time they received the same message when putting the innocent on trial. They condemned both Jesus and Stephen to death. But they are facing eternal condemnation before the very Messiah they murdered. He is “seated” in the Eternal Judgement Seat.

The First Martyr: Acts 7:57-60

“57) But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. 58) When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59) They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” 60) Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” Having said this, he fell asleep.”

The mob mentality came upon the Sanhedrin. They rushed upon Stephen with one impulse and drove him out of the city and began stoning him. This time they did not have the Roman soldiers do their dirty work. The Sanhedrin itself murdered Stephen. John 10:10 says; “The thief comes only to steal, kill and destroy.”

It is with this text that we meet Saul for the first time. The witnesses who accused Stephen of blasphemy laid aside their robes at the feet of Saul. He was overseeing the stoning. He launched a deadly persecution against the fledgling church.

As he was being stoned, Stephen cried out to the Lord and begged Him not to hold this charge against his murderers. Jesus uttered similar words from the cross.

I believe Stephen released the forgiving grace that eventually led to the salvation of Saul. Jesus personally recruited Saul. He poured his grace out upon him so richly that he ultimately became the Apostle Paul.

We need to grant people the same forgiveness and grace that leads to salvation. According to 2 Corinthians 2:6-11, Satan’s schemes are rooted in bitterness.

There are many things to learn from the stoning of Stephen. He became the first Christian martyr. His sacrifice fueled the spread of the gospel in the early church. His death was not wasted. He set the pattern for martyrdom captured in Foxe’s Book of Martyrs. If you have never read this history of the early church, add it to your reading plan.

The Great Scattering: Acts 8:1-4

“1) Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2) Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him. 3) But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison. 4) Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word.”

The stoning of Stephen marked a distinct change in the book of Acts and the early church. It was the beginning of an intense persecution led by Saul. He was ravaging the church. He would

enter house after house and drag off both men and women and put them in prison. Little did he know that he would one day be destined for the same for the sake of the gospel.

But God is always in control and fulfills His ultimate purpose. Acts 1-7 could be called “The Great Gathering.” (See Acts 1:4). Acts 8- to the end of the book of Acts could be called “The Great Scattering.” (See Acts 8:1)

Suddenly, the gospel was carried beyond Jerusalem to the regions of Judea and Samaria. This was not coincidental. It brought the fulfillment of Acts 1:8. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit was going to fill the believers with power so they could carry the gospel to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and even to the remotest parts of the earth.

God used this persecution to spread the gospel. I believe He always uses adversity and trials to spread the gospel. He wants to shine through our blessings and through our trials. He wants us to be salt and light in the world.

The book of Acts is only a small glimpse of what God was doing in and through the early church. The fuller story is amazing. Let’s quickly survey the other Apostles not highlighted in the book of Acts or the New Testament.

Andrew brought the gospel to “the land of the man eaters” which was the former Soviet Union. He also preached in Asia Minor, modern day Turkey, and Greece where he was martyred.

Thomas was active throughout Syria. He carried the gospel as far as India, where he was martyred. I have visited his final humble dwelling place on this earth.

Philip had most of his ministry in Carthage in North Africa and Asia Minor. There he helped convert the wife of a Roman proconsul. Retaliation resulted in his arrest and cruel martyrdom.

Church history has Bartholomew accompany Thomas to India and then back to Armenia, Ethiopia, and southern Arabia where he was finally put to death for the gospel.

Matthew ministered in Persia and Ethiopia. There are mixed stories of his death. Some say he was beheaded and others report he was viciously stabbed to death.

James was the first Apostle martyred as recorded in Acts 12:1-3.

Simon the Zealot ministered in Persia. He was killed for refusing to sacrifice to the sun god.

Matthias, who replaced Judas as one of the twelve, ministered in Syria with Andrew. As Andrew moved north, he remained behind where he eventually met death by burning.

John was the only Apostle to likely die a natural death. He was the church leader in the Ephesus area where he took care of Mary the mother of Jesus. During later church persecution

he was arrested and exiled to the prison island of Patmos where he wrote the book of Revelation. Some records have him later released and living with the underground believers in the catacombs of Rome and dying there of old age. One Latin tradition has him dying by being cast into boiling oil. (Another story says Roman emperor Domitian commanded that John be boiled to death in oil, but John continued to preach from within the pot and survived.) -dj

Unfortunately, only Paul was accompanied by a secretary and recorder. Luke traveled with him and being an historian he captured much of his story. Rightly so, because God used Paul to write much of the New Testament. Paul was eventually martyred in Rome. Peter was eventually crucified upside down.

I maintain a book similar to the Acts of the Apostles could have been written to record the lives and ministries of each of the Apostles and men like Philip. The Pilgrim Church throughout history had equally compelling stories of mighty movements of the Holy Spirit. Many godly men and women have lived and died for the glory of God realizing their citizenship was in heaven. (See Philippians 3:20-21)

Having the rare privilege of traveling internationally in the body of Christ, I realize that God is doing many glorious things in our days as well. Some of the greatest stories of faith, the power of the Holy Spirit, signs and wonders, as well as great suffering and martyrdom are unfolding today. In fact, these days may be eclipsing all of church history.

If your Christian life is consumed with boredom and the mundane, I beg you stop embracing the comforts of this world and seek God with fresh faith and abandonment. Throw yourself, your prayers, and your resources at the front lines where the needs are greatest and where God is working most. Store up treasures in heaven.

The glory, power, and presence of God are not poured out on worldly saints who are content sitting in a recliner, gorging on junk food while surfing the web and addicted to romance novels and pornography. God's presence does not overshadow the Sunday morning church that is embracing and drooling over woke culture.

Also, I don't expect a mighty movement of God in any church that teaches that God does not do miracles today or that the Holy Spirit can no longer empower believers with spiritual gifts. Such rational and fleshly theology might tickle your intellect, but it is void of the Spirit and power. (See 1 Corinthians 2:1-5)

If you yearn for Book of Acts kind of stories, then develop Book of Acts kind of faith and obedience. Seek Jesus on His terms and not your own. Study the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the Bible and seek Him to fill and empower your life. Then step out and watch God start moving mountains and the enemy start viewing you as a threat. Be a World-Changer in the hands of a mighty God!

Philip in Samaria: Acts 8:4-8

“4) Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word. 5) Philip went down to the city of Samaria and began proclaiming Christ to them. 6) The crowds with one accord were giving attention to what was said by Philip, as they heard and saw the signs which he was performing. 7) For in the case of many who had unclean spirits, they were coming out of them shouting with a loud voice; and many who had been paralyzed and lame were healed. 8) So there was much rejoicing in that city.”

As the Great Scattering happened because of the persecution launched by Saul, Phillip went down to Samaria and began preaching Christ to them. There are four important points in these verses.

First, we discover that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem extends into Samaria. Salvation through faith in Jesus Christ begins to extend to the Gentiles. But there's more.

Philip was one of the seven put forward by the congregation in Acts 6:6-7. Stephen was also among this number. Both of these men were full of the Holy Spirit and had extraordinary signs accompanying their ministry. Compare Acts 6:8 and Acts 8:6-7. Luke actually devotes three chapters to these two men.

This is significant because the power of the Holy Spirit was not restricted to the Apostles. The gifts, anointing and unction of the Holy Spirit are for all believers who are obedient to Christ and walking in consecration to God.

Paul makes a distinction between the natural man, the spiritual man, and the carnal man in 1 Corinthians 2:14-3:3. There are carnal Christians who are living in the flesh and not the Spirit. These do not live or minister in the power of God.

Second, we again discover the principle that the power of God accompanied the preaching of the gospel. Signs accompanied Philip as he proclaimed Christ in the city of Samaria. As a result, the multitudes were giving attention to what was being said by Philip.

Third, we discover that many people were enslaved by demonic activity. The message of Jesus Christ was setting them free. Believers have the authority in the name of Jesus to cast out unclean spirits and bring people to freedom.

Finally, there was much rejoicing in that city. The gospel brought hope to people formerly in bondage. The same is happening today. Faith in Jesus Christ changes people and sets captives free. We have much to celebrate!

The Philip Approach: Acts 8:9-13

“9) Now there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great; 10) and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, “This man is what is called the Great Power of God.” 11) And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts. 12) But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike. 13) Even Simon himself believed; and after being baptized, he continued on with Philip, and as he observed signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed.”

We now encounter Simon the magician. Like the sorcerers and magicians in Egypt, he was claiming to be someone great and was astonishing the people with his craft. Satan has counterfeit power. According to 2 Thessalonians 2:9-10, some will come with false signs and wonders and will deceive many in the end times.

But Philip had greater signs and wonders and a message of life and hope. God is infinitely more powerful than Satan. After the fourth miracle of Moses in Egypt, the magicians recognized the finger of God working through Moses. (See Exodus 8:18-19) “The Battle of the Gods” is a constant theme throughout the whole Bible.

Those in spiritism, the occult, or false mystic religions are fair targets for the gospel. They are full of deception, but recognize the reality of the spiritual realm. There is often a power encounter between truth and deception, God and the devil –but God always wins. He has never lost a battle with the enemy.

As the people of Samaria responded to the gospel and believed, they were being baptized. I often wonder how many had previously been exposed to the gospel through those in Sychar who came to Jesus through the witness of the Samaritan women and the crowd subsequently won to faith by Jesus Himself in John 4:7-45. He had sowed abundant seeds in Samaria.

It is especially noteworthy that Simon also believed and was baptized. He was persuaded by both the preaching of Philip and his extraordinary signs and wonders. (Vs 13) He continued with Philip and as he observed the signs and great miracles taking place, he was constantly amazed.

This hints at a problem in Simon. He was more drawn to the power of the signs and wonders than a deep personal relationship with Jesus Christ. As the story continues, we discover he had a longing for power and the spotlight. He needed subsequent deliverance from his inner brokenness and jealousy.

Becoming a Christian starts the journey to inner healing and freedom. Simon wanted to step right into leadership, but Peter quickly recognized the bondage that still gripped him. (See Vs

22-23) We must grant time for spiritual growth, inner transformation, and healing. Every new believer needs time to lay aside the old self, renew their mind, and put on the new self which is based on a truth encounter and a deep relationship with Jesus Christ that produces a righteous life. (See Ephesians 4:22-24)

An important takeaway from this text is that the gospel quickly took center stage in the city of Samaria. Philip's ministry was not "under the radar." It became "the main attraction." I fully recognize some situations in persecuted countries require caution, but much of the world would benefit from a Philip approach.

One might wonder; "What caused Philip and the gospel to quickly grab the attention of the people?" I can no longer deny the importance of signs and wonders to the spread of the gospel in the book of Acts. They went hand in hand!

The same is happening in many countries today. They read the Bible and take it at face value. Their faith does not need to overcome the theological agnosticism so prevalent in the western church. They recognize God still does miracles today. They do not quench or grieve the Holy Spirit. They expect God to work according to the record and witness of the Bible.

The Tragic Divide: Acts 8:14-19

"14) Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, 15) who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. 16) For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 17) Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit. 18) Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money," 19) "saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

This text introduces us to the theological crisis at the root of the Evangelical - Pentecostal Divide. To state the case simply; evangelicals believe according to Ephesians 1:13-14 that the Holy Spirit is given at the moment of salvation. That's when Paul clearly stated that the believer is sealed with the Holy Spirit. They see no need for what they view as a second work of grace.

But the Pentecostal and Charismatic movement believe strongly according to this text in Acts 8:14-19, that the Holy Spirit is bestowed through the laying on of hands and often accompanied with speaking in tongues as seen in Acts 10:44-48. Of course, the problem in Acts 10 is that Peter did not lay hands on them and they were later baptized with water.

Relating to the issue of speaking in tongues, evangelicals quickly point out in 1 Corinthians 12:1-3 Paul warned of the possibility of false tongues and clearly stated in 1 Corinthians 12:30 that all do not speak with tongues because it is a distributed gift. (1 Corinthians 12:11)

Some try to bridge this gap by elaborating on the difference between baptism of the Holy Spirit, sealing with the Holy Spirit, and the filling of the Holy Spirit. This is a noteworthy contrast. It's a great study.

I do not expect to solve this tension, but I will observe that both sides have biblical merit. For some reason, the Bible does not solve this controversy. This issue begs the question; "Is salvation based on faith in Jesus Christ alone or does it need a manifestation of the Holy Spirit such as speaking in tongues?" I have very godly and mature friends in both camps. They all love Jesus and live fruitful lives. Carnality and sin also show up equally in both camps. Neither camp has a cornerstone on godliness.

When I became a Christian, I started attending an evangelical free church and a charismatic Bible study at the same time. Looking back, that was providential. The first full book of the Bible that I memorized was 1 Corinthians for the Bible Quizzing team hosted by the evangelical church. I have never been pulled heavily into either camp nor have I been closed to the gifts or ministry of the Holy Spirit even though I attended Moody Bible Institute.

The second full book that I memorized in high school was the Gospel of Matthew. It became very hard for me not to acknowledge the doctrine of laying on of hands, asking the Father for the Holy Spirit, healing the sick, and the need to cast out unclean spirits. I equally value the solid biblical foundation I received at Bible College and the passion and unction for the Holy Spirit I received from the Scriptures and my many "Spirit-filled friends."

I confess, for a while I was influenced by the extreme academic environment of Bible College and the tendency to create numerous theological boxes that rationally carry biblical concepts to extreme conclusions. But, I learned that Dwight L Moody himself and many other spiritual giants of the Great awakenings were very Spirit-anointed and dependent. They saw the dangers of dead academic theology.

So how do I approach the evangelical/Pentecostal divide? My answer might be simplistic, but I do not make it an issue! I preach Jesus Christ and a pure gospel while persuading people to be saved. I pray earnestly for the filling, anointing, and power of the Holy Spirit. I lay hands on the sick and pray for healing. I rebuke, confront, and cast out unclean spirits in Jesus name. I lay hands on new believers and carnal Christians and pray for the filling and baptism of the Holy Spirit. I leave the distribution of spiritual gifts to the sovereign will of the Holy Spirit. I expect signs and wonders to accompany the spread of the gospel. I point all believers to a holy life, passionate prayer and worship of Jesus Christ, solid Bible study, walking in the Spirit, world evangelization, personal fruitfulness, and love of the brethren. I see these as the inner motivations that should accompany salvation.

I respect and honor different biblical convictions and doctrines within the Christian tradition. I love the old hymns of the faith and modern inspirational worship songs. I can stand stoically in the presence of God and I can sing and dance in the Spirit. I am madly in love with Jesus Christ and His Spirit and enjoy Him both day and night. He is my portion in this life.

I have zero interest in being a people-pleaser or gaining the approval of men. Academic degrees or big titles mean absolutely nothing to me. If the presence, power, and anointing of God is not on a person's life, they are nothing but modern Pharisees. Many of them need a burning bush encounter with Jesus Christ and His Spirit.

I strongly reject the prosperity gospel, spiritual abuse, immorality, and carnality in the church, playing church politics, and any kind of woke drift. I view these as the work of the anti-Christ and the apostate church. If the Bible doesn't teach it, don't ask me to embrace it!

Ok, I didn't solve the dilemma, but I hope you caught my approach to this conflict. I build up rather than tear down. I unite rather than divide sincere and godly believers. I point all believers to a deeper walk with Jesus Christ, solid Bible Study and greater intimacy with the Holy Spirit. I sincerely believe if you ask for a fish, your Father in heaven will not give you a snake! He will give the Holy Spirit to those who seek and ask. (Luke 11:9-13)

Laying on of Hands: Acts 8:14-19

“14) Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, 15) who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. 16) For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 17) Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit. 18) Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, 19) saying, “Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.””

This was a monumental event. Samaria had received the Word of God. In keeping with Acts 1:8, the gospel had spread from Jerusalem and all Judea, and was now moving into Samaria. This was an area with significant Gentile intermarriage with the Jewish population.

Traditionally, Orthodox Jews would shun the Samaritans. (See John 4:9) They had no dealings with them. In response, the Samaritans set up their own center of worship in the mountain region and boycotted the temple in Jerusalem. The conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman captures this rivalry. See John 4:19-22.

But Jesus took it to the next level way beyond a discussion of geography. Listen to the next two verses; “23) But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. 24) God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”” (John 4:23-24) In a very real sense, these verses from the mouth of Jesus were prophetic. Now let's return to our text in the book of Acts.

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, who when they came down prayed for them that they might receive the

Holy Spirit. For some reason, He had not yet fallen on any of them; they had simply believed and had been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. This wording merges Acts 8:12-13 with Acts 8:16. They both believed and were baptized.

The text provides no explanation for the problem of them not receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit, but the fix was simple; the apostles began laying their hands on them so that they might receive the Holy Spirit. When Simon saw that the Holy Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of hands, he offered them money so that he might also receive this authority. This brought a strong rebuke from Peter.

Few passages in the Bible have been more criticized, twisted, explained away, or nullified by scholars than these verses. I admit, this text baffles me for numerous reasons, but good hermeneutics must read them at face value. Three things stand out in this text.

First, the apostles coming from Jerusalem fulfilled the words of Jesus from John 4:21-22. Salvation was tied back to the Jewish Messiah and everything that had just transpired in Jerusalem with the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God was making it clear that He did not accept the alternative worship system established in the mountains of Samaria.

Second, it is possible for some people to believe and be water baptized but still not be filled with the Holy Spirit. In 1 Corinthians 3:1-3, Paul called these people “carnal Christians.” They live according to the flesh and not the Spirit. Possibly their salvation was rational rather than spiritual. I cannot explain this mystery, but our churches are full of carnal Christians today.

Third, the Apostles immediately addressed the problem by laying their hands on them and praying that they might receive the Holy Spirit. They wasted no time trying to figure out the problem. They moved straight to the solution. The Bible is clear that Jesus is the one who baptizes people in the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 3:11-12; John 1:33; Acts 1:4-5; Acts 2:33) They were simply asking Jesus to fulfill His promise.

The New Testament practice of the laying on of hands includes things like healings, blessings, filling people with the Holy Spirit, anointing for service, and ordination into ministry. This text illustrates that those filled with the Holy Spirit become the hands of Jesus. Jesus was touching the Samaritans through the hands of the Apostles. It was Jesus who was baptizing them with the Holy Spirit.

This explains why Simon had no part in this ministry. He was promoting himself and not Jesus Christ. His heart and his hands remained carnal, sinful, and dirty. Satan still had a grip on him. He needed deliverance.

Let me quickly add that the Bible does not put God in a box. Acts 10 tells the story of the gospel spreading to Cornelius and the Gentiles. Verse 44 says, “While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message.” In this case there was no laying on of hands. Jesus poured out His Spirit upon them as they were listening to the

message. This became a sign to Peter and his Jewish companions that salvation was also for the Gentiles. They then ordered them to be baptized in water.

We get in trouble any time we force our theological bias on God. That was the constant rub between Jesus and the Pharisees. He did not fall in line with their traditions and bias. The Bible often has exceptions to our narrow understanding. Walking by faith involves letting God be in control and not twisting or explaining away clear passages of Scripture because they do not fit our grid.

The Story of Simon: Acts 8:18-24

“18) Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money, 19) saying, “Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” 20) But Peter said to him, “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! 21) You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. 22) Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. 23) For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity.” 24) But Simon answered and said, “Pray to the Lord for me yourselves, so that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.””

Two things stand out in this text. First, God is not for sale. The gifts and callings of God cannot be bought or sold. Peter quickly rejected Simon’s offer for money. He was not about to become a Judas who sold Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. Paul warned Timothy not to put anyone in ministry who had a love for money. (1 Timothy 3:3)

Much damage comes to the cause of Christ when people enter the ministry for profit. Some big name people in ministry have become wealthy “selling their services.” I need not elaborate. It is abominable.

This is the root problem with the prosperity gospel in many poor countries plagued with poverty. The pastors exploit poor and ignorant people to get wealthy themselves. In so doing, they compound the misery and suffering of the poor who give the little they have hoping to buy a blessing from God. The children go hungry while the pastor gets rich. In doing so, they perpetuate the curse of poverty for many people. This is the antithesis of what Jesus taught His disciples. James taught the importance of giving to the poor and not exploiting them. (See James 3:14-26) Rather than meeting needs in Jesus Name they are given to greed.

Second, Simon carried negative baggage into his Christian life. Peter called him to post salvation repentance. He was still in a gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity. Though he was saved, he was still in bondage. Sin still had a grip on some areas of his life. He was saved but not totally free. Please catch this point in Simon's story. It is true of every new believer.

Salvation starts a journey into a new life. It took Moses one day to get Israel out of Egypt, it took forty years to get Egypt out of Israel. The Journey to freedom can be very fast through the power of the Holy Spirit, or people can wander for years if they embrace their flesh and the world. Don't waste your life wandering in the wilderness of Sin.

I believe in the importance of discipleship. In my Freedom Quest Workshop, I teach people to confront sin and Satan head-on with confession and repentance while resisting and renouncing the enemy. We expose and pull down Seven Basic Strongholds identified in the Bible. Then we lead people in praying for the filling and power of the Holy Spirit for consecrated living.

We follow the pattern of Ephesians 4:22-24 by directing people to put off the old self, be renewed in the spirit of their mind, and put on the new self in the likeness of Jesus Christ based on truth. Simon needed these steps to freedom and sustained progress toward growth and maturity before he was ready for leadership.

In Ephesians 4-6, Paul followed the Steps to Freedom in building godly, victorious, and fruitful followers of Jesus Christ. Peter pointed people to the same growth process as outlined in 2 Peter 1:2-11.

Why is this important? Salvation is the starting line and not the finish line. Salvation is an event, but Christian maturity is a process. Becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ is a new way of life. Building your life on the Word of God and walking in the Spirit becomes a life long journey and there will be bumps in the road. The goal is not legalistic perfection, but rather sincere holiness through walking with Jesus in the Spirit.

Simon was not ready for leadership, he was ready for the sanctification process. Peter did not reject him, but he did rebuke and correct him. He pointed him toward a transformational walk with Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, the book of Acts does not tell the rest of the story about Simon. I am confident that he became a fruitful follower of Jesus Christ. I am confident of the same for you as you follow Jesus Christ and endeavor to walk daily in the Spirit.

Samaria Opened to the Gospel: Acts 8:25

“(25) So, when they had solemnly testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they started back to Jerusalem, and were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.”

All of Samaria was now open for preaching the gospel. Traditions and prejudices are hard to overcome. You would think that the disciples had learned a lesson from Jesus and His ministry to the Samaritan woman and the Samaritan city of Sychar in John 4, but their hearts were still hard and their minds blind. Suddenly, with the ministry of Philip and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Samaria, a mental stronghold was pulled down. Everything changed.

According to Acts 8:25, their return trip to Jerusalem was very different. Instead of traveling with blinders to the needs around them, “they were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.”

Had God suddenly opened new doors for the gospel or had He merely opened their eyes and minds to harvest fields previously unseen? I maintain the change was within them.

It was their perspective and mindset that changed. They were no more doing “business as usual” like buying food and provisions for Jesus in total silence and indifference. They should have learned this lesson earlier from Jesus in John 4:1-45. His food was to do the will of Him who sent Him. He said the harvest fields of Samaria were ripe!

We have the same closed minds today. We are conditioned into thinking that ministry only happens a few hours a week when we are in church. The rest of the week we go through our routine in silence. But sharing the gospel should be a lifestyle. That became the new approach of the apostles as they returned to Jerusalem.

But we need to wrestle with a few more questions. What is involved in “preaching the gospel?” How do we attract an audience? Why would anyone want to listen to our message?

First, the context screams that they were sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Acts 8:25 says; “And the Spirit said to Philip, “Go up and join this chariot.” They learned to obey the leading and promptings of the Holy Spirit. He is active in the life of every believer. He wants to lead us in the same way today.

Second, Jesus modeled an approach to sharing the gospel that challenges my thinking. It shakes my norms. It stretches my understanding of preaching the gospel. It was first recorded in Matthew 4:23-25. Please read the full context, but let me quote only verse 23; “Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people.” Was He modeling an approach to sharing the gospel that included healing and casting out unclean spirits?

The next two verses are profound. News about Him spread quickly and crowds gathered around Him to hear the gospel. It might be easy to write this off, but in Matthew 10:7-8 and Luke 10:8-9 He instructed His disciples to do the same thing – and they did! Shockingly, this authority for healing people and casting out demons was bestowed on them before the day of Pentecost, and they were very effective!

The same approach accompanied the spread of the gospel in the early church. Read Acts 4:29-31; 5:12; 6:8; 8:6-7, 6:12-13; 9:40-42 and many other texts. God is starting to open my heart and mind to a Samaria I have previously considered “off limits.”

My recent in-depth study of the book of Matthew followed by this study of the book of Acts is leading me to a shocking realization: “God wants us to heal the sick and set captives free from demonic oppression in the name and authority of Jesus Christ as we spread the gospel.” They are closely connected in the New Testament.

Over the years, I’ve seen Jesus set numerous captives free, but healings have been rare and I feel awkward ministering in this area. My root problem is that this is not part of my tradition or training. I don’t know how to minister in this “Samaria” and I sincerely believe that many so-called “faith healers” are fraudulent today.

But my biblical perspective is beginning to change. My norms are being challenged. I am beginning to realize that the big change has to take place within me! I feel like I am missing something.

I am also searching for answers as to why so many people are prayed for today with so few actual healings. That was not the testimony of the disciples in the four gospels nor was it the standard in the early church. Something is missing.

Pray for me as my faith journey continues. I am trying to get my experience to line up with Scripture. I am tired of the modern western church twisting Scripture to excuse and accommodate our “powerless” experience related to the subject of healings. I am beginning to believe that ministering effectively in this Samaria is part of our biblical calling, but I’m not sure how to move forward. I am sincerely seeking God and studying the Word for answers.

Angelic Activity: Acts 8:26

“26) But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, “Get up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a desert road.)”

We now have an unusual event. Rather than the Holy Spirit speaking to Philip, we have a record of an angel of the Lord speaking to him. This is a great place for a short discussion about angels.

Angelic activity is seen throughout both the Old and New Testaments. There was a notable surge of angelic activity recorded in the four gospels and the book of Acts. The birth of Jesus Christ and His launch into ministry while fasting in the desert were two notable times of increased angelic activity.

Yet the Bible warns against seeking communications with angels. They are usually silent and unassuming ministers on behalf of God’s people. (Read Hebrews 1:14 and 13:2) They are not seen in the New Testament as teachers or a source for biblical revelation.

Paul warned about the possibility of deceiving angels with a false gospel message in Galatians 1:8. Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism should have followed the warning in this verse. Jesus Christ, the Bible and the Holy Spirit are the source of truth for believers.

In Colossians 2:18, Paul warned against the false practice of worshiping angels and taking a stand on false visions. The reason might be that Satan often translates himself into an angel of light. (2 Corinthians 11:14). His workers are always deceptive and seek to lead people astray. The idea of a private “spirit guide” is rooted in the occult and not Christianity. This phenomenon is deceptive and of demonic origin.

By far, the book of Revelation records the most angelic activity. They are seen worshiping God in heaven and carrying out His wrath on Satan’s empire on earth. There is a cosmic battle in the unseen world between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. God’s angelic agents are very active in this present world.

The role of angels toward God’s people in the New Testament can be summarized as protection, supernatural deliverance, encouragement during times of exhaustion, and occasional direction. They are usually unseen and unassuming agents from heaven. They are part of God’s team to carry out His purpose in this world. We are not alone in this warfare.

Story of the Ethiopian: Acts 8:27-40

“27) So he got up and went; and there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship, 28) and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29) Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go up and join this chariot.” 30) Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, “Do you understand what you are reading?” 32) And he said, “Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.”

We now have the story of the gospel going to the ends of the earth. The Ethiopian eunuch represented an open door to Africa. There are some tremendous insights to be gleaned from this story.

First, he was already seeking God. The Ethiopian official had been in Jerusalem to worship.

Second, he was a man of influence. He was an official in the court of the queen. God often saves kings and queens and those in high places to enhance the spread of the gospel.

Third, he was reading from a scroll of the book of Isaiah. He had access to the Word of God. He was reading out loud. He was an educated man. Making the Bible available to people is important to evangelism.

Fourth, the Holy Spirit led Philip to the chariot at a providential time. The text in Isaiah related to the work of Jesus Christ as the lamb of God. Always be sensitive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit in evangelism and use the Word of God to explain the gospel.

Fifth, it is likely that while in Jerusalem, the Ethiopian eunuch had heard numerous stories about Jesus Christ and His crucifixion and resurrection. Philip was joining the evangelism story already in progress. Take time to find out where people are in the decision-making process.

Sixth, God always uses believers in the evangelism story. Some argue that Saul was an exception to this rule. I point out that he was present to hear the whole message of Stephen before he was stoned and most likely had many others whom he persecuted testify to him about Jesus Christ as well. He was also a student of the Old Testament. God had planted many seeds in his life.

Seventh, personal faith in Jesus Christ came before water baptism. When the Ethiopian said, "What prevents me from being baptized?" Philip replied; "If you believe with all your heart, you may." Salvation is based on personal faith in Jesus Christ.

Finally, after Philip had been snatched away, the Ethiopian went on his way rejoicing. Jesus Christ had reached, changed, filled, and completed him. He was a different man.

The Story of the Ethiopian eunuch was included in the book of Acts to record the spread of the gospel beyond Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. Jesus died on the cross to reach the whole world with the good news. (Read John 3:16-17) The Great Commission is our core mission until Jesus returns.

A Time To Snatch Away: Acts 8:39-40

"39) When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing. 40) But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities until he came to Caesarea." Acts 8:39-40

The encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch was providential from beginning to end. An angel directed Philip to go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza. (Vs 26) The Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot." (Vs 29) The Ethiopian just happened to be reading from a Messianic portion of a scroll of the book of Isaiah. (Vs 32-33) At the right time they came to a pool of water. (Vs 36) The encounter ended with the Spirit of the Lord snatching Philip away and dropping him in Azotus. (Vs 39) Philip continued on his way with his preaching ministry. (Vs 40)

All of these aspects of this story intrigue me. I believe God is sovereign to arrange divine encounters with people. I try to be sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit and His promptings as I meet and talk with new people.

But most intriguing was how this encounter ended. The Spirit of the Lord abruptly snatched Philip away. (Vs 39) He had no time to devote to discipleship. It's not the mode of transportation that gets my attention, it was the timing. It happened immediately after coming out of the water.

The whole gospel and biblical textual transmission to Ethiopia was unique. They have a Biblical text with slightly different wording in some verses. There is some question over which text is oldest and most reliable.

It's almost almost like God was intentionally preserving two textual lines to prevent tampering with the text. When you read in the margin of your Bible that "some older manuscripts do not include this verse"; it is often referring to the Ethiopian text. Two witnesses are better than one. 99.99 % of the manuscripts read exactly the same. The textual transmission of our extant manuscripts are very trustworthy because of comparison with two textual lines.

But another unique phenomenon with this story was the emergence of three separate Christian traditions. The Jewish tradition was deeply stamped with Old Testament Judaism. The Western Gentile church picked up hints of Greek influence. The Ethiopian church went on to become uniquely African in worship style and church structure.

I maintain that this is good. The gospel message is universal, but church structure and tradition can reflect local culture. Biblical theology and morals should be the same, but methodology can be flexible. (Study 1 Corinthians 12:4-7 and Acts 15:13-35) The Apostles in Jerusalem granted liberty to the Gentile church to develop their own traditions.

This becomes important in world missions. This might be radical, but our goal at GoServ Global is to equip and empower national leaders to reach and care for their own people. We do not send typical western missionaries to "rule over" national church leaders. We see ourselves as their servants. We intentionally try not to export the dysfunctional American church to the mission field.

We focus on a solid gospel message, sound biblical theology, and high and holy morals, but we trust the National leaders to seek the leading of the Holy Spirit for methodology. Honestly, in most cases they do a much better job and are more fervent in prayer and more studious in the Word than the western church. The Spirit of God is moving in profound ways around the world in many countries.

We recently had a lengthy meeting with a mission leader from a Spirit-filled Lutheran church from Ethiopia. They are biblically sound, morally pure, and on fire with the spread of the gospel. They now have over 50,000,000 believers who follow the Bible, walk in the Spirit, work in over 19 predominantly Muslim nations, and are seeing extraordinary signs and wonders accompanying the spread of the gospel. They plant many churches that are free to depart from Sunday Lutheran liturgy. Even their own mid-week services focus on worship and healing ministry with no liturgy.

They recently sent letters to two American Lutheran denominations that embrace same sex marriages calling them to repentance. Upon refusal to adhere to biblical morals, the Ethiopian church leaders refused their money and closed the door on working together.

This story illustrates the value of indigenous national churches. It may have its roots in Acts 8:39-40 and the Spirit of God snatching Philip away from the Ethiopian eunuch. Jesus takes responsibility to build His Church around the world.

Saul, the Persecutor: Acts 9:1-2

“1) Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, 2) and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.”

Saul took his role seriously. Damascus was located over 160 miles north and slightly west of Jerusalem in Syria. It was a strong 70 miles northwest of the Sea of Galilee. Saul intended on eradicating the followers of Jesus Christ from the whole of Palestine.

Technically, the high priest had no authority in Syria, except over the Jewish synagogues. Saul was prepared to track down any men or women who attended the synagogues who were also followers of “the Way.”

Some date his trip to Damascus 3-5 years after the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Many doubt that he was personally acquainted with Jesus Christ during His public ministry.

When you compare Acts 8:3 with Acts 9:1-2, Saul was the primary force leading the first wave of deadly persecution against the church. His cruel reputation spread far and wide. Galatians 1:22-24 and Philippians 3:6 both refer to him as the primary source of persecution in the early church.

We are here introduced to the term “the Way” used for the early believers. The term is used six times throughout the book of Acts. It was the term the early disciples used to describe themselves. The term was most likely anchored in both Isaiah 40:3 and the words of Jesus in John 14:6 where He referred to Himself as the way, the truth, and the life.

His followers viewed Him as the Messiah and the only way to God. (See Acts 4:11-2) They saw no other means of salvation but through the name of Jesus Christ.

It was this exclusive message of the Gospel and faith in Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation that brought the wrath of the Jewish religious leaders. “The Way” was viewed as a direct threat to their existence. This perceived threat became the fuel for the deadly persecution led by Saul.

We now discover a common denominator behind all persecution of Christians. There is a real and perceived threat that obedience to the gospel and the teachings of Jesus Christ will bring an end to any competing doctrine, religious institution, system of morality, evil enterprise, or form of corruption. This is a true conclusion. Following Jesus Christ changes people.

It can be inferred that all wicked and evil men from the drug lords to Hollywood screenwriters understand this truth. Their only recourse to preserve “their own way of life” is to persecute Jesus Christ and those who follow Him as “the Way.”

The Conversion of Saul: Acts 9:3-9

“3) As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; 4) and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” 5) And he said, “Who are You, Lord?” And He said, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, 6) but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.” 7) The men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. 8) Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus. 9) And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.” Acts 9:3-9

The conversion of Saul was accompanied by a direct visitation from Jesus. As he traveled, he was confronted by a blinding bright light, and Jesus called him by name and confronted him.

This was not unlike the voice that spoke to Moses from the burning bush and said; “Moses, Moses.” (Exodus 4:4) Saul was very familiar with the story. It marked the call of Moses.

The bright light was undoubtedly in keeping with the words of John 1:4; 8:12; and 1 John 1:5. Jesus is the light of the world. God is light and in Him there is no darkness. The glorified Christ was speaking to Saul.

The question was very personal and to the point; “Why are you persecuting me?” It was a profound question that Saul did not answer. Instead, he asked; “Who art thou Lord?” He was not prepared for the reply; “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.”

Technically, Saul was not among those who crucified Christ, but he was leading the persecution against the followers of Jesus. We are reminded that whatever is done to the least of those who follow Jesus, is done to Him! (Matthew 24:40; 45) Those who persecute a follower of Jesus are persecuting Him!

Saul never did answer the question as to why he was persecuting Christians. Jealousy, rage, hatred, and prejudice are not rational. They are driven by emotions and not reason. Saul had no reply.

The people traveling with Saul heard the voice but saw no one. Saul was knocked to the ground by the appearance of the Christ. This might qualify for what some call “slain in the spirit.” The visitation was directed to Saul and not his traveling companions.

Paul was three days in his blind state and neither ate nor drank. This appearance had a profound effect on Saul. He related it in his testimony both in Acts 22 and Acts 26. I am sure he shared it numerous times. It was his story.

Some say the conversion of Saul was unique. They maintain that “Jesus no longer works that way today.” But Jesus is speaking to many in dreams and visions today. Joel 2:28-29 appears as common now at the end of the church age as it was at the beginning. (See Acts 2:14-21)

We witnessed it happen in the jungles of Peru several years ago with a tribal leader the night before we arrived to share the gospel. As we approached the village, the leader met us and said; “Jesus appeared to me in a dream last night and told me that white people were coming to tell me about the gospel. He told me I needed to repent and follow Him.” Nearly the entire village came to Jesus. The leader shared his story at a village gathering that evening.

We ended the meeting by praying for people to be healed. One woman came for prayer who had a large tumor. It was so big she looked pregnant from her side. She was begging for money to go to Iquitos for surgery. Our missionary host said; “we do not have money for travel or surgeries, but we will have a prayer service tonight and we will pray for your healing!” She was the first in line for prayer. Initially, nothing happened, but then at 3:00 AM she was miraculously healed. The tumor was gone. She woke up the entire village as she ran from hut to hut yelling; “Glory to God, Jesus has healed me!” It was a glorious night.

Numerous reports are surfacing of both Muslims and Hindus coming to faith because Jesus is appearing to them in vivid dreams and visions. The impact is as profound as what happened to Saul in this story in Acts 9:3-9. These are days of great harvest. It is almost like the urgency of the gospel is being compressed today. God is again working in extraordinary ways.

(There is some controversy in regard to precise numbers, but it’s not inaccurate to say that there are more Muslims coming to faith in Jesus right now than at any time in the 1500-year history of Islam –and in many cases, it’s the result of miraculous dreams and visions like Terry reported in Peru. This is happening millions of times in many, many places.) -dj

But God expects us to actively participate in the Great Commission. Romans 10:8-15 clearly states that God’s usual approach is to send messengers to share the gospel. According to Acts 1:8, He empowers every believer with the Holy Spirit for effective witnessing. Nothing compares to being in the delivery room when a person is born-again by the Spirit of God. Every testimony is extraordinary.

A Man Named Ananias: Acts 9:10-19

“10) Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” And he said, “Here I am, Lord.” 11) And the Lord said to him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying, 12) and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight.” 13) But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; 14) and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name.” 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 names sake.” 17) So Ananias departed and entered the house, and after laying his hands on him said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road by which you were coming, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” 18) And immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized; and he took food and was strengthened. 19) Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus,”

This text contains several valuable nuggets for those seeking to follow Jesus. First, God can and does speak to people. He has ways of making His specific will known to His followers.

In the case of Ananias, the Lord used a vision. In verse 10, He spoke to Ananias in a vision. Then in verse 12, He spoke to Saul in a vision. Though Colossians 2:18 warns about taking a stand exclusively on visions, they were part of God's communication network with His people. Joel 2:28-29 prophesied about this phenomenon.

In the Old Testament, visions were reserved for the prophets. In the New Testament, God can speak to any child of God through a vision. They seem to be most common for those living under the shadow of intense persecution. Visions must be measured by truth, in keeping with the character and nature of God and in line with the Great Commission. Jesus will not lead His people into confusion or in opposition to what His Spirit is doing in the broader context of the church He is building.

Second, when the Lord speaks through a vision it is often very specific. It included the street address, the house of Judas, the man named Saul, the fact that he was praying and that he would be expecting a man named Ananias. (Vs 11-12) These details were intended only for Ananias because God was sending him on a special mission.

Third, God can and does tap some individuals for special assignments. Ananias wrestled with the Lord because his mission was contrary to the common-sense cautions against Saul. He was the source of suffering and persecution for God's people. Saul was to be avoided at all costs. Word about his arrival in Damascus had spread quickly. But God had a special mission for Ananias. Ananias had every reason to seek clarification and confirmation from the Lord. He was not arguing with God.

Finally, Ananias obeyed God and became part of a story that changed the course of human history. He went straight to the house of a man named Judas and ministered to Saul. (Vs 17) He shared a word of knowledge about the Lord Jesus appearing to Saul on the road. (Vs 17) Ananias was walking in the Spirit and using spiritual gifts. He laid hands on Saul for healing (Vs 12), and to be filled with the Holy Spirit. (Vs 17) He also immediately baptized Saul (Vs 18), and introduced him to the broader body of Christ.

Unfortunately, this story is all we know about Ananias. He was an ordinary believer sent by God on a specific mission. What God accomplished through him was extraordinary. Ananias had no clue what God was about to set in motion through his small step of obedience.

What about you? Are you available to be used by God? Every believer is called to walk in the Spirit and have an impact for the glory of God. Never underestimate what God might set in motion through you for His Glory! There is an old chorus that was popular in the 1970's that said; "It only takes a spark to get a fire going." Be a spark for Jesus! How?

Draw near to God, walk in the Spirit and obey His leading in your life. Purpose to live a consecrated life of faith and obedience, and buckle your seat belt! God will invite you to join Him on an amazing ride through this life.

(AMEN! My first mission trip was to the Dominican Republic in 2015. It so changed my life, I prayed, "Lord, I will go *wherever* you send me!" And God said, "Okay. Watch *this!*" –and I have been blessed beyond all measure!) -dj

God's Prospect List: Acts 9:13-16

"13) But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; 14) and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." 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.""

God had special plans for Saul. One big thing stood in the way –he needed to be converted. From the perspective of Ananias, Saul was the problem. From the perspective of Jesus, Saul was a prime prospect, he merely needed a new boss.

Look at his credentials. He was devoted, filled with zeal, tireless, and willing to suffer personal adversity to carry out his mission. The guy had no end to tenacity, persuasiveness, and vision. He had even persuaded the high priest to send him all the way to Damascus with authority to search for those belonging to the Way. He was a self-starter. Jesus had a position to fill. He looked at Saul and said, "There's my guy!"

Ananias had a radically different take on Saul. He saw him as a persecutor, murderer, and threat. He was the last man for any position. No wonder he pushed back on the recruiting mission.

It wasn't until Jesus showed Ananias the job description that Ananias suddenly saw potential in Saul. Let me paraphrase:

"I need a man of courage who is not afraid to suffer to carry out his mission. He will carry my gospel to the Gentiles, but many will reject him. He will speak of me before kings and political leaders, but they will put him in prison. He will proclaim my gospel before the Jewish people but they will misunderstand him and try to kill him. He must be willing to suffer much from everyone for my name's sake!"

Suddenly, Ananias saw potential in Saul. No one in their right mind would ever sign up for that mission. It's almost comical, but after hearing the job description Ananias departed immediately to search for Saul.

Let me make an observation: Jesus loves and sees potential in people you and I currently despise, avoid, and write off. No one is beyond the potential reach of the grace, the mercy, the gospel, or the power of God. He can change and use unlikely people.

Ananias had no clue that Saul of Tarsus was about to become the Apostle Paul. Jesus was going to work through him to change the course of human history and write 1/3 of the New Testament. He was about to become the greatest apologist and defender of the gospel the world would ever know. He was about to become to the New Covenant what Moses was to the Old Covenant. Both were unlikely prospects.

Nothing is impossible with God! No one is beyond the reach of the gospel if God is calling them! There is no limit to what God can do through one man or woman who is fully and wholly devoted to Him! Do you have a Saul on your prayer and gospel prospect list? Do you have a young Joseph, David, Daniel, Esther, or Timothy? Are you willing to be an Ananias?

Of course, there is one more possibility: *You* might be on God's prospect list. Are you running from God and His call on your life? Jesus wants to change your life and self-identity. He may want to give you a new name and a new mission in life.

The Launch: Acts 9:19-22

"19) ... Now for several days he was with the disciples who were at Damascus, 20) and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, 'He is the Son of God.' 21) All those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, 'Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?' 22) But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ."

This text begs the question; “How long does someone need to be a Christian before becoming fruitful in Christian witness and service?” In the case of Saul, he began proclaiming Jesus Christ and the gospel almost immediately.

Granted, Saul had the advantage of being a Jewish scholar. He knew the Old Testament very well. At the same time, he carried much baggage into his Christian life. He had been a Pharisee. Yet he became fruitful and effective very quickly.

The text says; “and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.” Even the newest Christian has a story to tell.

But the text also indicates that Saul kept increasing in strength, insight, and effectiveness. His understanding and effectiveness was growing quickly.

How long after coming out of the cocoon does it take for a butterfly to start flying? It’s amazing. As soon as its wings dry off it soars into the sky. As a caterpillar it spent its entire life crawling. But after being born again, it spreads its wings and starts flying. Its crawling days are over.

Saul spread his wings and started flying immediately. He was a new man and was filled with the Holy Spirit. He couldn’t help but testify for Jesus. He launched quickly.

I believe God wants every new Christian to speak up quickly, study the Word deeply, and grow rapidly. We have no biblical explanation or pattern for spiritual impotency. New life and new mission begins the moment someone becomes a believer.

The Gospel in the Old Testament: Acts 9:20-22

“20) and immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.” 22) But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ.” Acts 9:20, 22

I tied these two verses together to prove a point: It is possible to share the gospel from the Old Testament. Because Saul was a biblical scholar, the Holy Spirit opened His eyes to see the message of Jesus concealed in the Old Testament.

2 Corinthians 3:12-18 argues this point. A blinder is over the eyes of the Jewish people when they read the Old Testament, but whenever a person turns to the Lord, it is taken away. Suddenly they can see Jesus in every story, type, form, and shadow. Many Old Testament prophecies are about Him. The anointing of the Holy Spirit causes the Bible to come alive.

I believe the books of Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews are prime examples of how Paul used the Old Testament to prove that Jesus is the Son of God and preach the gospel to Jewish people. He became a mighty evangelist and biblical apologist. These books are a masterpiece for every believer to study related to how to preach the gospel from the Old Testament.

Faith Refined On The Front Lines: Acts 9:23-25

“23) When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him, 24) but their plot became known to Saul. They were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death; 26) but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a large basket.”

We do not know how long Saul remained in Damascus after his conversion, but he had a very fruitful ministry. He was spreading the gospel, accumulating some disciples, and confounding the Jews. Soon he became the target of deadly persecution.

The Jews living there devised a plot to put Saul to death. From my perspective, any religious persuasion that breeds and advocates death and violence invalidates itself. Satan brings death and destruction, but Jesus always brings life. (John 10:10) Never lose sight of this contrast.

It is amazing how quickly the prophecy about Saul given to Ananias in Acts 9:15-16 was becoming reality. His opposition and suffering began almost immediately.

Beware: “What you sow you reap.” (Galatians 6:7-8) By your standard of measure, it will be measured to you. (Matthew 7:1-2) Saul was receiving back exactly what he had been dishing out. The letters and authority he had received from the high priest against any belonging to the Way was now being applied to him. (Acts 9:1-2) In a sense, he was like Uriah who carried his own death warrant to the front lines. (See 2 Samuel 11:14-24)

But, the believers had now become his defenders. When the plot was exposed, his disciples took him by night and let him down through a basket over the city wall. His foes were watching the gates night and day that they might put him to death. 2 Corinthians 11:32-33 sheds light on the plot. His imminent danger came from high places and was very real.

Suffering and escapes from death soon became a way of life for Saul. Though he suffered much, he became an example of the sovereignty and protection of God. The time and means of his death was in God's hands.

We recently spent time with a friend from the Ukraine who has spent the past year doing relief work on the front lines of the war with Russia. She related many miraculous stories of divine protection and the tragic ravages of war, violence, death, and destruction. Her theology has been deeply tested and refined. It was so refreshing spending time with her.

Debby and I were like sponges soaking in her stories and vibrance for Jesus. Her faith has been honed on the front lines of service with rockets and bullets flying overhead. She has become an amazing woman of God.

Paul's faith was also honed on the front lines. I am beginning to think that faith learned in safety, comfort, and from textbooks is highly dysfunctional. Only western rational faith has the luxury of arguing over theology with a beer in one hand and the tv remote in the other while sucking on sermonettes for "christianettes."

The early church was birthed, lived, and many suffered and died on the front lines. (Read 2 Corinthians 11:22-33) The western church is suffering from not suffering for its faith. There are no apostate believers among the Martyrs. Those willing to die for Christ and the gospel live courageously for Christ and the gospel.

Second Stage Launch: Acts 9:26-28

"26) When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. 27) But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. 28) And he was with them, moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord."

When Saul returned to Jerusalem, the Christians shunned him. They did not believe that he had become a believer. Many had suffered severely at his hands. He had been the source of much pain and suffering.

Our past reputation can be an anchor to hold us back. It takes time, consistency, and a new direction in life to rebuild a reputation. Philippians 3:4-14 captures Paul's resolve to put Jesus Christ first in his life. He made knowing Jesus Christ and sharing in His suffering his new pursuit.

I believe he had to resolve his own past. He did this by seeking Jesus, forgiving himself, forgetting what was behind, and pressing forward to embrace his upward calling. (Philippians 3:12-14) He finally determined to press on with Jesus despite how the church treated him. He blazed a new path for the glory of God. Eventually his name changed from Saul to Paul. It is a mystery when and how his name changed.

Barnabas was the first to embrace him. How appropriate. The Son of Encouragement stood with Saul. (Acts 4:30) God never leaves us alone. It was Barnabas that introduced Saul to Peter and James, the half brother of Jesus. (See his Testimony in Galatians 1:13-2:10) His story becomes a bit confusing at this point.

According to the Galatians account, Saul went into Arabia for three years and then returned to Damascus before meeting Peter and James. He stayed with Peter for fifteen days at that time and then spent fourteen more years in ministry before returning to Jerusalem. He became a key leader in the Church at Antioch where he was launched into his mission trips. (See Acts 11:19-26 and 13:1-2) At this point, he was still known as Saul.

Let me make a few observations from the life of Saul: First, though he started witnessing for Jesus immediately, Saul spent three years of intense focus getting to know Jesus. (See Galatians 1:15-17) He took time to build a deep personal relationship with Jesus Christ. This time of getting to know Jesus as his “surpassing value” became his launching pad for a new life and ministry. (Philippians 3:7-11). Don’t skip this stage! Attending a Bible college or seminary does not fulfill this stage!

Second, though Saul was eventually endorsed by the apostles, he didn’t sit around waiting for them to embrace or send him. He started ministering broadly to people, worked with the church at Antioch and was sent out by the Holy Spirit. (See Acts 13:1-4) He was close to Barnabas and under the authority of the Gentile church at Antioch. But he didn’t wait for man’s approval because he had God’s approval. His credentials came from his gifts, calling, amazing walk with Jesus Christ, and the anointing of the Holy Spirit. He was God-made and not man-made. (Galatians 1:1)

Finally, he was under proper authority and not a maverick, rebel, or self-appointed teacher or prophet. This is important! He was mentored by Barnabas, sent out by the church at Antioch, and eventually approved and endorsed by the apostles in Jerusalem. (Galatians 2:1-10) Rebellion is Satan’s trap into deception, heresy, and false teaching.

So, what can we learn from the story of Saul related to a call into ministry? Let me quickly summarize:

Start by building a deep and personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Get busy ministering for Jesus right where you are to the people around you. Seek out a godly mentor like Barnabas. Join an on-fire and alive local church. Submit to godly authority. Be prepared to be sent out by the Holy Spirit. Focus on building the ministry God entrusts to you rather than criticizing others. Recognize that the Father has called and sent you to bear much fruit for His glory. (See John 15:8; 16) Courageously walk through the doors God clearly opens before you. Finally, abide in Jesus, walk in the Spirit, and remain faithful. Don’t get distracted by sin, Satan, or the world.

I sometimes have people ask me to mentor them. I say; “Read the Daily Bible Commentary every day. Go back and read past completed Daily Commentaries I have written on other books. Over forty-five years of my ministry experience is packed into them. Attend a Freedom Quest Workshop or order the Manual. Go on a short-term mission trip. Courageously follow Jesus. When these fall in line, I will find a way to be a Barnabas and pour into your life with personal correspondence –but it might not be needed at that point because Jesus will have become your mentor.

Right Message, Wrong Approach: Acts 9:28-31

“28) And he was with them, moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord. 29) And he was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic Jews; but they were

attempting to put him to death. 30) But when the brethren learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus. 31) So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.” Acts 9:28-31

As predicted at the time of his salvation, Saul became a lightning rod for opposition and persecution. He was very vocal about his faith and very persuasive in his defense of the gospel. Those who dared argue with him were quickly won over to Christ or put to shame. He was both a biblical scholar and expert debater.

Early on in his Christian walk, he was openly argumentative in his approach. As he grew in his faith and dependency on the Holy Spirit, he undoubtedly depended less on his intellectual reasoning abilities and more on the power of God.

1 Corinthians 2:1-5 makes this case. He learned the importance of love and letting the Holy Spirit persuade people. The book of 1 Corinthians is also home to the famous love chapter. (1 Corinthians 13) By the time he wrote to the Corinthians, his approach to ministry and the gospel was very different.

It might be that his abrasive approach early on was partially responsible for the hostile reactions against him. When he was ushered away to Tarsus, a time of peace settled over all Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. There may be a correlation between the two.

I have met numerous Christians who are good scholars and debaters, but they have terrible people skills. They come across as arrogant and offensive. It is impossible to force or argue people into the faith.

Saul soon learned the value of speaking the truth in love. He learned the value of prayer and letting the Holy Spirit wrestle with people.

I have discovered that more people are offended by judgmental and arrogant Christians than they are by Jesus Christ and the gospel. Saul soon learned the value of causing no offense to the gospel. Some Christians suffer because of their approach rather than being reproached because of the gospel. It never hurts to treat people with respect and dignity. It was a lesson gradually learned by Saul.

The Healing of Aeneas: Acts 9:32-35

“32) Now as Peter was traveling through all those regions, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda. 33) There he found a man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden eight years, for he was paralyzed. 34) Peter said to him, “Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; get up and make your bed.” Immediately he got up. 35) And all who lived at Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord.” Acts 9:32-35

With these verses, the spotlight suddenly shifts from Saul back to Peter. He is pictured in these verses doing an itinerant ministry trip that may have included Judea, Samaria, Galilee and even up into Damascus. His home was most likely still near the Sea of Galilee. He had a very broad and far-ranging ministry.

(The town of Lydda mentioned here is currently the city of Lod. It's about 9.5 miles southeast of Tel Aviv, and 25 miles northwest of Jerusalem. The population is over 85,000.) -dj

As he traveled, he came to Lydda. It was there that he was introduced to a certain man named Aeneas who was paralyzed and had been bed-ridden for eight years. He was well known to the people of the region.

This may sound like a trivial point, but according to the text, Peter did not anoint him with oil or lay hands on him for healing. Instead, he said to him; "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; arise, and make your bed." That was it. There was no ceremony, long prayer, or teaching about faith, but he immediately arose.

I am beginning to see a common denominator in many healings in the book of Acts –they were accomplished through the Name and authority of Jesus Christ. The same happened back in Acts 3:6. Peter spoke healing to the lame beggar in the Name of Jesus Christ.

So what's my point? Jesus gave authority to heal to the apostles and later to the seventy during His public ministry. (See Acts 10:7-8 and Luke 10:8-9) Healing authority in the Name of Jesus Christ predated the day of Pentecost. The format did not change with the giving of the Holy Spirit.

This begins to take the mystery out of biblical healing. It appears that it was not based on an amount of faith or a special anointing or gift of the Holy Spirit, but rather New Testament healing was rooted solely in the authority of Jesus Christ. Healing was spoken in the Name of Jesus Christ and Jesus was credited as the healer.

In Acts 9:35 we see the pattern that this healing created an open door for the gospel in Lydda and Sharon and they turned to the Lord. This is consistent with the ministry of the disciples sent out by Jesus to preach the gospel. Healing and deliverance ministry was a normal part of their ministry.

But again, I want to stress the point that it was based in the person and authority of Jesus Christ and not in themselves. Healing pointed people to Jesus Christ. By His stripes people are healed.

This is starting to change my mindset and approach to healing. I'm starting to approach it through the authority of Jesus Christ and less in the amount of my faith or the faith of the person in need of healing. I find it much easier to preach Jesus Christ to people in His fullness and attributes and then simply pronounce healing in His Name. We do not heal anyone. Only Jesus

Christ holds the office of Savior, Lord, and Great Physician. He is the One who does the saving, delivering, and healing from these three offices of authority.

Raising Tabitha From The Dead: Acts 9:36-43

“36) Now in Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which translated in Greek is called Dorcas); this woman was abounding with deeds of kindness and charity which she continually did. 37) And it happened at that time that she fell sick and died; and when they had washed her body, they laid it in an upper room. 38) Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, having heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him, imploring him, “Do not delay in coming to us.” 39) So Peter arose and went with them. When he arrived, they brought him into the upper room; and all the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing all the tunics and garments that Dorcas used to make while she was with them. 40) But Peter sent them all out and knelt down and prayed, and turning to the body, he said, “Tabitha, arise.” And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter, she sat up. 41) And he gave her his hand and raised her up; and calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. 42) It became known all over Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. 43) And Peter stayed many days in Joppa with a tanner named Simon.”
Acts 9:36-43

The event of Peter raising Tabitha from the dead greatly advanced the gospel. Verse 42 says, “And it became known all over Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.” It followed the pattern that every healing and miracle in the New Testament opened doors for the gospel and caused many to believe in Jesus Christ.

There are records of raising people from the dead in the Old Testament, during the public ministry of Jesus, and in the book of Acts. Though raising people from the dead was not common in the Bible, it must be noted that Jesus came to defeat death. There are also some modern reports of people being raised from the dead through the name of Jesus Christ, but they are not easy to substantiate. Let me make a few observations about raising people from the dead.

First, someone coming back to life does not mean they are forever immortal. Death simply means the physical body is no longer able to support the soul and spirit. It ceases to function. A separation takes place between the body and the soul and spirit. The soul and spirit are eternal.

Second, according to 2 Corinthians 5:2-4, the body is like external clothing or a tent for our soul and spirit during our sojourn on earth. At the time of death, it can no longer sustain physical life. Our physical body will wear out over time or be rendered nonfunctional because of a trauma, disease, or the natural aging process. The physical body is mortal.

Third, restoring life to a dead person simply means the physical body begins to function again. It is able to house the soul and spirit for a while longer. Raising someone from the dead could be looked at as a healing or restoring of the functions of the physical body.

Fourth, in John 11:1-46, we have the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. According to John 11:39 he had been dead for four days. That's a long time. Jesus is greater than death. According to verse 45, as a result of this miracle, many believed in Him.

Fifth, in John 11:25, Jesus called Himself the resurrection and the life. Life and death are within the realm of His authority. This is true of both eternal life and restoring physical life to a deceased person. He is the source of life.

Sixth, in Acts 9:40, Peter knelt down and prayed and then he turned and spoke to the body of Tabitha, exactly as Jesus had done to Lazarus. His praying may have been discerning God's will for Tabitha. When his praying was done, he turned and spoke life back into her body. This miracle was done through the authority of Jesus Christ.

Seventh, at some point we will all succumb to physical death. Hebrews 9:27 says; It is appointed for men once to die and after that comes judgment. Death is universal for all people. The only exception will be those believers who are transformed immediately into their new bodies when Jesus returns. (See 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18)

Eighth, the eternal life to come for believers is unimaginable compared to this life. 1 Corinthians 15:20-58 describes the eternal resurrection life awaiting all believers. It is a text that always gives me goosebumps. I can only imagine.

Finally, though rare, it is within the realm of Scripture when the Holy Spirit leads to speaking life back into people. However, Hebrews 11:35-40 looks at the two sides of the coin. Some women received their dead back by resurrection, but most did not accept their release because they were looking for a better resurrection.

The ultimate goal is to be safely home. If you're not sure about your own or another person's eternal destiny, focus on reaching them now. In the case of Tabitha, her death was reckoned as premature and unacceptable by her community of believers. She left behind shoes too big to be filled. That's why they sent for Peter. I applaud their step of faith. It is not to be viewed as an injunction to pray for all people to be raised from the dead.

I really admire this guy!

God Prepares Cornelius: Acts 10:1-8

"1) Now there was a man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort, 2) a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people and prayed to God continually. 3) About the ninth hour of the day he clearly saw in a vision an angel of God who had just come in and said to him, "Cornelius!" 4) And fixing his gaze on him and being much alarmed, he said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God. 5) Now dispatch some men to Joppa and send for a man named Simon, who is also called Peter; 6) he is staying with

a tanner named Simon, whose house is by the sea.” 7) When the angel who was speaking to him had left, he summoned two of his servants and a devout soldier of those who were his personal attendants, 8) and after he had explained everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.”

With this text, God prepares to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. He uses extraordinary means for the task. Of all people, God sends Peter. He was the Apostle to the Jewish people. God loves breaking boxes and working in non-conventional ways. Let's review the story:

After raising Tabitha from the dead, Peter stayed on in Joppa for many days at the beach home of Simon the tanner. Many believed in the Lord as a result of the miracle. Peter was taking advantage of the open door for the gospel and possibly organizing a church in the area.

Meanwhile, in Caesarea about forty miles to the north, God was preparing some fresh soil. A Roman centurion named Cornelius and his whole household was sincerely seeking God. He was there leading an Italian cohort. In other words, he was Italian. Though he had not yet heard the gospel, he was continually seeking God in prayer and giving alms and favor to the Jewish people.

Then it happened: God sent an angel to Cornelius in a vision about the ninth hour of the day with vivid and clear instructions to send for Simon, who is also called Peter. The vision was so specific that the angel called Cornelius by name and included the address where Peter was saying.

It is notable that his prayers and alms had ascended as a memorial before God. (Vs 4) When people are sincerely seeking God, He will find a way to bring the gospel to them. The angel specifically ordered him to dispatch some men to Joppa and bring Peter back with them. Then the angel departed.

Immediately, Cornelius assembled a delegation that included two of his servants and a devout soldier. Verse 8 says that Cornelius explained everything to them and then sent them to Joppa.

Can you imagine the meeting with his servants and the soldier? Cornelius; “I just had a vision of an angel who gave me orders to send for a guy named Simon, who is also called Peter who is staying with a tanner named Simon by the sea in Joppa. Pack your bags for a few days and go and bring him back here.” Delegation: “Say what?” Then they look at the sun dial thinking, “It's only the ninth hour of the day, he can't be drunk already!” (Compare with Acts 2:15)

When God is at work, He prepares both sides of the story. He was about to give Peter a vision as well and prepare him for the encounter. This was about to become a Divine encounter that would shape the course of human history. God is very detailed and in control, but He often uses unconventional means. We are called to obey and walk by faith even when things appear totally out of the ordinary.

Removing Cultural Barriers: Acts 10:9-23

"9) On the next day, as they were on their way and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. 10) But he became hungry and was desiring to eat; but while they were making preparations, he fell into a trance; 11) and he *saw the sky opened up, and an object like a great sheet coming down, lowered by four corners to the ground, 12) and there were in it all kinds of four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air. 13) A voice came to him, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat!" 14) But Peter said, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean." 15) Again a voice came to him a second time, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy." 16) This happened three times, and immediately the object was taken up into the sky. 17) Now while Peter was greatly perplexed in mind as to what the vision which he had seen might be, behold, the men who had been sent by Cornelius, having asked directions for Simon's house, appeared at the gate; 18) and calling out, they were asking whether Simon, who was also called Peter, was staying there. 19) While Peter was reflecting on the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you. 20) But get up, go downstairs and accompany them without misgivings, for I have sent them Myself." 21) Peter went down to the men and said, "Behold, I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for which you have come?" 22) They said, "Cornelius, a centurion, a righteous and God-fearing man well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews, was divinely directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and hear a message from you." 23) So he invited them in and gave them lodging. And on the next day he got up and went away with them, and some of the brethren from Joppa accompanied him."

A new paradigm was beginning. God was about to undo a three-fold prohibition against the Gentiles. The Old Testament Law through Moses considered them unclean. Jesus had been sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. He had warned His disciple not to go in the way of the Gentiles or to any city of the Samaritans. (Matthew 10:5-6) These three prohibitions had been burned into Peter's mind from childhood. No wonder the number "three" was important in this text.

Three Gentile men were sent to Peter by Cornelius. Peter saw the same vision three times. It appears from the text that it took the men three days to complete their journey. Three is also the number of God or the trinity.

As to the vision of the unclean animals, God was telling Peter that if all animals were now considered clean, certainly the work of Jesus on the cross made all people clean. He was driving home the point that people created in the image of God have surpassing more value than animals. God loves all people and Jesus died to atone for all people.

The wall of separation between God and man was torn down by Christ. The wall of separation between people groups was also torn down. Jesus reversed the dispersion of people groups from the Tower of Babel. He was now dispersing His disciples to all people groups around the world.

What God was revealing to Peter was far more than a new diet. He was sending his disciples to all people, customs and diets around the world. The basis for prejudice and discrimination between the races was now being removed and bridged by Agape love.

The point at which unreached people groups know that you love and care for them is when you eat their foods around a common table. Though I have my preferences for healthy eating, I refuse to allow foods to hinder the work of God or the spread of the Gospel. God has given me the grace to eat and in most cases eventually enjoy foods from around the world. I have invited Jesus to be Lord of my taste buds.

(I have been taught that, especially when it comes to mission trips, “Never refuse grace when it is offered to you.” I think it’s a good teaching for all of life.) -dj

This chapter might seem insignificant at first reading, but it launched the Great Commission for the early disciples. People were now to be valued above foods, customs, politics, and all things that drive wedges, separate, or divide. The Gospel can transcend any wall or barrier. 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 needs to be embraced by every disciple of Jesus Christ.

Coincidence or Divine Providence: Acts 10:24-33

“24) On the following day he entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them and had called together his relatives and close friends. 25) When Peter entered, Cornelius met him, and fell at his feet and worshiped him. 26) But Peter raised him up, saying, “Stand up; I too am just a man.” 27) As he talked with him, he entered and *found many people assembled. 28) And he said to them, “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean. 29) That is why I came without even raising any objection when I was sent for. So I ask for what reason you have sent for me.” 30) Cornelius said, “Four days ago to this hour, I was praying in my house during the ninth hour; and behold, a man stood before me in shining garments, 31) and he *said, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. 32) Therefore send to Joppa and invite Simon, who is also called Peter, to come to you; he is staying at the house of Simon the tanner by the sea.’ 33) So I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. Now then, we are all here present before God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.””

I believe God’s leading often includes affirmation and confirmation. He actively works on both sides of the story bringing together people to hear the gospel and a messenger to preach the gospel. In this case, He used an angel, a vision, and three messengers to go find Peter and very specific communication to Peter with three more visions which were exactly the same and the Spirit of God clearly speaking to him. All of this was wrapped in providential timing that tied everything together. I do not believe in luck or coincidence. I believe in Divine Providence.

Cornelius had been very active preparing for Peter's arrival. He had gathered together many friends and relatives at his home. As a Centurion, he undoubtedly had some soldiers in attendance as well. The people were already assembled when Peter arrived.

The story is an example of how the Holy Spirit moves orchestrating events and meetings. This is the ultimate picture of strategic planning. When done in the flesh, it can be a waste of time. When prompted by the Holy Spirit it accomplishes Divine results. God does the planning. It is our job to listen, discern, and obey. I can only imagine the conversation between Peter and his traveling companions as they journeyed. I am confident it was not wasted.

Living by faith and following the leading of the Holy Spirit results in God-sized stories. He leaves His fingerprints on His works. I believe coincidence might be a surname for God. Learn to walk by faith and not by sight. Step out and take risks based on the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Listen, trust and obey.

The Gospel is for all People: Acts 10:34-43

"34) Opening his mouth, Peter said: 'I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, 35) but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him. 36) The word which He sent to the sons of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all)— 37) you yourselves know the thing which took place throughout all Judea, starting from Galilee, after the baptism which John proclaimed. 38) You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. 39) We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They also put Him to death by hanging Him on a cross. 40) God raised Him up on the third day and granted that He become visible, 41) not to all the people, but to witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God, that is, to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. 42) And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead. 43) Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.'"

God arranged all of these events that Peter might preach the gospel to the Gentiles. According to verse 33, Cornelius had gathered all the people "present before God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord." They were eager to listen.

Peter started by sharing the revelation he had received and that he now understood that the Gospel was for all people. God does not show partiality. Jesus died to reconcile the whole world to God. (John 3:16)

Then in verses 37-38, Peter made the strong point that the stories of the public ministry of Jesus Christ had spread far and wide. They had undoubtedly heard about Him. Jesus lived out His life and ministry openly and in public.

I want to emphasize that Jesus Christ was the subject of Peter's message. He spoke of His miraculous life in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. Then he stressed the point that they were witnesses of His entire public ministry.

Then Peter zeroed in on the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He did not leave Him in the grave. In verses 40-41 he stressed the resurrection and that they had eaten and drank with Him after His resurrection. Peter presented Him as the one anointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead.

Then Peter pointed to the Old Testament prophets and emphasized that they foretold of the ministry of Jesus, and that through faith in His name, everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins. (See verse 43)

As we shall see in the next paragraph, the results were instantaneous. God confirmed their faith by pouring out the Holy Spirit.

What is paramount about this text is the focus on Jesus Christ and the Gospel. Peter stayed true to the message. He remained faithful to His calling to preach the Gospel. God did the rest. God arranged all the details for Peter and Cornelius to come together so Peter could preach the Gospel to them. There is no salvation without the gospel being shared.

So how does this apply to you and me? Please prioritize the sharing of the Gospel in your life and ministry. This is why you were given the Holy Spirit. He wants to empower you to be a witness of the Gospel. (Acts 1:8) If you desire to see God move in miraculous ways, make Jesus Christ and the gospel your focus and part of your conversations.

The Gentiles Receive The Holy Spirit: Acts 10:44-48

"44) While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. 45) All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. 46) For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, 47) "Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?" 48) And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay on for a few days."

It was much harder for God to get Peter and his Jewish associates to preach the gospel to the Gentiles than it was for God to gloriously save them upon hearing the gospel. The text says, "While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message." Notice the gospel had to be preached and received.

There was no doubt that they were born-again of the Holy Spirit. Why? The gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon them. God did the exact same thing to Cornelius and the

Gentiles as He did to the 120 Jewish followers on the day of Pentecost. They were hearing them speaking in tongues and glorifying God. This was like a Gentile Pentecost!

The end result was that Peter ordered them to be baptized because it was evident that they had become believers. Then Peter and his comrades stayed on for a few days with their new brothers and sisters in Christ.

Ironically, they had no inhibition with them speaking in tongues. That was confirmation that they had become Spirit-filled believers. Their inhibition was that they were Gentiles. It was most likely an awkward few days trying to figure out how to dine with Gentiles.

It wasn't until Paul came along several years later and hammered out the revelation of the body of Christ in Ephesians 2:11-23 that the bride of Christ started harmonizing and accepting one another. Persecution also gave ample opportunity for the Gentile Christians to accept and love their Jewish counterparts. God used the fire of persecution to forge them together.

I'm sure this text leaves some people uncomfortable and full of questions, especially about speaking in tongues. Welcome to the Bible. It is full of mysteries for every sincere theologian! There are numerous things I do not understand, but I have learned to not criticize, reject, or nullify things clearly talked about in the Bible.

The big crisis today in the body Christ is the Pentecostal/Evangelical divide. The big crisis in the early church was the Jew/Gentile divide. I've come to the place of receiving and loving all believers that know and love Jesus Christ and show the fruits that accompany genuine salvation. It's saving faith in Jesus Christ that places a person in the body of Christ. (Ephesians 2:1-10)

The big challenge has always been getting the body of Christ to accept and love each other. The only standard should be acceptance or rejection of Jesus Christ and the gospel. This is always accompanied by the inner sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit producing a new life of obedience to the Word and personal holiness. If there is no change, there is no salvation. It's that simple.

The Critics and the Cure: Acts 11:1-18

"1) Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. 2) And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him, 3) saying, 'You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.'"

It was bound to happen. It always does. The critics stepped up and became vocal. They accused Peter of wrongdoing because he went into the Gentiles and dined with them. Their traditions and legalism was more important than what God was doing.

In the context, Peter did the right thing. He could have asserted his authority, but instead he openly and very humbly told the whole story. Acts 11:1-18 is basically a repeat of Acts 10. First, he shared the story of Cornelius and the angel visitation. Then he retold his own visions and the Holy Spirit's command to him.

Verse 18 says, "and when they heard this, they quieted down, and glorified God, saying, "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life." Hearing context can calm controversy.

I maintain that "it is our job to tell the story; but it is God's job to move the mountain." We always get in trouble when we try to force mountains to move in our flesh.

Peter wisely kept the focus on God and what He had done. The Old Testament was not silent about the gospel going to the Gentiles, the legalistic critics were merely blind to that portion of prophetic word. God was about to open their hearts and minds.

The timing was perfect. Persecution quickly mounted again as a result of Stephen's stoning. The orthodox Jewish leaders that rejected Jesus as the Messiah, the gospel message, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit launched a new wave of persecution against the Jewish Christians.

God raised up the rapidly-growing Gentile church as both shelter and aid for their persecuted Jewish counterparts. Because many of the Gentile believers were Roman citizens, the letter from the high priest did not apply to them. As Romans, they were beyond the reach of the Jewish infighting. The high priest had no authority over them and had he laid hands against a Roman, it would have amounted to an insurrection against Rome.

The love and servitude of the Gentile church toward the Jewish believers helped silence the critics. They became a very timely shelter and relief from persecution for their new Jewish friends. This helped shape theology and precipitate a strong bond between the two groups. God's timing was perfect.

Loving your enemy is always the cure for the vocal critic. God often finds a way to silence the critic by putting them in the humble place of needing help and shelter in the time of need. Guess who He often sends to help them?

Methodology is Flexible: Acts 11:19-22

"19) So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone. 20) But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. 21) And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. 22) The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch."

Persecution served the purpose of spreading the gospel. The Jewish believers were content to stay in Jerusalem until a force greater than themselves compelled them to leave. As they fled, they preached the gospel.

Most of them were content to speak only to Jewish people. But there were some mavericks who broke rank and started speaking to Greeks also. The hand of God was upon them and a large number believed and turned to the Lord. When the news reached the church at Jerusalem, they sent Barnabas to oversee the work.

This text reminds us that God is creative. He constantly breaks boxes and does things in unorthodox ways. The gospel is the same. Christian morality is the same. But methodology is flexible.

Be willing to be different. Try new things for the glory of God. Speak to some Greeks about Jesus! Watch what God does.

Saul Moves to Antioch. Acts 11:23-26

“23) Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord; 24) for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord. 25) And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul; 26) and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.”

This text tells the story of the starting of the church at Antioch. According to verses 19-21, it was made up of both Jewish and Gentile believers. When a considerable number of Greeks turned to the Lord, the church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas down to help organize the assembly. (Vs 22)

It is significant that Barnabas “witnessed the grace of God among them.” (Vs 23) The church at Antioch could have easily slipped into carnal legalism. Grace, faith, and walking in the Holy Spirit go hand-in-hand. The next verse builds on this premise.

Good churches are built on good leaders. The text says that Barnabas “was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.” I am coming to the place of being leery of any movement that minimizes or marginalizes the ministry of the Holy Spirit. He is our teacher, guide, and helper.

Barnabas quickly recognized that there was a regional movement or awakening happening in Antioch. Considerable numbers were brought to the Lord. The challenge was to build disciples of the new believers without quenching what God was doing. Barnabas recognized that he needed help.

It was at this time that he recruited Saul. Having been a former Pharisee, Saul understood Jewish tradition. He was an Old Testament scholar and was skilled at using it to defend the gospel against legalism. God also used him to unpack the doctrine of grace. He was the perfect fit for the blended Jewish/Gentile church in Antioch.

The next year was very busy for Barnabas, Saul, and the church at Antioch. It was here, in Antioch, that the disciples were first called “Christians” which basically means “followers of Christ.” (Vs 26). The name was the natural outcome of Saul’s central focus on the person and work of Jesus Christ.

I would argue that Antioch is where the foundational doctrines of the Christian faith were hammered out and applied to daily living. This became the launching pad for the man soon to become known as the Apostle Paul.

Let me emphasize that all people are works in progress. Even Barnabas and Saul were growing in faith and in their understanding of Jesus Christ, the Old Testament Scriptures, and their walk in the Spirit. Much personal growth happens in the motion of doing ministry.

If I could go back in time and pick one New Testament church to join, Antioch would be at the top of my list. Corinth would be a close second. These two churches brought evangelism, faith, grace, and the walk in the Spirit into focus within a local body of believers. They were on the cutting edge of reaching lost and sinful people from very diverse backgrounds and turning them into fruitful followers of Jesus Christ.

They faced huge challenges, but emerged as healthy congregations. It is noteworthy that both Antioch and Corinth are absent from the letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation. Why? I don’t want to stretch that question too far, but both of these works were real, sincere, and effective. They were healthy marriages between evangelism and disciple-making.

An Unusual Open Door: Acts 11:27-30

“27) Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28) One of them named Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the reign of Claudius. 29) And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. 30) And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders.”

God has a plan for everything. The church in Antioch cut through social norms to form a congregation composed of both Jews and Gentiles. That was not the case back in Jerusalem. It was composed of Orthodox Jews who had become believers, but they were still zealous for the Law. (Acts 21:19-21) They despised Paul and the gospel of grace and the doctrine of justification by faith.

So what does that have to do with this text in Acts 11:27-30? God sent a great famine to give the Gentile church an opportunity to love and serve their Jewish counterparts. The church at Antioch took a love offering to help the suffering Jewish believers down in Jerusalem.

Jesus taught in Matthew 5:43-45 that we should love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. This was an opportunity for the church in Antioch to exercise this principle. In Matthew 6:21, Jesus also taught that “where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” Love put in action becomes a bonding glue.

Though this may seem like an insignificant text, God was at work pulling down walls and building bridges in the early church. Things were about to get very bad for all Jewish people in Jerusalem when the city was invaded and the temple pulled down. Undoubtedly, the Gentile believers were about to become the hiding place and refuge for many Jews fleeing for their lives. God was pulling down the walls of discrimination and prejudice.

God gives all of us ample opportunity to meet the needs of the poor and unfortunate. Could it be that God has His hand in the current immigration crisis in the United States? He is literally dropping the world at the door steps of the western church. May we not respond with blind eyes and closed hearts no matter our political persuasion. I fully suspect that our gold, silver, big homes, and extravagant toys will be a witness against us on the day of judgment. (James 5:1-6)

A few years ago, I had an amazing trip to Guatemala and met many wonderful people! Now my eyes are open to the fact that hundreds of Guatemalans are living among us. God has allowed many thousands from Central and South America to come here in search of hope. It is our job to love them and point them to Jesus and the Gospel.

The Paradoxical Nature of God: Acts 12:1-5

“1) Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them. 2) And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword. 3) When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. Now it was during the days of Unleavened Bread. 4) When he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people. 5) So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God.”

In this chapter we have the martyrdom of James and the supernatural deliverance of Peter in the same context. These two men were among the first disciples Jesus called. They were both with Him on the Mount of transfiguration and taken deeper into the Garden of Gethsemane. Yet within a few short verses they experienced two radically different outcomes.

We could ask the question; “Which one did Jesus love most?” Conventional logic would force us to say, “Peter” because he was spared from the evil design of Herod the king. Yet we know that they were both loved equally.

So how can we explain the radically different outcomes of these two men? One was put to death with a sword, while the other was delivered by angelic intervention. Certainly, it seems like James died prematurely, especially with all that Jesus had invested in him. I have wrestled much with this chapter over the years. Let me share a few brief thoughts.

First, I want to observe that God could have delivered James as well had it been in His will. But he had a different plan and purpose for James. I maintain that his death was used as greatly as Peter's deliverance in the early church. He set the example of dying well for the glory of God. He set the example of choosing death above life for his loyalty to Christ. His death sent shock waves of courage and boldness through the early church. His death was not wasted!

But secondly, this chapter screams that God has a unique and different plan and will for each of us. I always get a bit queasy when I hear people say; "It's always God's will to..." The bottom line is that God is Sovereign, very creative, and in control. That means His will always happens. I cannot imagine a world in which other forces can trump or supersede the will of God. The moment that happens, God is dethroned.

Over the years, I have come to the conclusion that there is a paradoxical mystery to the nature of God. Let me explain. Apart from broad parameters like love and truth, God is not restrained by boxes. He is free to do as He pleases, with whomever or whatever He pleases, whenever He pleases to do it, but He is not random in the process. He is decent and orderly. Mysterious He is, cruel He is not!

His specific will for each one of us will be colored in differently. Related to His sovereignty, it seems that love, mercy, and grace prevail. Yet there will be times that James will be put to death with a sword and Peter will be released. Both fit within His love and sovereignty. Yet I want to stand up as I read Acts 12:1-5 and scream; "But God ... this isn't fair!"

Do you ever feel that way about circumstances in this life?

One of our problems with this discussion boils down to perspective. We have a temporal perspective, but God has an eternal perspective. We read about James being put to death with a sword, but we don't get to read about the heavenly celebration and reunion with Christ that began before the sword was returned to its sheath. We say; "James was the first apostle martyred!" Jesus says; "James was the first apostle I glorified!" What different perspectives.

The Soldiers Square Off: Acts 12:4-6

"4) When he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out before the people. 5) So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God. 6) On the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison."

These verses set the backdrop for one of the most unique stories in the Bible. After successfully killing James the brother of John, Herod the king proceeded to arrest Peter, but the story was about to play out totally differently.

The Christians were developing the reputation of being hard to keep in jail. Herod took no chances with Peter. He had him arrested, delivered him to four squads of soldiers to guard him in the jail.

(There were four soldiers in a squad, which meant Herod allocated 16 trained professionals to guard one Galilean fisherman-turned-preacher.) -dj

They took extraordinary precautions with Peter. These soldiers knew their lives were on the line with this mission. Security was tight.

The other prisoners undoubtedly recognized that a political prisoner was among them. The climate had changed and become very tense. The former fisherman from Galilee was being treated like a notorious criminal. The scene was almost comical. He was even being held in chains in his cell. The chains were much stronger than the ropes he formerly used to retrieve his fishing nets.

Verse 5 says; “So Peter was kept in prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God.” Did you see what just happened? The text tells us of two armies amassed against each other. In these verses, elite Roman soldiers are lined up against Prayer Warriors. The physical and the spiritual square off against each other. This suddenly becomes pregnant with insights.

Before getting into the rest of the story, I want to emphasize the power and importance of prayer. This text underlines the fact that prayer moves the hand and heart of God. When God steps up every power and authority on earth steps down. He always wins.

Make no mistake – we are not called to put faith in prayer. As Christians we put our faith in God! Prayer is merely our communications network. Yet verse 5 indicates that when the church got serious about prayer the scales were immediately tipped in their favor.

When James was arrested earlier in this chapter and beheaded with the sword, there was no mention of the church praying on his behalf. But when Peter was arrested and facing the same fate, suddenly the church was moved to prayer. What is it going to take in our days for churches to stop playing and start praying?

In Ephesians 6, we are called to put on the full armor of God. We are God's army. The text ends with a call to prayer. (See Ephesians 6:18-20) Prayer is our greatest weapon. It is our communication network with God. When the church starts praying earnestly, God always responds.

Peter is Gone: Acts 12:6-11

“6) On the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and guards in front of the door were watching over the prison. 7) And behold, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter’s side and woke him up, saying, “Get up quickly.” And his chains fell off his hands. 8) And the angel said to him, “Gird yourself and put on your sandals.” And he did so. And he *said to him, “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me.” 9) And he went out and continued to follow, and he did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. 10) When they had passed the first and second guard, they came to the iron gate that leads into the city, which opened for them by itself; and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel departed from him. 11) When Peter came to himself, he said, “Now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.””

God has a variety of resources at His disposal to carry out His plans. He can work through people. He can work through angelic intervention. He can work through His Holy Spirit. He can speak into a situation through His authority. He can manifest His power at any time in miraculous ways. He can manipulate the weather, animals, or even the waves of the sea. He sometimes used storms, a flood, earthquakes, famines, and even a whale to rescue Jonah. At the end of the story of Jonah, He used a single worm. These are but a few options available to Him. God has many servants at His disposal.

In this story, He dispatched one angel to set Peter free from the prison cell. The four squads of elite Roman soldiers were totally unconscious of the events transpiring around them. Even Peter thought he was seeing a dream. The chains fell off and the gates opened as if by themselves. Peter just walked out of the prison as if he was on a Sunday stroll. It was so smooth it was almost anti-climatic. It was definitely not the blazing guns and nail-biting drama of modern escape movies.

People sometimes complain; “I never get to see God work in dramatic ways!” Neither did Peter. It just happened as if he was seeing a dream. In fact, verse 11 says; “And when Peter came to himself, he said, now I know for sure that the Lord has sent forth His angel and rescued me...” He was part of it and yet he was not conscious of it.

I can just imagine the soldiers having a similar awakening. One moment Peter was there and the prison was safe and secure. They blink their eyes and he is suddenly gone –but they missed the whole thing. They had no idea how Peter escaped. He was just gone! When Herod examined them, they were led away to execution as if they were derelict of their duties. (See Acts 12:19)

When God chooses to work supernaturally, it sometimes has negative ramifications for those on the periphery of the story. Jesus created, loved, and died for those Roman soldiers as well.

Maybe some became believers before they died. They certainly had much to think about as they awaited their fate.

But back to my main point, none of the main players in the story saw anything unusual happen. It just happened. During His public ministry, the critics of Jesus were constantly asking for a sign. He was working daily but they couldn't see it or connect the dots. Yet, in three short years, human history was forever changed. But those in the story couldn't see the bigger picture. They couldn't see that God was working in dramatic ways. They missed it!

Many today are in the same hypnotic state. God is working all around us in extraordinary ways, but most are missing it. They are complaining; "I never get to see God work in extraordinary ways!" Really?

Back to the story. I can just imagine the two guards in the cell who were responsible for watching over Peter. They knock at the door and say; "Captain, I think we've got a problem!" After a yawn, the captain asks; "What's the problem?" Then with shaking voices they respond; "Peter is gone!" Suddenly the midnight prison comes to life. Then the big question; "What happened?" They respond, "We didn't see anything unusual, but Peter is gone!"

Let me sound a wake-up call for the church today; "Peter is **gone!**" Our world has drastically changed right before our eyes. Nothing is the same anymore. You may not have noticed it while it was happening, but "Peter is **gone!**" Extraordinary things have been happening in a compressed way right before our eyes. It is very much like the previous years to this story in the book of Acts. Things changed radically and dramatically between the start of the public ministry of Jesus and the launch of the church in Antioch for the Gentile believers.

When God does hundreds of things in a compressed time frame, it is an indication of something very big. We are living in extraordinary times! Don't miss what God is doing. Something momentous, even epochal is unfolding right before our eyes!

The Second Wave: Acts 12:5-17

"5) So Peter was kept in the prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God.

12) And when he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. 13) When he knocked at the door of the gate, a servant-girl named Rhoda came to answer. 14) When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her joy she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter was standing in front of the gate. 15) They said to her, "You are out of your mind!" But she kept insisting that it was so. They kept saying, "It is his angel." 16) But Peter continued knocking; and when they had opened the door, they saw him and were amazed. 17) But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had led him out of the prison. And

he said, "Report these things to James and the brethren." Then he left and went to another place."

There seems to be a connection between prayer and faith, but this text exposes a lapse of faith in the early church. They were praying for Peter's release, but were filled with doubt and denial when it actually happened. There are some beautiful insights in this text. Let's briefly examine a few.

First, prayer is always the right course of action. It might include confession and repentance, but it is always right to seek God. Certainly it involves worship, praise, intercession, and adoration. It is both a relationship and faith-building exercise. Prayer is about much more than getting our way, it's about deepening our walk with God. The prayer room is where seasoned disciples are raised up.

Second, a lack of faith on our behalf does not hinder God from working. It only takes mustard seed sized faith to move mountains. (Matthew 17:20) Initially, God will move some mountains to build our faith. But when mountains start moving, our faith starts growing exponentially. In short order, you will be ready to stand before Mt Everest. Seasoned prayer warriors pray for things the average Christian might view as lunacy. Why? They've stood before impossible mountains before and watched them move in Jesus Name.

Third, God wants His church to unite in prayer. Verse five says; "... but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church of God." In Mark 11:17 Jesus said; "My house shall be a house of prayer for all nations." They had turned it into a robber's den. He wants His church to become a House of prayer. In Acts 6:4 the apostles did a "reset" and focused on prayer and the ministry of the Word. God may allow trials and adversity simply to call His people back to prayer.

Finally, every new generation needs to answer the call to prayer and walking in the Spirit. In a very real sense, Acts 12 was another "reset", but this time it was aimed at the second wave of disciples. In this chapter, James and Peter were put on the sidelines. It was time for the next generation of leaders to step up. The second wave of leaders needed to stand up and face a seemingly impossible mountain without Peter or James at the helm. A church is not measured by the greatness of its pastor, it is measured by the depth of its people.

They wavered a bit in unbelief, but they did the right thing. God was preparing them for bigger things. He was raising up many leaders. He was about to launch them around the world. They needed prayer and listening to the Holy Spirit to be their primary method. It should come as no surprise how the next chapter in the book of Acts begins.

The Disturbance: Acts 12:18-19

"18) Now when day came, there was no small disturbance among the soldiers as to what could have become of Peter. 19) When Herod had searched for him and had not found him, he

examined the guards and ordered that they be led away to execution. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and was spending time there.” Acts 12:18-19

God has a habit of stirring things up. “When day came, there was no small disturbance among the soldiers as to what could have become of Peter.” I’m sure there was a thorough investigation. The chains were examined, the doors were checked, even the gate was looked at closely. Finally, the guards were examined to see if there was a Jesus sympathizer among them.

This line of investigation must have turned up some positive sentiment for The Way. After all, Cornelius and his Italian cohort had come to Christ in the previous chapter.

Herod concluded it was an inside job. There was no tolerance to consider the Divine Intervention Theory. That would have been the modern equivalent of admitting an Intelligent Designer pulled off the origins of the universe. The notion was quickly dismissed.

(For Herod to have all sixteen soldiers killed, he would have had to conclude that all sixteen were either horribly incompetent or all sixteen were involved in a conspiracy to free Peter. In either case, it would seem reasonable to question the competence and/or wisdom of whomever picked these particular sixteen soldiers for this job. That was, of course, Herod. His propensity for mercilessly killing his detractors probably accounts for the lack of “pushback” after Peter’s inexplicable escape.) -dj

Herod chose to kill four squads of soldiers rather than yield to the notion that the finger of God was responsible. Some people are dogmatically closed to the notion of the existence of God. They refuse to acknowledge Him or humble themselves before Him. They are blind and deaf to any and all evidence that points to God. They would rather die as atheists than live as Christians. The rest of the story screams that God is more than willing to accommodate their foolish fate!

Worm Manure: Acts 12:20-24

“20) Now he was very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon; and with one accord they came to him, and having won over Blastus the king’s chamberlain, they were asking for peace, because their country was fed by the king’s country. 21) On an appointed day Herod, having put on his royal apparel, took his seat on the rostrum and began delivering an address to them. 22) The people kept crying out, “The voice of a god and not of a man!” 23) And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died. 24) But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied. 25) And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their mission, taking along with them John, who was also called Mark.”

If you stand back and look at the big picture, this text captures the contrast between God’s program and the memory of the opposition. During his life, Herod was feared as an oppressor.

He tried to stomp out the cause of God. In the end, he died and he was consumed by worms. History has long forgotten him.

Herod reeked from self-glory and pride. The crowd called him a god, but they secretly viewed him as a devil. In truth, they celebrated his death more than his life. So is the fate of every mortal who deceives themselves into thinking they have attained godhood. Shortly after their death they are reduced to a pile of worm manure.

By contrast the text says; “(24) But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.” The gospel went on to change the course of human history. Peter became a household name and many throughout history have been named after him! The wicked always come to an end and slip away into obscurity. When was the last time you met someone named “Herod?”

Change of Reputation: Acts 12:25

“(25) And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their mission, taking along with them John, who was also called Mark.”

It is fascinating following names over the course of the next chapter in the book of Acts. Barnabas and Saul return from Jerusalem “when they had fulfilled their mission.” They were both reliable and highly responsible men. They faithfully distributed the money that had been entrusted to them. (See Acts 11:27-30) Christian character is often measured by a person's ability to manage money with no drift toward Judas Syndrome.

When they returned to Antioch, they were accompanied by John Mark. He was one of the twelve Apostles who accompanied Jesus during His public ministry. Though not stated in the text, Mark undoubtedly was going to Antioch to ground the Gentile church in the life and teachings of Jesus. According to Colossians 4:10, he was the cousin of Barnabas. It may have been during his stay in Antioch that the gospel of Mark was recorded. It was widely circulated among the Romans.

Notice also that Acts 12:25 talks about “Barnabas and Saul.” By the middle of Acts 13, the name “Saul” is permanently changed to “Paul.” (Vs 9) Also the order of their names are changed to “Paul and Barnabas.” (Vs 42, 46) Paul was gaining in prominence. He becomes the central figure in the book of Acts moving forward. (More about the meaning of the name “Paul” as we get into the next chapter.)

As you grow as a Christian, your reputation should change. With years of walking with Jesus, your name should evoke a different response from people. Over time, you should no longer be known as the person you formerly were before coming to Jesus. In a sense, every Christian should have a Saul to Paul metamorphosis. This change becomes part of your testimony.

Stop and ask yourself; “Is my reputation changing?” If it is not, you have reason to be concerned. Your relationship with Jesus should affect the way other people see and perceive you!

Unique Glimpse into Church Structure: Acts 13:1

“1) Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.” Acts 13:1

This verse describing the leadership structure in the church at Antioch may take you by surprise. Absent is the notion of “senior pastor” or a “lead elder.” Instead there is a plurality of leaders and gifts. It is also multinational and multicultural. The church at Antioch was instead led by a godly team.

I personally believe this is a reflection of Ephesians 4:11-12. Let me quote; “11) And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, 12) for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ;”

There are five distinct ministry gifts mentioned in this context. Each of them adds an important dimension to the church. Where there is a mature plurality of equals, Jesus is honored as head of the church and the leading of the Holy Spirit is earnestly sought. It seems that the church in Jerusalem had the same model. It was led by a team of godly men. Both churches had autonomy and self governance, yet held to a common confession of faith.

I fully understand there are other Scriptures like the seven churches in Revelation that seem to point to a senior pastor model. However, I honestly do not see the New Testament being definitive about church structure apart from Jesus Christ being the head of His church. I have seen strengths and weaknesses with every system.

Seeking Jesus Christ, listening to the Holy Spirit and remaining true to Scripture are the three priorities of any church model. Where God is sincerely put first, then His presence, power, and anointing follow.

A thread on structure that does flow through the New Testament could be defined as the Acts 6:4 focus; “But we will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word.” The next two verses in Acts 13:2-3 underline this same priority. Seeking the Lord as church leaders through fasting and prayer was a priority. This is when and where the Holy Spirit clearly spoke to them about ministry direction.

The goal was to avoid personal agendas and power personalities that seek to control or manipulate the church. These are always yellow lights of carnality. Jesus shares His glory with no man or woman!

Many churches have fallen into the clutches of Diotrephes mentioned in 3 John 1:9-10. He wanted to be first among them and control everything. It was disastrous for the church. Many churches today are rendered ineffective from the same carnal and ungodly dominance.

Spirit-Filled Staff Meeting: Acts 13:2-4

“2) While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” 3) Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. 4) So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus.” Acts 13:2-4 NASB

These verses speak volumes about the prayer focus on the leadership level of the early church. This was undoubtedly the single highest priority passed on by the Apostles in Jerusalem. (See Acts 6:4)

The wording in verse 2 is intriguing. Notice, the NASB says; “while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting...” ESV and NIV says; “while they were worshipping the Lord and fasting...” The emphasis goes beyond merely praying. They were earnestly seeking the Lord on a regular basis. Worshipping God and seeking Him was their agenda. They were not casually “opening in prayer” at the beginning of their staff meeting and then rushing into the rest of the agenda.

It is significant that “fasting” was part of the meeting. This may have been a special time of a longer duration set aside by the staff to seek God. The text does not elaborate. They may have stated the year or month with a dedicated time of fasting and seeking God. Some believe they may have ended the week with a day of fasting and worship as leaders. “How” they did it is not mentioned. The fact “that” they set aside time for fasting, prayer, and worship is significant.

It was during one of these times of fasting, worship, and prayer that the Holy Spirit clearly spoke to them as church leaders. They were to set aside Barnabas and Saul “for the work to which I have called them.” They were being sent out by the Holy Spirit.

With this very clear and specific word from the Holy Spirit, they 1) fasted, 2) prayed, 3) laid hands on them, and 4) sent them away. This was a commissioning service for mission work. Verse 4 says, “So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit...” I believe in the importance of a sending church. They had both covering and accountability. They later reported back to the church at Antioch. (Acts 14:25-28)

What grabs me most in this text is the fervor and intentionality of the leadership in seeking Jesus Christ as the head of the church. This was far from a modern staff meeting or business meeting. The Holy Spirit and not the board president was in charge. I realize there is a place for business meetings, but this pictures a radically different and refreshing way of seeking God.

This lines up well with Acts 1:4 to wait for the promise of the Holy Spirit. Every local church needs a way to seek the agenda of the Holy Spirit and not merely the agenda of power brokers in the church. This is the difference between fleshly ministry and Spirit-filled and Spirit-directed ministry. I have little time or tolerance for carnal ministry at this time in my life. People's issues always show up on leadership teams, but intentionality must take place to minimize its influence. Jesus shares His throne with no carnal man or woman.

The Power Encounter: Acts 13:4-12

“4) So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. 5) When they reached Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they also had John as their helper. 6) When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they found a magician, a Jewish false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus, 7) who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence. This man summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. 8) But Elymas the magician (for so his name is translated) was opposing them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. 9) But Saul, who was also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze on him, 10) and said, “You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord? 11) Now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time.” And immediately a mist and a darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking those who would lead him by the hand. 12) Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord.”

The first missionary team was sent out by the Holy Spirit. It was composed of Barnabas, Saul and John Mark. It is intriguing that the Holy Spirit did not specifically call John Mark to be on this team. (See Acts 13:2) One might argue that he did not have the same grace, unction, and calling for this trip. That becomes significant later in the story. He ended up dropping off the team.

Having been sent out by the Holy Spirit, they knew God was going before them. They did not have an agenda other than preaching the gospel wherever they went. As they traveled, they preached in every Jewish synagogue they encountered. It made for a ready audience.

When they reached Paphos, they encountered a magician who was a Jewish false prophet. His name was Bar-Jesus or Elymas. He had some degree of demonic powers and had attached himself to Sergius Paulus, who was the proconsul over the region. Satan often sends his false workers to influence both people and policy in the political domain. This deceitful practice can be seen throughout the entire Bible.

The text says that the proconsul himself was a man of intelligence. I have discovered that many political figures are intelligent, gifted and reasonable people. They are valid targets for evangelism and the gospel.

Seek to build bridges with them no matter their political affiliation. Put them toward the top of your prospect and prayer list. (See 1 Timothy 2:1-8) Paul consistently sought a hearing with political and community leaders wherever he traveled. It was part of his calling. (See Acts 9:15)

The resistance did not come from Sergius Paulus, it came from Elymas the magician. The proconsul himself sought to hear the word of God, but Elymas was actively running interference against the mission team and the gospel. (Acts 13:7-8)

This set up a power encounter between Paul and Satan's deceitful worker. Paul immediately took authority over Elymas and both exposed and bound the false worker through the authority of Jesus Christ. The magician was immediately rendered powerless and was blinded for a period of time. The same fate happened to Saul earlier in his life and led to his conversion. (See Acts 9:1-9) Jesus has strong ways of dealing with those aligned against Him and the gospel.

Upon seeing what unfolded right before his eyes, the proconsul became a believer and was amazed at the teaching of the Lord. In a real sense, this showdown became a "sign" or "open the door" for the gospel. The same was true of Moses and the magicians of Egypt centuries earlier. God seems to thrive on Power Encounters with Satan's deceitful workers. Some of them become open to the gospel. (See Acts 8:9-13)

Let me make a strong point: Spiritual warfare is not to be feared, rather it is consistently seen in the four gospels and in the book of Acts as a huge open door to advance the gospel. Jesus Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords. He wins every power encounter without exception. (See Philippians 2:9-11; Colossians 2:15)

This story screams of the surpassing greatness of Jesus Christ over the false gods of this world. If you are a Christian, then you are a soldier for Christ. Stand in your authority and expose, resist, and rebuke the devil. James 4:7-8 and 1 Peter 5:8-9 both say the same thing. When believers actively resist and stand firm in their faith, the devil will flee.

This story in Acts 13:4-12 is a common example of how the early church engaged in spiritual warfare and confronted Satan's false workers. There are numerous stories like this in the book of Acts. Once you train yourself to see them, the New Testament is full of similar stories.

Every believer has been given the same authority "in Christ" over the demonic realm. With the overwhelming volume of Scripture on this subject, ignorance is both pathetic and inexcusable!

Inner Team Conflict: Acts 13:13

"Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; but John left them and returned to Jerusalem." Acts 13:13

We now have a mention that John Mark left Barnabas and Paul and returned to Jerusalem. This created a long standing rift between Paul and John Mark. (See Acts 15:36-41) It was so toxic that it eventually split the team of Barnabas and Paul and they formed two separate teams.

Historically, many pastors and scholars have been hard on John Mark and questioned his commitment level. But there are some facts about him that are often ignored.

First, he was not sent out by the church at Antioch, he was sent out by the church at Jerusalem. He was not mentioned by name by the Holy Spirit in Acts 13:2, only Barnabas and Saul were signified by name.

Second, Acts 13:13 states very specifically that John Mark returned to Jerusalem and not Antioch. He was on a different mission and reported to a different headship. He was most likely sent to bring a report back to Jerusalem about what God was doing among the Gentiles. He was indeed fulfilling his mission.

Third, John Mark was one of the early disciples called by Jesus and most likely accompanied Him during His public ministry. He may have been the disciple described in Mark 14:51-52. He was like an investigative reporter. He was older than Paul in the faith and had more years of ministry experience, yet Paul belittled him.

Fourth, early on in his ministry, Paul was very controlling and demanding. The split between Barnabas and Paul over John Mark exposed a deeper flaw in Paul than in John Mark. Early on, Paul was very rigid and micromanaged people. He was a self-appointed authority and John Mark danced to a different drummer.

The truth is, they had a mutual disrespect for each other. Interpersonal relationship problems often quench the Spirit. This is not spiritual warfare, this is spiritual immaturity.

This whole story is filled with lessons on team health and leadership principles. Paul was so focused on his mission, he failed to value and affirm his team. It is interesting that the Son of Encouragement saw value in John Mark and chose him above Paul as his long term traveling and ministry companion. (See Acts 4:36 and Acts 15:39-40)

Years later Paul went through a change and specifically requested Mark to join him in ministry. (See 2 Timothy 4:11) I believe this is a sign that both men had grown considerably and matured.

Ministry will either make you or break you. Those who survive in ministry grow up, learn to forgive, and change immensely over the course of time. If they calcify because of anger and bitterness, they become unusable.

Over the years, Paul took on some of the leadership traits of Barnabas and became an encourager himself. It was Paul that eventually penned Philippians 2:1-5 and 1 Corinthians

13:1-7. As the full story unfolds, it is a picture of the grace and love of God at work in the lives of both Paul and John Mark.

So what can we take away from this story? Be patient and allow God to finish his work in people before you judge their value. Also remember that God is not finished with you yet either. I have a tendency to see myself and others as works in progress. I confess, I gravitate toward Barnabas. I strive to add value to people. I don't see them as throwaways.

Sharing The Gospel from the Old Testament: Acts 13:14-15

“14) But going on from Perga, they arrived at Pisidian Antioch, and on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. 15) After the reading of the Law and the Prophets the synagogue officials sent to them, saying, “Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it.”

We now discover why attending the local synagogue on the Sabbath was such a good strategy. They automatically read from the Law and the Prophets during the service. Every synagogue had scrolls of every book in the Old Testament.

Because Paul was a former Pharisee, he was an expert in the Old Testament. He was well equipped to share the gospel using the Old Testament. It was a natural launch into the Gospel.

I believe the Old Testament is vital for every believer. It helps put a biblical foundation under our faith. Romans 8:1-5 explains how Jesus fulfilled the Law, so that we might be set free to walk in the Spirit.

Knowing the Old Testament puts the whole story together. It colors in the full progressive revelation of God to mankind. It paints the fall and human depravity in living color. It shows that God had a plan for human redemption from the beginning. It also reveals the holy character and nature of God and the basis for righteous judgment.

It puts the gospel into the historical context as it unfolded throughout human history. The early Christians were able to open the Old Testament and show the many prophecies that pointed to Jesus Christ.

I beg you to study the whole Bible. Paul told Timothy, “15) and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. 16) All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; 17) so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:15-17)

In this context, he was referring to the Old Testament because the New Testament was not yet complete or compiled. Embrace the whole Bible. Study the whole Bible. Master the full story of God's revelation to mankind.

Both Jesus and Paul were masters of the Old Testament. Attending the synagogue on the Sabbath and reading from the Law and the Prophets set the stage for the gospel.

The Gospel From the Old Testament: Acts 13:16-25

“16) Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, “Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen: 17) The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with an uplifted arm He led them out from it. 18) For a period of about forty years He put up with them in the wilderness. 19) When He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land as an inheritance—all of which took about four hundred and fifty years. 20) After these things He gave them judges until Samuel the prophet. 21) Then they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. 22) After He had removed him, He raised up David to be their king, concerning whom He also testified and said, ‘I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My heart, who will do all My will.’ 23) From the descendants of this man, according to promise, God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, 24) after John had proclaimed before His coming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel. 25) And while John was completing his course, he kept saying, ‘What do you suppose that I am? I am not He. But behold, one is coming after me the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie.’”

We now have a sample of Paul’s preaching. He walked through the whole Old Testament to paint a panoramic view of the Gospel ending at the feet of Jesus Christ. He showed that God consistently worked through the nation of Israel bringing them to the promise of the Messiah.

Admittedly, this was a very Jewish message, but remember, Paul was in a Jewish synagogue. He applied the gospel to the audience. Jesus became the focus and climax of his message. He wove the whole Old Testament together to make the case that Jesus Christ was indeed the promised Messiah. His message was not finished yet, but his argument was clearly presented and almost impossible to refute.

This text is most likely not your favorite passage in the Bible, but for his Jewish audience that day, it was like a lightning bolt of truth. The Holy Spirit used it to open their eyes to the gospel. All of the Bible stories they had heard for years suddenly made sense. The Holy Spirit was opening their eyes.

Never underestimate the value of the Old Testament or the many Bible stories learned by a child that “gives them the wisdom that leads to salvation.” (2 Timothy 3:15) When the Holy Spirit suddenly turns the lights on in a person's understanding, Jesus is calling their name and inviting them to follow Him. He is the one that draws people to salvation.

The Good News About The Bad News: Acts 13:26-33

“26) Brethren, sons of Abraham’s family, and those among you who fear God, to us the message of this salvation has been sent. 27) For those who live in Jerusalem, and their rulers, recognizing neither Him nor the utterances of the prophets which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled these by condemning Him. 28) And though they found no ground for putting Him to death, they asked Pilate that He be executed. 29) When they had carried out all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb. 30) But God raised Him from the dead; 31) and for many days He appeared to those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, the very ones who are now His witnesses to the people. 32) And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, 33) that God has fulfilled this promise to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, ‘You are My Son; today I have begotten You.’” Acts 13:26-33

After a brief survey of the Old Testament, Paul preaches the good news of the gospel to them. He proclaimed the fact of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. He walked through the details of what had recently occurred in Jerusalem. The tragic story had spread far and wide.

At first hearing, it sounds like bad news. The Jewish leaders missed all the testimony of the Old Testament prophets about the Messiah and instead of welcoming Him, they had Him executed. How could that be good news? They killed the Messiah! (Vs 28)

The answer comes in the fact that Jesus Christ was the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. (John 1:29-34) They did not execute the Messiah, they unknowingly fulfilled the mission of the Messiah. (Read Isaiah 53) Every prophecy, image, type, shadow, and picture of the Messiah in the Old Testament was exactly fulfilled. Notice verse 29: “And when they had carried out all that was written about Him, they took Him down from the cross and laid Him in a tomb.”

The good news starts with the next verse: “30) But God raised Him from the dead.” He is alive! The gospel is not about death, it’s about **life**! The Gospel is about the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. His death paid for the sins of humanity. His resurrection conquered the grave and paved the way for forgiveness and eternal life.

Jesus began a new system of salvation. It was no longer based on self goodness by keeping the Law. That system did not work. It failed Israel and it failed humanity. Why? Because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. The Law condemns every human to death and judgment. Jesus is the only one who was innocent according to the Law. He kept it without any violation. He had no sin.

That qualified Him to be our substitute payment. He was indeed the innocent lamb of God. The priests and religious leaders didn’t recognize it, but the true Lamb they put to death on that Passover died on a cross and not on the altar in the temple. He was the Son of God.

The whole imagery of the Old Testament sacrificial system was fulfilled during that Passover. It included God providing Himself as the lamb for the sacrifice in place of Isaac. (Genesis 22) Salvation was now a free gift based on faith. The focus of the gospel was on the resurrection of Jesus Christ and His giving the promise from the Father, being the Holy Spirit. (See Joel 2:28-29; Acts 1:3-5)

When fully understood and embraced, the gospel becomes “Good News!” That’s what Paul said in Acts 13:32; “And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers.” It was the promise of a new relationship with God and a new power for living.

The Power of the Resurrection: Acts 13:34-39

“34) As for the fact that He raised Him up from the dead, no longer to return to decay, He has spoken in this way: ‘I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David.’ 35) Therefore He also says in another Psalm, ‘You will not allow Your Holy One to undergo decay.’ 36) For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep, and was laid among his fathers and underwent decay; 37) but He whom God raised did not undergo decay. 38) Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, 39) and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses.” Acts 13:34-39

Paul now focuses on the resurrection. This is what separated Jesus Christ from the Old Testament prophets like David and all religious leaders. He conquered death! The curse of sin, which is death, could not hold Him. Compare this with 1 Corinthians 15:54-57. He defeated death –and proved it by His resurrection!

But Paul goes one step further in Romans 1:4. He points out that Jesus was, “declared to be the Son of God with power by the resurrection from death.” All the Old Testament patriarchs died and decayed in tombs. The same was true for every world religious leader. Why worship a dead man? But Jesus Christ rose from the dead. He conquered death. He overcame the curse of sin. The message of the resurrection is the punch line in the Gospel message.

Paul then makes the point that this qualifies Jesus Christ to forgive our sins and free us from the curse of the Law. Those who want to live by the Law, die by the Law. Galatians 3:10 makes this abundantly clear. Romans 8:1-4 takes it even further. The good news of Jesus Christ is forgiveness, freedom and life. “There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus” because we have been set free from the Law of sin and of death.

But Paul was speaking to legalistic religious people. They failed to understand his message. They were focused on self-righteousness. They were so preoccupied trying to save themselves by their own good deeds, they refused to accept the free gift of forgiveness and new life in Christ. They did not see themselves as sinful or lost.

When the Holy Spirit opens a person's heart to the gospel, it is as profound as when God spoke into the darkness of Genesis 1:2-3 and said; "Let there be light!" Suddenly darkness was replaced by light.

So it is with the lost and sinful man, woman, or child who hears the gospel and responds with saving faith. They are born-again and filled with the Spirit of God. Their darkness is flooded with the light of God's love, forgiveness, and acceptance. They become children of God by faith in Jesus Christ.

Amazing Day at the Synagogue: Acts 13:42-43

"42) As Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people kept begging that these things might be spoken to them the next Sabbath. 43) Now when the meeting of the synagogue had broken up, many of the Jews and of the God-fearing proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, were urging them to continue in the grace of God."

What an amazing meeting at the synagogue that day. For the first time, the Bible was explained in a way that made sense. The Holy Spirit was working and enlightening many hearts and minds to the gospel.

It is always a delight when people "see and understand" the gospel. Many Jews and God-fearing proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas. Their hearts were burning within them. The truth about Jesus Christ being the Messiah was planted within them. They were understanding the meaning of grace.

Jesus is not a contradiction to the Old Testament, He is the fulfillment. The Bible is just a history book until the message of the gospel is clearly presented. When the veil is taken away and the Holy Spirit turns the lights on, the Bible suddenly becomes the most amazing book in the world. (See 2 Corinthians 3:14-18)

This is one of the signs that accompanies genuine salvation. The Holy Spirit becomes the inner teacher. The Bible is transformed into the words of life, truth and freedom. It becomes manna to the soul and spirit. Show me a person's Bible and I will describe the sincerity of their walk with God!

Ignited and Launched for the Glory of God: Acts 13:44-47

"44) The next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of the Lord. 45) But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming. 46) Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. 47) For so the Lord has commanded us, 'I have placed You as a light for the Gentiles, That You may bring salvation to the end of the earth.' ""

This text captures the tug of war between the flesh and the Spirit. When God is at work the enemy is quick to push back. “44) The next Sabbath, nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of God.”

Nothing this big had happened in Pisidian Antioch previously. God was at work. The whole city was buzzing with conversation about Paul’s message of Jesus Christ being the Messiah and the fulfillment of the Old Testament.

“45) But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming.” It didn’t take long for the enemy to inflame the opposition with jealousy. James 3:14- 16 warns, “14) But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. 15) This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. 16) For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing.”

The earthly, natural, and demonic showed up quickly to divide the crowd. I’ve seen it happen many times right in the middle of movements from God. Ministry is never easy. As long as there are carnal people, there will always be opposition in ministry. It’s one of the unwritten principles in the Ministry 101 Handbook.

But God causes all things to work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28) Without skipping a beat or getting side tracked, Paul pointed to Isaiah 42:6 and 49:6 and embraced his higher calling. He recognized that the door to the Jews was closing for him because God was opening a greater door to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. God’s greater purpose was coming into focus.

When you look at this story through the lens of faith, what looked like opposition became the launching pad for world missions. Peter and others still focused on work among the Jews, but Paul and Barnabas embraced their calling to boldly bring the gospel to the Gentiles. They continued to preach to Jewish people as they encountered them, but their frame of reference exploded to encompass all people and all nations. This insignificant story of jealousy and opposition changed the course of human history.

Paul recognized that God was in control. Rather than getting discouraged, he aligned himself with the greater plan and purpose of God. This story exposed the root problem –their vision and focus was way too small! We can only expect great things from God when we attempt great things for God. Faith steps up in the face of what is seemingly impossible.

God did not call Noah to build a rowboat to save his family. He called him to build an ark to preserve all animal life on planet earth. Those two missions were radically different. The first was man-sized, the second was God-sized.

Something similar happened in this story. God used the opposition in that synagogue to open the eyes of Paul and Barnabas to see their greater calling. The Holy Spirit launched them! Their fuel tanks were filled in Acts 13:3-4. The fuel was ignited in Acts 13:46-47.

What is it going to take for God to ignite your fuel? When are you going to launch beyond mediocrity into the glory of God? When is the fight around you going to give you the courage to live by faith and answer the call into something truly “God-Sized?”

In His Time! Acts 13:48-52

“48) When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. 49) And the word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region. 50) But the Jews incited the devout women of prominence and the leading men of the city, and instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. 51) But they shook off the dust of their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium. 52) And the disciples were continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.”

These five verses develop a picture that often plays out around the world. A significant movement of God is matched by stiff opposition and harsh persecution. The Gentiles rejoiced and many believed. The Jews aroused prominent men and women against Paul and Barnabas and organized persecution to drive them from their region.

So, which side won? Among the Gentiles there was great rejoicing and “as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.” (Vs 48) The doctrine of election became a guarantee of significant fruitfulness among the Gentiles.

Among the Jews, organized opposition drove the gospel team from their region. The doctrine of rejection was used by God to move Paul and Barnabas to their next assignment.

It looks like there were two very opposite outcomes in this text. In verse 51, Paul and Barnabas “shook off the dust of their feet in protest against the Jews.” By contrast in verse 52, “the disciples were continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.” The Gentiles were celebrating God and His favor.

This tension plays out in many regions around the world. Paul and Barnabas followed the leading of the Holy Spirit and moved on to Iconium. They continued to share the gospel elsewhere while they turned the future harvest in Pisidian Antioch over to God and others.

There will come a time that God wants you to move on. When Paul and Barnabas shook the dust off their feet, they were declaring their mission was complete. Their watch was over. They had fulfilled their responsibility.

But that did not mean God was done with the city. They left behind many seeds that were firmly planted and a group of disciples that were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit.

It's time to get a broader perspective. God works in regions over time and uses many people in the process. The same is true with the way God works in the lives of people. Just because you were met with opposition does not mean God has run out of options. He has a plan and it most likely involves other people and time.

1 Corinthians 3:6 captures this phenomenon. Paul concluded; "I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth." There comes a time to "let go and let God." Never lose sight of the fact that God's work unfolds over time!

As the years have turned into decades, I have watched in amazement as God changed regions and reached people that were previously very closed to the Gospel. It underlines for me that God works over time and through many people and circumstances.

Great freedom came when I realized that I was not responsible to do it all! I cannot force God or others into my time-frame. I used to be caught in a time warp trap. I wanted it done, "Now!"

I am learning to hand the baton over to God and others to complete His work in His time. Mountains often move over time. Many of my mountains from 40 or 50 years ago no longer exist. God is faithful, but they moved over time.

The Iconium Experience: Acts 14:1-7

"1) In Iconium they entered the synagogue of the Jews together, and spoke in such a manner that a large number of people believed, both of Jews and of Greeks. 2) But the Jews who disbelieved stirred up the minds of the Gentiles and embittered them against the brethren. 3) Therefore they spent a long time there speaking boldly with reliance upon the Lord, who was testifying to the word of His grace, granting that signs and wonders be done by their hands. 4) But the people of the city were divided; and some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles. 5) And when an attempt was made by both the Gentiles and the Jews with their rulers, to mistreat and to stone them, 6) they became aware of it and fled to the cities of Lycaonia, Lystra and Derbe, and the surrounding region; 7) and there they continued to preach the gospel."

Their time in Iconium offered suspenseful clips for every newsletter. They had a service in the local synagogue that resulted in a large number of conversions. This stirred up stiff opposition against them from both the Jews and Gentiles.

Meanwhile, as they continued to preach in the city, the power of God was present performing signs and wonders. Despite the amazing things God was doing, persecution mounted that included attempts by the rulers to stone them.

Eventually, the mission team had to flee to Lycaonia, Lystra, Derbe, and the surrounding region. As they fled, they continued to preach the gospel. With all of this drama, the gospel became the focal point of every conversation.

The western church wants short term mission trips that guarantee peace and safety. From one side of our mouth we pray to be like the early church. We want to experience power, signs, wonders and many conversions. But in our very next breath we loathe the idea of “suffering for the gospel.” The mere mention of the word “persecution” sends fear waves through the western church.

It appears from this text that signs and wonders go hand in hand with persecution and opposition. The gospel is sent into the heart of a lost, sinful, depraved, and hurting world filled with both victims and wicked people. In this world, demons are real and money and pleasure vehemently oppose the gospel message. There are many people who hate the God of the Bible and enjoy the pleasures of sin.

We now revisit Acts 13:48. The last phrase says; “... as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.” The gospel is to be preached to all, but will be received by a rather small minority. Not everyone views the “good news” as “good news.” Satan will harden many in the world against the gospel.

Noah preached for many years as he built the ark. In the end, only he and his family entered. Jesus ministered for three years with power, signs, and wonders. In the end, they crucified Him. The early church preached the gospel with reliance on grace and the Holy Spirit. The results were a very mixed bag everywhere. His sheep were gathered in while the world actively opposed them.

I suspect as we enter the end times, human civilization will again be polarized. Signs and wonders will accompany the preaching of the gospel while opposition mounts against the true church. The apostate church will confuse the message and embrace the values of the world. Many will be deceived. At some point the antiChrist will grant false signs and wonders to the apostate church and those world religions that are opposed to the true gospel. (See 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12) Meanwhile, the bride of Jesus will be singled out for persecution.

Things have a way of going full circle. As the church age rushes to a climax, the Iconium experience will become commonplace. This text is ready for the big screen in contemporary society. Let's preview the advertising: “Iconium – Coming soon to a town near you!”

The Modern Missionary: Acts 14:8-18

“8) At Lystra a man was sitting who had no strength in his feet, lame from his mother's womb, who had never walked. 9) This man was listening to Paul as he spoke, who, when he had fixed his gaze on him and had seen that he had faith to be made well, 10) said with a loud voice, “Stand upright on your feet.” And he leaped up and began to walk. 11) When the crowds saw

what Paul had done, they raised their voice, saying in the Lycaonian language, “The gods have become like men and have come down to us.” 12) And they began calling Barnabas, Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. 13) The priest of Zeus, whose temple was just outside the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds. 14) But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd, crying out 15) and saying, “Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. 16) In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; 17) and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.” 18) Even saying these things, with difficulty they restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them.”

Opinions can change very quickly. They went from calling Paul and Barnabas “gods” in this paragraph to trying to kill them in the next. The miracle of healing on a lame man opened the door to preach the gospel. But the Greek crowd jumped to the wrong conclusion.

They called Barnabas “Zeus” and Paul “Hermes.” It was with difficulty that they stopped them from presenting sacrifices to them.

It is interesting in verse 14 it says; “When the Apostles, Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed into the crowd...” We here have the title “Apostles” clearly ascribed to both Barnabas and Paul, but neither of them were among the original twelve who were in office prior to the day of Pentecost. This has caused confusion for some. Let’s take a moment and unpack this mystery.

The word “apostle” literally means a “sent one.” Ephesians 4:11 includes this word in a list of five administration gifts of the Holy Spirit for the church. Absent from the list is the word “missionary.” Interestingly, Paul and Barnabas had been sent out by the Holy Spirit on a missionary journey. (See Acts 13:3-4) I maintain the mystery is solved. Those named “apostles” after the day of Pentecost fit the description of the modern term of “missionaries.”

These are often multi-gifted people sent out to start new works. Missionaries are often pioneers bringing the gospel into new regions. Paul and Barnabas both were called and gifted for this role. They usually have thick skin and the ability to face opposition. I praise God for these amazing people.

God Taunts The Adversaries: Acts 14:19-23

“19) But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. 20) But while the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city. The next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe. 21) After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, 22) strengthening the souls of the disciples,

encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” 23) When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” Acts 14:19-23

Things changed very quickly for Paul. They went from calling him Hermes to stoning him within a few days. Some Jews from Antioch and Iconium came down to Lystra and stirred up opposition against Paul and Barnabas. They dragged Paul’s lifeless body out of the city supposing him to be dead. Mission accomplished... or so they thought!

As the disciples were standing around remorsefully taking in the trauma of Paul being killed, he suddenly arose and entered the city with them. According to the text, they didn’t give him CPR, first aid, or life support therapy. He suddenly just stood up. They didn’t even carry him and he didn’t appear to be limping.

Wait...time out... he had just been stoned and left for dead! It would take weeks to recover from those wounds naturally. But the very next day, he went away with Barnabas to Derbe and continued to preach the gospel and make many disciples. It looks like the more they suffered the more effective and fruitful they became!

To be fair, the text does not say that Paul was raised from the dead, but he was healed from the lingering wounds of being stoned. That would have taken weeks of natural recovery, but in Matthew 10:8, Jesus gave His disciples authority to raise the dead as well as heal people. So, instead of having to go through weeks of natural recovery, Paul enjoyed supernatural recovery. He simply got up and went about business as usual!

What makes his story even more interesting, in 2 Corinthians 11:24-27 Paul shares his extended testimony. This guy was whipped five times, beaten with rods three times, stoned, endured several riots against him, was shipwrecked, at one point floated in the water for over 24 hours, was put in both jail and prison, was in constant danger from wild beasts and violent men. He was familiar with being hungry, thirsty, and suffering from hypothermia. At the very least, you have to admit, the guy had resilience. The Lord delivered him out of it time and time again.

But what motivated him? Acts 14:22 says; “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” Philippians 3:10 talks about “the fellowship of His sufferings.” Colossians 1:24 says; “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions.” (I dare not touch the theology hinted at in that verse!)

One thing I do know: the disciples Paul and Barnabas made and the elders they appointed understood suffering for the gospel. They were the real deal! They were filled with boldness, courage, grace, the power of the Holy Spirit, and a willingness to suffer for Jesus.

Let me make an observation: “Miracles and suffering danced hand in hand in the early church.” These two extremes are paradoxical to our modern thinking. But many times the miracles were the byproduct of the suffering and the tribulations endured by the early Christians. You will not see many miracles until you are willing to walk through the valley of tribulation and suffering.

This is where the text gets really interesting. Instead of fleeing, verse 21 says; “... they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch.” The inclusion of this point in verse 21 almost appears to be taunting.

They intentionally and very publicly walked right past the mob that had stoned Paul and left him for dead... and no one touched them again! The reader is left wondering what impact this witness had on their adversaries.

I suspect the Holy Spirit may have been at work creating more “Saul to Paul” conversion stories! Can you imagine the impact of Paul smiling and looking into the eyes of the very people who had recently stoned him and left him for dead? What an irony! His presence added validity to the gospel message and the claim of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. They were looking into the eyes of a walking and talking miracle which they could not explain or deny. Maybe they were persuaded to listen to his message.

Church Planting: Acts 14:21-23

“21) After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, 22) strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” 23) When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” As the first mission trip for Barnabas and Saul comes to an end, they had one final mission to complete. They retraced their steps and appointed elders in every church.

It must be noted that they gave time for God to work in each city. This accomplished two things:

First, it allowed time for spiritual fruit to emerge that accompanies true salvation, especially in areas of persecution. Those who persevere for Christ are usually those who were genuinely converted.

Second, it gave time for spiritual gifts to develop and for leadership to emerge. Given several months, it became clear “in” and “through” whom the Spirit of God was working.

It is important to note that they prayed with fasting when making this decision. (Vs 23) They were expecting the Holy Spirit to lead them as clearly as He had in Acts 13:2-4 with the calling of Barnabas and Saul. Leadership decisions determine the future life of the church.

We learn from the context that they had made “many disciples.” (Vs 21) Paul and Barnabas had planted abundant seed in each city. There was most likely a steady harvest of new believers and spontaneous evangelism taking place daily. They most likely imitated the faith and activity of Paul and Barnabas in these new churches. I suspect they were very dynamic as opposed to being static.

They needed a place and format for corporate worship, teaching, and fellowship. The text sheds no insight on how the new churches were structured, when they met, or what the worship services looked like. However, they were connected back to the church in Antioch as seen in Acts 14:24-28. There was most likely some exchange and guidance from Antioch with the newly formed churches.

Church planting looks romantic, but it’s hard work. It takes time for a new work to take root, start functioning, mature, and find its ministry within the community. The book of Acts leaves us with hundreds of questions about structure, format, mission and accountability. Each group had to study Scripture, make new disciples, and seek God for direction.

They had to look to Jesus to build His church among them. He was the true vine and they were new branches. Each church seemed to be autonomous and self-governing.