

Acts 16:11-15

TRANSLATION

And having set sail from Troas, we ran a straight course for Samothrace, and the next day unto Neapolis, and thence unto Philippi, which is the chief city of a district of Macedonia—a colony. And we were staying in this city for some days. And on the day of the Sabbath, we went out of the city alongside the river, where we thought there to be a place of prayer, and we sat down and were speaking to the women who had come together there. And a certain woman by the name of Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city Thyatira—a “God-fearer”—heard, whose heart the Lord opened to give attention to the things spoken by Paul. And when she was baptized and her household, she urged us saying, “If you have judged me to be a believer in respect to the Lord, come in to my house and stay.” And she persuaded us.

COMMENTARY

A Tree Grows in Philippi

A tiny seed was planted alongside the river of Philippi. Its growth would be phenomenal. It would become a great tree whose branches would soon overspread the entire Roman Empire. But why not start in Amphipolis—the capital of Thrace? Or why not Athens—the cultural womb of the Western world? And why not first to the political leadership? Or to men of wealth and power? Why a few women by the riverbank? Of course, in our modern society the question would be, why not the women? Isn't that a putdown? No, indeed. In that day and in that society the position of women was quite different. Contrary to popular belief, the coming of Christianity into the ancient world did far more to liberate the women than most people realize. In the minds of many, the liberation has not gone far enough, but in Paul's day the focus on

women as instruments in the birth of Christianity was truly remarkable.

Paul had been in Philippi several days. He had obviously come to know something of the city. He apparently knew that there was a special place of prayer along the river. And there he went on the Sabbath day. And there he found Lydia and some of her devout friends. Lydia was a “God-fearer” but not a “proselyte.” She believed devoutly in the teachings of the Jews about God, but she was not a full-fledged member of the Jewish community. She sought her place of prayer by the river. Lydia was a business woman—a dealer in purple cloth, which was a specialty of her native city of Thyatira. We are not told what Paul said on that Sabbath morning that so deeply impressed his hearers, but Lydia was so moved by it that she

accepted his teachings, and both she and her entire household were baptized—at that time an important public declaration that one had become a part of the Christian community. She had been quite evidently a chosen vessel of God to be a part of the footing of the establishing of the church in the Hellenistic world.

Whose heart the Lord had opened to give heed to the words spoken by Paul. Ministry that is effective requires both a spirit-directed message and a spirit-opened heart. How else would Lydia have been able to receive Paul's words? She had no written revelation by which to compare them. Paul was new to her and a newcomer to her city. It would take a miracle of God to bring these two together, and indeed, a miracle occurred. She quickly accepted the message of salvation and baptism into the fellowship, and so did her whole family.

But what was the message? We are not told, and it is of no value to speculate. Lydia's response indicated what had evidently been offered to her—that she could be identified with Christ in faith. The word translated by some as "faithful" literally means "a faith person"—a believer in Christ. There would have been no way to know so soon whether or not Lydia would be faithful to the Lord, but she could be a believer instantly. "If you judge me to be a genuine believer in the Lord" makes better sense.

Come into my house and stay. A beachhead was established on the continent of Europe. It would be part of the vast network of simple fellowships of believers that would stretch from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. The present era of grand buildings and sophisticated facilities has not proven to be more effective than the simple gatherings of believers in the homes.

The entire episode of Lydia and the establishing of the church in Philippi is a most important guidepost, as it was intended to be, in the methodology by which Christ would establish His Church in the world. The task of bringing the eternal God of the universe into the hearts of mankind is a task quite beyond human capacity. The inability to recognize this fact has produced the absurdities of the modern promotional techniques along with hundreds of thousands of "how to do it" books which have reduced the wonder and the glory of identification in the spirit with the God of the universe to a tacky religion which takes its place alongside the carnival booths of a celestial midway. The methods of evangelization have followed suit in the brash and brazen promotions of the carnival huckster. In sharp contrast, the expansion of Christianity into the Western world was launched by a few words from Paul to a few unobtrusive women by the river in Philippi.

Acts 16:16-24

TRANSLATION

And it happened that while we were going to the place of prayer, a certain maiden who had the [demon] spirit of fortune-telling encountered us, whose masters derived much profit from her predictions. This one was following Paul and us, and cried out saying, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaimed to us the way of salvation." She was doing this for many days. And Paul was greatly vexed and turned to the [demon] spirit and said "I charge you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out in the same hour. And her masters, seeing that their hope of profit went out, seized Paul and Silas and hauled them to the marketplace before the authorities. And bringing them to the magistrates, they said, "These men, who are Jews, greatly trouble our city and declare customs which are not lawful to us to receive nor practice, being Romans." And the crowd joined in setting upon them, and the magistrates tore off their garments and beat them with rods. And when they had laid upon them many stripes, they cast them into prison and charged the jailer to keep them securely. He [in turn] charged one, thus, to take them and cast them into the inner prison and secure their feet in the stocks.

COMMENTARY

The Mission to Europe Begins in Jail

It was a strange way to launch the evangelization of the Western world—from a Philippian jail. To compound the matter, Paul was the victim and not the perpetrator of the crime. Still worse, Paul and Silas were treated as criminals who needed the utmost security and the roughest of treatment. And further compounding the injustice, Paul was a Roman citizen which, for reasons that are not clear, he chose not to disclose at the beginning.

The incident that occasioned the imprisonment was bizarre. It was obviously a satanic attack upon Paul and his cohorts, although as we learn from

Paul's letter to the Romans (8:28), God has a way of turning such things for good. It was one thing for the girl to make a scene, but she kept it up day after day. It was not only fraying to the nerves, but it was apparently affecting the work enough for Paul to take action. That it was hindering the ministry and not just a personal vexation was obvious, because the Holy Spirit, through Paul, saw fit to cast the demon out of her. It should be noted here that in the modern day efforts to duplicate the miracles performed by the apostles, there is so much strenuous human effort involved. Exorcising demons, for example, now involves a very complex process of

ceremonies and endless petitions. In the case of the casting out of demons by both Jesus and the apostles, the power of God was instantaneous. There were no all night vigils nor hand-wringing pleadings with the Deity—just the instant response of God to the need. Both the vessel and the fleshly fervency were superfluous to the will of God to accomplish His own given purpose.

The word used to describe the young lady's dubious prowess could be translated "fortune-telling," "prediction," "soothsaying," or "divination." It all adds up to the same thing—the ability of humans to say things beyond the range of normal human knowledge. There are those who have a high degree of sensitivity to other humans—even to something of a "sixth sense." And, of course, there are those who are highly trained in the behavioral sciences who are able to analyze human behavior and make predictions about future potentials. But, of course, they are working with existing data of one kind or another. What we are talking about here is knowledge that is not based upon data, but upon some external source of information, such as a spirit realm. Some may indeed predict the future with uncanny skill, using the data that is available, but telling the future without such facts clearly requires information from such a source. Here is where we get

into the potential phenomenon of satanic activity or demon possession. It is not that future predictions could not come from God Himself, as was true throughout the Bible. It is not common, but quite possible. But where one is operating avowedly outside the range of direct interaction with God, the only alternative would be a demonic spirit. There is, of course, much of charlatanry in the modern phenomenon of "fortune-telling", but where it is seriously practiced and sometimes with inexplicable accuracy, we may be dealing with a satanic factor.

The arrest and maltreatment of Paul and Silas was clearly stated as vengeance from those who had been exploiting the young lady and now found their means of profit gone. It really had nothing to do with customs and practices that would violate Roman law. The radical reaction of the magistrates would certainly give credence to the idea that something deeper was involved than the simple violation of civil rights.

One thing is certain, that God does not spare His servants from grave and unjust mistreatment at the hands of the godless. But it is equally certain that when it occurs, there will be the grace to bear it as we shall see in the next episode.

Acts 16:25-40

TRANSLATION

And at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and worshipping God with hymns, and the prisoners were listening to them. And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and all the doors were immediately opened, but all the prisoners were accounted for. And the jailer awoke and seeing the door to the prison open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing the prisoners to have escaped. And Paul shouted with a great voice saying, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." And having called for a light, he rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. And leading them out he said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved and your house." And they spoke to him the word of the Lord with all those in his house. And he took them in that hour of the night and washed their wounds. And he himself was baptized immediately and all who were his. And when he had brought them into his house, he laid out a table; and all his house rejoiced, having believed God.

And when day came, the magistrates sent the guards, saying, "Loose those men." And the jailer announced the word to Paul, "The magistrates sent to have you released. Now then go out, and go in peace." But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned men who are Romans, and thrown us into prison. And now do they cast us out secretly? Indeed not; but let them come themselves and bring us out." And the guards declared these words to the magistrates, and when they heard that they were Romans, they were afraid. And they came and urged them and led them out, asking them to depart from their city. And having gone out from the prison, they entered the house of Lydia, and seeing her, they encouraged the brethren and went away.

COMMENTARY

Strength Made Perfect in Weakness

It was not rule five in the "Handbook for Happy Christian Living." The singing of hymns in the prison stocks was a

spontaneous expression of their spirits. No one had said to them—"When in trouble, sing." Nor was it done as the

price of deliverance. Of course, the episode has become something of a proof text for those who peddle the absurdity that God will answer one's prayers only if one first gives the proper praising. This is part of the rather widespread "formula praying." Prayer is divided into so many parts of praise; so many parts of penitence; so many parts of petition. The truth of the matter is that prayer cannot be reduced to a practiced art. Prayer must be as artless as a child. Prayers that attempt to manipulate the Deity are absurd. Prayer is rather the spontaneous communion of our spirits with the Spirit of God. When the spirit speaks, it knows neither form nor formula. One cannot imagine Paul suggesting to Silas—"Maybe if we praise the Lord, he'll deliver us." The praise was initiated by the spirit of God within them. The evidence that it was something of the Holy Spirit was in the response of the prisoners around them.

The prison was shaken by an earthquake and the doors to the cells were opened. It was not a reward for singing—it was a fulfillment but a fulfillment of the purpose of God which would soon be manifest in the conversion of the jailer and of his entire household.

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ . . .

Crucial to this episode are the implications of the jailer's conversion. What was the basic requirement. How much more did Paul say to him and his household? What caused the entire household to turn to Christ? What are the implications for evangelism today? As for Paul's initial statement to the jailer, to assume that there was more to it would be to go beyond the text (not an uncommon practice in the effort to derive systems for salvation). Paul's simple response is consistent with John's initial statement in John 1:12—"As many as received Him, to them He gave the authority to become the children of God." It is also consistent with Paul's words to

the people of Ephesus—"By grace you are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (2:8). The essence of salvation is the restoring of the Spirit of God to the human spirit. It is accomplished, not by vows and conditions, but by simple acceptance. Our response to the sacrifice of Christ as a covering for sin is "thank-you," and not "therefore I will do this and that." It was the same with Lydia. She simply became a believer—that is, one who had identified herself with Christ. If there were further steps necessary, this would have been the place to make this clear.

The results of the coming of the Holy Spirit into our spirits is primarily a change of attitude. The change of attitude often results in changes of behavior, but it is unrealistic to assume that salvation brings an immediate alteration of personality. We are looking here at the conditions surrounding the conversion of the jailer. We are asking what Paul might have said to him in addition to what is given us here. Many responses to the jailer's question would have included, as a part of salvation, some requirement of change. It seems remarkably simple that the jailer's salvation should merely be acceptance. But what else could possibly be required of fallen human nature? Both Jesus and Paul make it abundantly clear that human nature is completely unable to effect its own salvation. Jesus said, "Without me you can do nothing." Paul said, "By grace are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is a gift of God, not of works lest anyone should boast." If anything is required of our human flesh, we are indeed in trouble. All we can do is accept God's offer. Whenever we accept it, the Holy Spirit comes into our spirit, and then we are in a position to relate to God. Changes do take place, but only by the power of the Holy Spirit within us. But again, the flesh is not any more capable

of making changes after the Spirit comes in than before. As Paul said, *“Having begun in the Spirit, are you now made perfect in the flesh?”* (Galatians 3:3). To make any human effort a condition of salvation or a confirmation of salvation would be foolish. And this Paul indicated to the Galatians in the same text.

Changes do take place after conversion, but they are of the spirit and not the flesh. What changes is our attitude toward God; our attitude toward others; and our attitude toward ourselves. We care about God and want Him in our lives; we care about others and pray for them; and we care about ourselves and recognize some worth to our spirits, even though we may not particularly like ourselves any better. These changes of attitude do often effect behavioral changes as we relate differently to God and others and ourselves. We are far from perfect in our behavior, as we understand the word “perfection”. In fact, the New Testament does not have a word similar to our own English usage of perfection. The Greek word, so translated, really means “fulfillment of consummation”. Thus, in Christ, we are fulfilled as persons in that we now belong to Him, but there may yet be many imperfections in our personalities and behavior. The pursuit of human perfection can be a most discouraging and guilt-ridden experience. Paul did not account himself as being perfect, but pressed on toward the satisfying of his calling in Christ (Philippians 3). A good analogy can be found in the automobile. Its main purpose is to transport passengers from one place to another. If it serves that purpose, it is fulfilled, even though it may have many imperfections. Behavior does matter, and personality changes are difficult and often slow. The consolation is that our spirits are safe with Christ while we undergo this process of change.

The reason for the above discussion, of course, is the issue of the conditions

surrounding the salvation of the jailer. What were the conditions of salvation presented to him? What did he have to do? How did it affect him? Was there more to the discussion of these conditions than was recorded here? If there had been other conditions, this would have been the place to record them. The text indicates that there was further discussion both with the jailer and the family, but we are not told the content of that discussion, and should have been if that discussion involved further conditions of salvation. Hundreds of thousands of books have been written on this subject, expanding on simple texts such as this one with complex systems or formulas of salvation. As Lydia had become a “faith-woman,” the jailer became a “faith-man.” He believed on the Lord with all of his house. Evidently the same simple condition was presented to them as to himself—“Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.” If anything of the flesh is required for salvation, we are all in trouble. Paul’s response to the jailer was consistent with the entire thrust of the New Testament—the grace of God reaching out to His helpless creation.

But how did salvation affect the jailer and his family? The jailer’s attitude toward Paul and Silas was immediately changed. Instead of treating them brutally, he took them home, washed their wounds and fed them. And then he and all of his family were baptized. But was that a condition of salvation? Paul did not give it as such, to our knowledge. Had that been an important condition, he certainly should have said so, else all who later would read of the incident would be misled. The baptism was rather a result of conversion. No doubt, Paul’s further discussions with the family instructed them regarding the meaning of baptism. Baptism was nowhere given to the Gentiles as a condition of salvation, but it was given to the Jews. In Peter’s address to the Jews on the Day

of Pentecost, he said to them, “Repent and be baptized, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” He was obviously talking about salvation and not about some second work of grace subsequent to it. To the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius, Peter never gave such a requirement, but did baptize them after they were saved. For the Jews, baptism was a symbol of cleansing and purification from their national apostasy. The entire nation, with the exception of a remnant, had turned away from God and become idolaters. The faithful remnant of the Jews who remained true to God identified themselves with the sins of their forefathers and were baptized as a symbol of repentance on behalf of the entire nation. That is what John the Baptist was doing when Jesus came to him to be himself baptized in the Jordan River. Once the terms of the repentance of the Jewish nation had been satisfied, this requirement was no longer pressed. It is not a requirement for the Jews today who wish to become saved. There are some groups today that consider baptism to be an essential condition of salvation, but it is never so stated. If it was that important, it should have been more clearly and prominently presented. As Paul said to the Corinthians, “*If the trumpet shall give an uncertain sound, who will prepare himself to battle*” (I Cor. 14:8). Baptism has been a very important facet of the church for nearly two thousand years and is certainly exemplified and encouraged in the New Testament, but is not given as a condition of salvation.

In summary, we may infer from the episode of the conversion of the Philippian jailer the following principles:

1. Belief in Christ was the basic condition required of the jailer for

salvation in direct response to his question.

2. Baptism was something that occurred as a result of salvation and not a condition of it.

3. An immediate change took place in the attitude of the jailer toward Paul and Silas.

4. It is unsound to speculate what other conditions might have been set forth in Paul’s discussion with the jailer and his family.

5. If there were other conditions involved, this would have been an essential time to make them known.

Let them come themselves and bring us out. This incident of Paul’s attitude toward the magistrates seems both anticlimactic as well as incongruous with the simple grandeur of the conversion of the jailer and his family. And if being a Roman citizen would have made a difference in their original arrest and imprisonment, why did Paul conceal it? Again, what was the purpose of vexing the magistrates? Was it merely a personal vendetta? It did not seem to accomplish anything of significance. The magistrates did come and lead them out as they requested and merely urged them to leave their city. The fact that they were Roman citizens brought about some anxiety on the part of the magistrates but did not elicit an apology nor did it deter them from asking them to leave the city. One must be very careful about speculating. Whatever its significance, it seemed important to include it in the record. Human speculation about the gaps in the records of scripture has always been subject to misconceptions. The best way to handle this is to leave it alone. Maybe it was purely personal; or maybe it did have some special significance in the mind of God. It is better for us not to add anything. Commenting on the incident of

Eve's confrontation with the serpent in the Garden of Eden, Robert South, one of the great puritan divines, made the following sage observation—"It is better to leave off listening where God hath left off speaking, for he that hath an ear where God hath no tongue might find himself instead listening to the voice of the tempter."

Paul and Silas visited the fledgling group of believers in the home of Lydia and went on their way. Paul's brief involvement with the people of Philippi seemed most unusual as a foundation for the expansion of Christianity into Europe. In the human sense, it would have been quite inadequate. But if Christ could feed the five thousand with a little boy's lunch, He can certainly use simple human efforts to accomplish His great divine purposes.

The Philippi connection would never have been so handled by human wisdom. It would have been completely absurd to us to think that the development of Christianity in the Western world should have started with such a place as Philippi

or with a handful of women by the riverside. We would more likely have targeted Amphipolis, the political center, or Athens, the cultural center. But the history of the spread of Christianity was a history of simple human instruments used by God for His glorious purposes. Paul, who had told the proud Corinthians that God had chosen the weak of the world to confound the mighty, told them also that he found his strength in weakness. "*Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me . . . For when I am weak then am I strong*" (II Corinthians 12:9,10). He also told them that the treasure of divine glory was kept in clay vessels such as ourselves. The vessel must be of clay that the glory may be of God. The strong tend to rely on their own strengths and God is not given the glory. Perhaps the most central truth of the book of Acts is illustrated here in Philippi, where human weakness seemed to be so evident. The whole matter can be summed up in God's words to Paul—"My strength is made perfect in weakness" (II Corinthians 12:9).

Acts 17:1-15

TRANSLATION

And having traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And as was Paul's custom, he went in with them, and for three Sabbath days he debated with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah [Christ] to suffer and to rise from the dead, and that "This Jesus, whom I declare to you is the Messiah." And certain of them were persuaded and joined with Paul and Silas, both of the 'God-fearing' Greeks, a great number, and of the chief women, not a few. And the Jews were stirred up [emotionally enflamed], and they took certain evil miscreants of the marketplace, and having gathered a crowd, they agitated the city and descended on the house of Jason. And not finding them [Paul and Silas], they dragged Jason and certain brethren before the officials, shouting, "These who have agitated the world [Roman Empire] have come here also, whom Jason has welcomed; and these are all practicing statutes contrary to Caesar, saying Jesus to be another king." And they troubled the crowd and the officials hearing these things. And when they had taken a peace bond from Jason and the rest, they released them.

And the brethren quickly sent out Paul and Silas by night unto Berea, which ones departed and drew near unto the synagogue of the Jews. And these were more noble than those in Thessalonica, which ones received the word with all readiness, examining the Scriptures daily if indeed these things were so. Many of them then believed, and of the influential Greeks, both women and men, not a few. And as the Jews from Thessalonica knew that the word of God was being proclaimed in Berea by Paul, they came there also, stirring up and troubling the crowds. And the brethren then quickly sent out Paul to go unto the sea, but Silas and Timothy remained there. And they conducted Paul and brought him unto Athens; and receiving orders for Silas and Timothy that they should come to him quickly, they departed.

COMMENTARY

The Simplicity and Grandeur of the Word of God to the World

Thessalonica was the crossroads of major trade routes from the Adriatic Sea to Byzantium (now Istanbul) and south to Athens and Corinth. It was also the major port city of Macedonia. Further, it had a large colony of Jews, who had their own synagogue. Paul and Silas, having passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, where there was no recorded effort, came to Thessalonica.

It is again noteworthy that Paul did not come here first rather than to Philippi. He would have had a ready forum in the synagogue with a much larger audience and a greater potential of expansion, as would be obvious in a city which was a major port and the hub of overland trade. Wherever there was a synagogue, Paul availed himself of it, and as was customary, he was allowed to speak. For three Sabbaths he was allowed to carry on a dialogue (as the Greek word suggests). He presented to this audience, already primed in the teachings of the Old Testament regarding the promises and purposes of the monotheistic deity, the claims of Jesus as the Messiah. It was, thus, a considerable advantage to Paul to begin with the primed audiences that the synagogues would afford. Much groundwork would have been already laid in the teachings of the Old Testament.

Paul spent three Sabbaths in the synagogue, using the Old Testament to prove that the Jesus whom he represented fulfilled the prophetic requirements of their own prophets regarding the Messiah. The result was that a significant number both of Jews and "God-fearing" Greeks, including women who were apparently of high position, were persuaded to accept Jesus as the Christ and to join with Paul and Silas.

What would Paul say in this first presentation ever, of the new order of things after the coming of Christ? Again, as in Philippi, we are not informed as to

the full content of the dialogue, but, as always, the central focus of Paul is that Jesus is the Christ, the Savior of the world. Whatever multiplicity of words was used to convince the hearers of this truth, to bring them into identity with Christ was Paul's ultimate aim.

This message is so simple and yet unfathomably profound; so plain and yet ineffably sublime. Neither the wisdom of the Greeks, with their pantheon of deities, nor the religious fervor of the Jews, with their devotion to ritual righteousness could ever match the simple reality that God had reconciled His disinherited creation through the ultimate sacrifice of His own Son and restored to them His own eternal Spirit nature. A truth that no religious system could match; a pinnacle of power that no human effort could achieve.

It was necessary for Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead. The martyrdom of a human being is noble and peerless in its humanitarian virtue, but it has no power to lift mortality to immortality. Legion have been the religious leaders of the world who have offered ingenious systems for self-realization or universal fulfillment, and often paid for their efforts with their own lives. But all of the blood shed by them throughout the course of human history could not avail for the salvation of themselves or a single follower. Nor did any guide or guru ever guarantee that it would. The efficacy of the blood of Christ rests in the reality that He is, in fact, an extension of the God of the universe. He, as One with God in essential substance, came to the earth as the human manifestation or expression of the Godhead. If the blood of the Creation was corrupted in the Fall and had contaminated the entire race of mankind, the blood of the Creator is the only antidote to that contamination. The shedding of blood in the Jewish sacrificial system was only symbolic of

the shedding of blood in the process of redemption. The shedding of the blood of Christ was the fulfillment of that symbol.

And if the shedding of the blood of Christ was necessary as an antidote to corruption, the resurrection of Christ was essential to the recovery of eternal life. If we are delivered from corruption and mortality by the death of Christ, we are imbued with incorruption and immortality by the life of Christ. This is the central message of God for the entire race of mankind. While many important ideas surround this basic truth, like astral clusters, it alone is the *sine qua non* (without which, nothing) of God's redemptive purpose for the universe He created. We possessed His very Spirit and Nature in the original creation, enabling us to coexist with Him throughout eternity—an essential element of our being forfeited in the fall. We are restored in this spiritual and eternal nature through the death and life of the Son of God. The simple statements of Paul to the Thessalonians regarding Christ embodied this whole glorious concept. In subsequent letters written to these very Thessalonians, these grand concepts are clearly confirmed.

The Jews were greatly stirred up. The Greek word *zeloo*, often translated by “jealousy” or “envy”, is much broader than that. It really denotes a high degree of emotional reaction, often leading to fanatical excess, as in the case of the Jews of Thessalonica. It had been, of course, the spark that ignited the flames of bitterness and hatred that had eventuated in the crucifixion of Jesus. Doubt and uncertainty were to be expected among the Jews in the advent of the man, Jesus, who claimed to be their Messiah. Other claimants to the role had come and gone with little effect but delusion on the part of some and contempt on the part of most, but Jesus' claims, accompanied by irrefutable miracles and large acceptance by the people, had stirred up a demonic

response as if orchestrated by Satan himself (which obviously it was). There had been scores of philosophers and religious leaders vying for followers, whose fallacies and follies soon propelled them into oblivion. But this little band of the followers of Jesus evoked an irrational frenzy in the Jews reminiscent of the satanic opposition to Jesus Himself.

It was not hard to find ‘ne'er-do-wells’ loitering about the marketplace who could be induced to participate in a riot for no other reason than the mood of mischief and cynicism that prevailed in their ranks. The motley crowd descended in a body on the house of Jason, where Paul had been staying. Not finding him, his host would do as well. As with most riots, principles were swallowed up in perversity. Jason and his companions were dragged off to the officials, who fined them and let them go. The perpetrators of the mischief settled back in their witless wilderness of ceaseless misconceptions to await another churlish cause.

And the brethren quickly sent out Paul and Silas by night . . . The trouble in Thessalonica encouraged a speedy departure on the part of Paul and his associates. It was not that Paul would have never stood his ground, even to martyrdom (which he did face in Rome), but rather that they felt compelled at this point to move on.

These were more noble than those in Thessalonica . . . There were several references in the book of Acts to people of noble birth or of wealth and influence. Here, the word means literally, “wellborn.” There is a more remote usage of the word which means more noble of spirit or mind. The clause following—“which ones received the word with all readiness, examining the Scriptures daily if these things were so”—seems to imply that they were more noble of spirit or mind. However, the Greek text does

not indicate causation—"in that"—but merely identification—"which ones." Later on the idea comes up again, with a different Greek word—*euschemon*—where it does mean people of high standing or influence.

In any event, they were people of great sensitivity to the Word to a degree that it was considered noteworthy. Apparently a very strong body of believers was established there.

Jews from Thessalonica . . . came there also stirring up and troubling the

crowds. Such blindness had enveloped the Jewish leaders and such bondage to Satan, that they could not leave this matter alone. They were bound and determined to expunge this One from the earth—this revelation from the very God of the universe, whom in their blindness they branded as an imposter. "Their blood be upon us and our children," they had brashly shouted at the crucifixion. They and their children for centuries to come would pay dearly for this demonic resistance to the Son of God.

Acts 17:16-21

TRANSLATION

While Paul was awaiting them [Silas and Timothy] in Athens, he was greatly troubled in his spirit, beholding in it the profusion of idols which were in the city. He reasoned then in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearers, and in the marketplace daily with those whom he chanced to encounter. And certain of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers engaged him in debate. And certain of them were saying, "What does this seed-picker [wool-gatherer] want to say?" And some said, "He seems to be proclaiming strange spirits," because he proclaimed Jesus and the resurrection. And laying hold of him, they brought him up to the Areopagus [Mars Hill] saying, "Can we know what this new teaching is which is being spoken by you? For certain strange things have entered into our hearing; we want to know then what these things mean." For all the Athenians and the strangers dwelling among them were giving their time to nothing else than to speak or to hear some new thing.

COMMENTARY

Paul and the Greek Philosophers

Paul went down to Athens. Athens was the cultural fountainhead of the Western world. The fifth century B.C. of its history, has been regarded as the "golden age of Greece." From that age, presided over for a time by Pericles, who was considered the "father of modern democracy," flowed a steady stream of the arts and sciences, still treasured today as the master works of human genius. Philosophers, poets, artists, sculptors, dramatists, scientists, mathematicians all participated in this remarkable era. The philosophers had, in the Greek language, a most adequate instrument for their abstract expressions. Many of the Greek philosophers were serious seekers after truth; many of them were academic game players. The great philosophical

triumvirate—Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle—whose works spanned a hundred years from the fifth to the fourth centuries, had in common a deep sense of the metaphysical and a dialectical method of questioning and debate known as the "Socratic method." The technique of questioning was a radical departure from the absolutism of the religionists. On the other hand, nothing was ever really resolved for them in their pursuit of the truth. All three—Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle—had a vague concept of some supreme intelligence, identified by Plato as "*the logos*." This imprecise view of the Deity as *logos*, was pinpointed by John in the first verse of his Gospel, where he pointed out that the "*Logos*" was, in fact, the anointed one of God—indeed, God

Himself—who came to earth as the revelation of the ultimate truth which the Greek philosophers were seeking. Socrates had been the teacher of Plato; Plato, the teacher of Aristotle. Aristotle was in turn, the mentor of Alexander the Great. The influence of these three permeated Greek philosophy down to the time of Paul and was quite familiar to him. Socrates was the fountain-head of four different philosophic systems of thought, out of which came the Stoics and Epicureans whom Paul had encountered in the marketplace. Stoicism, evolving out of an earlier Cynicism, derived its name from the common forum where the Stoics met—a covered portico known as a *stoa*. The stoics held that knowledge was the essence of all virtue and that through knowledge and reason came self-control, which in turn evolved a state of *apeitheia*—tranquility of mind and body and detachment from mental and physical disturbances. Everything in the world was, to them, predetermined and requires for harmony the total acceptance of one's lot as the road to equanimity. From Socrates the Stoics derived the identifying of virtue with knowledge.

The Epicureans, on the other hand, were an outgrowth of the Hedonists (seekers after pure pleasure). Named after its founder, Epicurus, the Epicureans believed that the quality of right or wrong in any action was measured by the amount of pleasure or pain derived from it. That is right which produces the most pleasure and that is wrong which produces the most pain. So to them, true virtue comes in flowing with nature.

Such were the philosophers whom Paul encountered in Athens, the very birthplace of Plato and the fountainhead of philosophical thought in the Western world. The fundamental problem with all philosophers is the lack of any authority or dependable resource outside their own minds. There is no way to verify (or falsify) their concepts. One has no more validity than another. The philosophers of the Agora in Athens were called *spermologoi*—a word akin to our word “wool-gatherers.” In their mind, Paul was another such collector of ideas with no particular authority. Their interest in him was not a sincere desire to know the truth, but rather a certain fascination with ideas, which they collected like butterflies or seashells.

Can we know what this new teaching is which is being spoken by you? They laid hold of Paul and took him up on the Areopagus (Mars Hill) where a council met, whose task was to examine those who presumed to teach in public. Only a miracle of God could penetrate the dense layer of self-imposed, humanistic, ideological deception. On the other hand, no human mind can ever grasp the truth of God unless it be penetrated by the Holy Spirit. Paul said this to the Corinthians—“*The natural mind does not receive things of the spirit, neither can he know them, because they are discerned only in the spirit realm*” (I Corinthians 2:14). A few minds would be penetrated by the truth, there in the heart of Athens, but there is no indication that Paul was able at that time to establish a significant body of believers.

Acts 17:22-34

TRANSLATION

And Paul having stood in the midst of the Areopagus said, “Men, Athenians, I see that in all things you are very religious. For while I was passing through and seeing your objects of worship, I found also an altar on which was inscribed, ‘TO THE UNKNOWN GOD.’ That which therefore you worship without knowledge, this I proclaim to you: God, who made the world and all things which are in it, This One being Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Neither is he attended upon or served by human hands, He himself having given to all life, and breath, and all things. He has made of one, all races of men dwelling upon all the face of the earth, having ordained the ordering of the seasons and boundaries of their habitations, that they should seek God, if indeed they might encounter Him personally and find Him, for He is even not far from any one of us. For in Him we live and have our energy and existence, as also certain of your poets have said, ‘For we are also of the same family.’ Being, therefore, of the family of God, we ought not to think God to be like images of gold or silver or stone, as produced by the craft and desires of a man. For the times of ignorance God overlooked, but now proclaims men everywhere to repent, since indeed a day has been appointed in which He is going to judge the inhabitants of the earth in righteousness, by a Man whom he has appointed, having raised Him from the dead as a presentation of confirmation to all.”

And having heard “resurrection from the dead” some were scoffing, and some said, “We will hear you concerning this matter again.” Paul thus went out of their midst. But certain of the people having followed him believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite, and a woman by the name of Damaris, and others with them.

COMMENTARY

The Philosophers Challenged on Mars Hill

Paul stood before the Council on the Areopagus to set before them the claims of the true God. Apparently they had

never been so addressed. They were in total ignorance of the meaning of Jesus and the resurrection. Paul’s mood was

neither harsh nor judgmental. If ever the hearts of these philosophers were to be opened, it must be in the dialectic mood to which they were accustomed. Had Paul come through as a religion absolutist, he would have lost them instantly. In discussing Christ with others, it is well to be open and sensitive. If we want them to be open to us, we must be open to them. The arrogance which accompanies absolutism closes the door to receptivity.

“I see everywhere that you are very religious.” The word often translated “superstitious”—*deisidaimonesterous*—can be used in both a positive or a negative sense. Literally it means “fear of the gods.” The word for “gods” however, is more akin to the spirit world in general than to a Supreme Being as such. Here it is used in a reverential sense to include the whole pantheon of celestial beings, greater and lesser, that the Greeks worshipped. Paul was not in any way criticizing them, but rather using as a point of departure, the fact that the Athenians had a great many objects of worship and therefore a great interest in the realm of the supernatural. It was this very interest to which he appealed, having come across the altar with the inscription “to the unknown God.” This was the one that he would declare to them.

Whom therefore you worship without knowledge. Paul was not charging them with primitive ignorance. He was merely saying that their very inscription indicated that they were reaching out for something of a deity that was beyond their current experience. It is important to note that at no point was Paul being derogatory or judgmental. In fact, the whole tone of his discussion with these pitiable philosophers, who had spent their lives pursuing the bird of truth and never catching it, was actually sensitive and compassionate. He knew well where they were coming from. He had spent half his life pursuing truth in

heartbreaking blindness and reaped the consequences in a ceaseless remorse over his arrogant antagonism against the very Son of God and his own family. It was certainly to their credit that they pursued the Deity at all. The Greeks had many celestial objects of worship. In fact, Paul marveled at the extent of their obsession with such things. The realm of the supernatural was one with which the Greeks were well familiar. Even then, they were not satisfied that they had exhausted the potentials of the deific realm. Paul sought to fill the void. *“The one whom you have missed is actually the Creator of all things. And not only so, He has regarded all creatures on the earth as members of His own family in that He had Himself fathered the race of mankind.”* But there was yet another dimension to consider. While all men are of one race, they have not all participated in the familial relationship. Paul urges the philosophers to seek God, that they might actually have a personal encounter with Him. The Greek word—*pselaphao*—often translated by “feel” or “touch”, is here used to indicate something more personal than a merely theoretical knowledge. He was not referring here to a fleshly experience of feeling and touching, but a very personal spiritual experience. So far these philosophers had seemed to be on the merry-go-round of their own minds, going nowhere and coming to grips with nothing personally. God is more than a philosophical ideal, as discussed by Plato, but a living reality who will impart to them a personal reality if they will only seek Him, not in the stark rationality of the human mind, but in the heart—“For He is not far from any one of us.”

For in Him we live and have our human energies and existence.

In this we are one creation; one race; one family. So how can we think that we should worship something of metal or stone—something fashioned out of human craft and desire. This idea of man as one universal family, was not

unfamiliar to the Greek philosophers and poets, as Paul indicated (although it is not certain exactly which of the poets he was quoting).

The times of this ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent. Prior to the coming of God's own revelation in Jesus Christ, there was a good deal of latitude in the mind of God, especially with those outside the circle of His own Jewish people. Mercy was measured by sincerity in the search for truth, as Paul indicates in Romans 2. But now the light of the Son of God has engulfed the world, and turning to that light more a matter of the will than of a lack of enlightenment. "Whosoever will let him come unto Me." Jesus says that "the light was there, but men refused to walk in it." They will now be accountable to receive that light.

He has appointed a day in which He is going to judge the inhabitants in righteousness . . . Righteousness does not mean piety, but rather "rightness." There is a right way to view the world and a wrong way. So far, these Greek philosophers had missed it. They had been prisoners of their own mental microcosm. All their pantheon of gods had been manufactured in their own minds. The Unknown God, whom they had acknowledged in blindness, was the key they had been seeking for centuries to unlock the mysteries of the universe, but those intellectual game players, and not earnest seekers after truth would not

be able to know Him. The promise of God stands irrevocably true—"You shall seek Me and find Me when you shall search for Me with all your hearts."

By a Man whom He appointed, having given confirmation to all when He raised Him from the dead. The resurrection of Christ from the dead stands as the everlasting witness to the truth and power of God and to the fact that Jesus Christ was indeed His appointed revelation to mankind, as well as the means by which His creatures could be forever united with Him.

When they heard—"resurrection from the dead"—the response of these proud Greek philosophers was predictable. Some scoffed; some said that they would hear him again of these matters, postponing indefinitely any kind of personal decision making. Mental blindness is a terrible thing. It cuts one off from the truth while one gyrates around and around and around in the diminutive circles of one's own mind.

But some of the people attached themselves to Him and believed . . . The darkness was penetrated by a tiny pinpoint of light, which would one day become a great floodlight illuminating mankind, and all the city would be bathed in the knowledge of the gospel of Christ.

Acts 18:1-11

TRANSLATION

After these things he [Paul] departed from Athens and came unto Corinth. And he found a certain Jew by the name of Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because of the decree of Claudius that all Jews must depart from Rome. And he came to them, and because they were of the same craft, he remained with them and was working with them; for they were tentmakers by trade. And he was discoursing in the synagogue every Sabbath, persuading both Jews and Greeks.

And when Silas and Timothy had come down from Macedonia, [they saw that] Paul was absorbed with the word, giving witness to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. And as they were resisting and blaspheming, he stretched out his cloak and said to them, "Your blood be upon your own heads; I am pure [from it]. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." And he departed from them and entered into the house of a certain man by the name of Titius Justus, a 'God-fearer,' whose house was next door to the synagogue. And Crispus, the president of the synagogue, believed the Lord with all his house. And many of the Corinthians were hearing and were believing and were being baptized. And the Lord spoke to Paul at night through a vision, "Do not fear, but speak, and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city." And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

COMMENTARY

Rejected By the Jews, Paul Turns to the Gentiles

Paul left a handful of believers in Athens (although nothing is said of a significant church) and went down to Corinth.

Corinth was a provincial capitol of the Roman Empire. It was situated on the narrow neck of land or isthmus that separated the mainland of Greece from the Peloponnesus. To the west was the Gulf of Corinth extending to the Adriatic

Sea and to the east was the Saronic Gulf on the Aegean. It was thus an important commercial center, having several ports. A very prosperous city commercially, it was also a center of culture. With its prosperity came also its vice. Behind the city the mountain of Acrocorinthus rose some two thousand feet, on the crest of which stood the Temple of Apollo, where the cult of Aphrodite (goddess of love)

flourished. It was a gathering place for the prostitutes of Corinth. The wealth and corruption of Corinth was the matrix out of which came many difficulties in the church of Corinth which Paul had to address in his letters to it.

Upon his arrival, Paul became quickly acquainted with Aquila and Priscilla—a Jewish couple who had come from Rome as a result of a decree from Claudius, clearing Rome of its Jewish population. These exiled Jews were part of the great movement known as the Diaspora (dispersion), which both voluntarily and involuntarily scattered the Jewish people throughout the Middle East. It was thus that Paul encountered synagogues in many of the Greek cities of his travels. Aquila had been a native of Pontus in Asia and had gone to Rome before being exiled to Corinth. He and his wife were tentmakers by trade—a considerable industry. These were not the “pup” tents and simple shelters of the weekend wanderers. Like mobile homes of today, they were often luxurious and were called “tents” only because of their mobility. The word “tabernacle”, of the famous wilderness worship structure of the Jews, actually is the word for “tent.” Paul, being himself a tentmaker, by which he earned his livelihood, was invited to join them in their business enterprise.

Thus, Paul earned his own way. It was not, as he later pointed out to the Corinthians, that he did not have the right to live by the largess of the people to whom he ministered. Though he had the right, he did not use it, since he did not want to be chargeable to any of them. It is assumed, today, in some quarters, that living “by faith” carries with it a certain special virtue. It was not a big issue with Paul. Sometimes he worked and earned his own way and sometimes he lived by the generosity of those he served. He felt, as he said to the Corinthians, that if he ministered to them in spiritual things, it was not

inappropriate for them to minister to him in material things.

Paul was absorbed with the word. . . When Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, where Paul had left them, they found him absorbed in teaching the word. What word? The only word available to them—the Old Testament Scriptures or the Torah, as the Jews called it. He was presenting, via the Old Testament prophets, the evidences for the claim that Jesus was the Messiah. As was his custom, he had gone straight to the synagogues to reach out to his Jewish brethren in the hopes of rescuing them from their stubborn resistance to the claims of Jesus. And many were persuaded by him—enough of a number that the mainstream of the Jewish community rose up in blasphemous resistance to Paul’s message.

From now on I will go to the Gentiles. Paul had given his Jewish brethren every opportunity to receive Jesus as the Messiah. They had steadily resisted. They had resisted to the point of blasphemy; and they had resisted to the point of continual harassment and ultimately to the seeking of Paul’s death. Paul had been longsuffering as befits the spirit-filled servant of God. As with their forebearers, the rebellion of the Jews had come to the full and God’s mercy to them had reached its climax. It was not a light thing for Paul to turn away from his brethren. It had nothing to do with personal outrage at their treatment of him. In fact, he carried them in his heart continually, according to his own testimony to the Romans: *“I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen in the flesh”* (9:2,3). Had Paul followed the dictates of his heart, he would have continued with his brethren, as fruitless as it might seem. But Paul, ever sensitive to the guidance of the Spirit, concluded that he had given the

people all that he could. It is easy to let the heart rule the spirit in our dealings with others. We feel deep concern for them and are reluctant to let go, but there may come a time when our own effectiveness with them is over. Someone else may have to help them. Let the Spirit be the guide. As long as there is openness we must persevere, but there may come a time when our efforts are counterproductive. At such a point we must simply turn them over to Christ to deal with them as He sees fit. Of course, we can always pray for them, but our own usefulness in the matter may be over.

The door of faith had not been closed by Paul's action, but others would have to take up the ministry to them. And the Jews, of course, were not finished with Paul. They would continue to harass him and finally succeed in causing an extensive imprisonment for him. But as with Jesus, whom they crucified and were unwittingly serving God's very purpose, so with Paul. Their persecution of him ultimately fulfilled a divine purpose for Paul, bringing him at last to Rome itself.

Many of the Corinthians were hearing, and were believing, and

were being baptized. First came Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue; and then came his entire family; and then came a large number of Corinthians. A strong church evolved in Corinth, but one with numerous problems. It was, in fact, the most troublesome church of all. Perhaps it was the engulfing moral decadence that characterized this great port city with its high levels of culture and fleshly attractions. Perhaps it was because large numbers of the converts were from the lower echelons of society, as Paul implies in the first letter to them. In any case, his ministry was eminently successful there with large numbers of converts.

Accordingly, the Jews were busy, as always, seeking to silence him. It was thus that Christ found it necessary to address him in a vision and urge him to continue the work and not to allow himself to be silenced. He was under divine protection and need not be fearful of the opposition. **"For,"** in the words of Christ, **"I have many people in this city."** Accordingly, Paul "settled down" and remained in Corinth a year and a half, teaching the word of God among them.

Acts 18:12-17

TRANSLATION

And Gallio, being the proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord set upon Paul and brought him to the tribunal, saying, "This one persuades men to worship God contrary to the law." And Paul, about to open his mouth, Gallio spoke to the Jews, "If it were a matter of injustice or evil behavior, O Jews, I would give attention to you; but if it is a question concerning matters and names and a law pertaining to you, you yourselves see to it; I do not wish to be a judge of these things." And he drove them from the tribunal. And they all, having seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, beat him before the tribunal. And Gallio was not concerned for these things at all.

COMMENTARY

The Jews—At It Again

His full name was Junius Annaeus Gallio. He was a real person—not just a name in a book. He was proconsul of Achaia, the province of Corinth. A proconsul was something of a provincial administrator. As the agent of Rome, he had considerable authority. According to the historians, he was a very amiable and engaging person. It was said of him by Seneca, a celebrated Roman philosopher and statesman, "No mortal was ever so sweet to one as Gallio was to all." To such a one came the Jews with their chronic "Paulophobia." They could not leave him alone. They seemed always in mortal fear of him. Had their own message brought any kind of relief or assistance to the people, they would not have been so concerned about Paul. The truth was that their message was dry as dust and burdensome to the soul. Paul was bringing them new hope and freedom from bondage. Therefore, what the dynamic of their own message could not do, they sought to have the Roman

government enforce by law. It is much like the church today, often bogged down in theological and legalistic systems. Their message fails to provide the dynamic that will hold its people steady; they must depend on rigid rules and requirements.

They brought Paul to the Bema, a form of Roman tribunal, where matters of the people were judged. The original Bema in Corinth still stands among the ruins. It is merely a raised dais along the stone wall which was part of the old *stoas* or porticoes of the marketplace. The word "Bema" is still visible, engraved on a stone above the site.

The carping protesters found little response in Gallio. He was totally disinterested in their religious quarrels. As indicated in the sketch of Gallio above, it was not that he was disinterested in people or his position of authority, or their causes, but that he

saw little relevance in their petty religious bickerings as far as the civil laws were concerned. While Rome was, in one sense of the word, the scourge of the surrounding nations, on the other hand, its system of jurisprudence was legendary. Gallio refused to drag its noble image through the swamps of esoteric disputations. As with Pilate before him, and Agrippa, and Festus and Felix after him, the Roman government never entered into provincial controversies except as they might involve acts of sedition against the Roman Empire.

If it were a matter of crime or injustice . . . Gallio refused adamantly to get involved. He found nothing illegal about what Paul was doing. The Jews were in great disfavor with Rome to begin with. All of the Roman provinces to which the Jews had been scattered faced the same undercurrent of discontent by them. The Jews had strong religious convictions and the world in which they lived was hostile to many of them,

especially their disdain for the entire Gentile world with which they were surrounded. As the Jews sneered at the Gentiles, so the Gentiles sneered at the Jews, but alas the Gentiles held the mace of authority. Frustrated by the constant carping of the Jews, Gallio drove them from his presence. The Jews, probably as frustrated as Gallio over their situation in a hostile Gentile world, dared not touch Paul, who had been exonerated by Gallio as the agent of Rome, of which Paul was a citizen, and so carried out their frustrations by seizing Sosthenes, the ruler of their own synagogue and beat him in front of the tribunal. Gallio did not take the bait. If they wanted to beat one of their own dignitaries, that was their privilege under the very Roman law that they had sought to engage in their nefarious cause.

The promise of God to Paul stood firm. Paul was delivered from harm and remained a number of days yet in Corinth, fulfilling his ministry there.

Acts 18:18-28

TRANSLATION

And Paul, having remained for a number of days with the brethren, bid them goodbye and sailed to Syria, and with him Priscilla and Aquila, after he had shaved his head in Cenchreae, for he had a vow. And they came to Ephesus, and those [Priscilla and Aquila] he left. And he himself entered into the synagogue and debated with the Jews. And when they were asking him to remain for a longer time, he did not consent, but having bid them goodbye and having said, "I will return to you again, God willing," he set sail from Ephesus. And having landed in Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and descended into Antioch. And having spent some time, he went out and passed next through the Galatian region and Phrygia, establishing all the disciples.

And a certain Jew by the name of Apollos, a native of Alexandria, a man of learning, arrived in Ephesus, one who was able in the Scriptures. This one was teaching the way of the Lord; and being enflamed by the Spirit, he was speaking and teaching diligently the things concerning Jesus, having known only the baptism of John; and this one began to speak boldly in the synagogue. And when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and declared to him the way of God more completely. And as he intended to pass into Achaia, the brethren encouraged him and wrote the disciples to receive him; who when he had come, gave much help to those who had believed through grace; for he refuted the Jews intensely in public, showing thoroughly through the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ [Messiah].

COMMENTARY

Planting the Seed . . . And Watering It

Asia, Asia Minor, Greece—Paul plants the seed. He went over to Ephesus, taking with him Priscilla and Aquila. On the way He had stopped in Cenchreae—one of the ports of Corinth—and shaved his head to indicate he was taking a vow. Hair, long or short, shaved or unshaven,

was far more meaningful in the Middle East than in the West. What the purpose of Paul's vow was, or what it was, we are not told. It is best not to speculate too much. However, Paul would not have done such a thing lightly, and so we presume there was some important

reason, perhaps to identify himself more closely in spirit with his Jewish brethren.

Ephesus was to the coasts of Asia Minor what Corinth was to Greece. A place of commerce and culture, it was a most important port on the Aegean. The ruins suggest a very beautiful city with marble streets and mosaic lined porticoes. The marble street leading from the docks to the center of town was paved in marble and lined with magnificent columns topped with torches. At the end of the street, as it led up from the harbor, was the great arena to the left and the library and public buildings to the right. About five miles to the left of the avenue, was the temple of Artemis (Diana, as she was known to the Romans) goddess of the hunt. Today, this city lies in ruins, the harbor filled with silt. All previous efforts to save it proved futile. Here, Paul would establish one of the strongest churches in Asia Minor.

To this great city came Paul with Aquila and Priscilla. Separating from them, he entered the temple to carry on his running debate with his Jewish brethren. Officially having turned from them, he had not as yet abandoned them.

I will return to you again, God willing . . . Apparently Paul had found some ready spirits, who received him and urged him to remain with them for a longer time. Evidently, assuming that it was not the right time, he turned them down with the promise that he would return, if God would allow him to do so. Throughout the book of Acts it is obvious that Paul is in continual submission to the Holy Spirit. It would have been natural, having been given an invitation to continue ministering in this most important cultural and commercial center, indeed, a crossroads of Middle Eastern commerce, he should seize the opportunity. He would return later to establish a most significant church, but apparently the time was not right. Timing has always been vital in God's

economy, as was evident in the coming of Christ—*"In the fullness of time God sent forth His Son . . ."* (Galatians 4:4). In a day when missionary enterprise is conducted with computers and charts and projections, it is well to observe this simple phenomenon—since the overwhelming task of recovering the world is possible only through the power of God, it is essential that all who assist Him in it be guided rather by the Holy Spirit, than by human perceptions of the task. Jesus said, *"Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest that He will send forth laborers into His harvest"* (Matthew 9:38). It is His harvest and we are His laborers. We must follow His orders. We have our own perceptions of things and God has His. Isaiah conveys God's message on this subject—*"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are My ways your ways, said the Lord. Whereas the Heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts"* (Isaiah 55:8).

A Jew by the name of Apollos . . . He was from Alexandria—a center of learning, both in the knowledge of the Egyptians and of the Greeks. It is here that a team of seventy Jewish scholars translated the Hebrew Scriptures into *Koiné* Greek—a work which we call the *Septuagint*. The Old Testament passages were often quoted by Jesus and Paul in the Septuagint, which was in common usage in those days. This accounts for what seemed to be discrepancies in New Testament quotations from the Old Testament. The Septuagint is a most valuable tool for offering insights into the way in which Hebrew scholars perceived the concepts of the Old Testament.

Paul identified with Apollos—*"I have planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase"* (I Corinthians 3:7). Ever sensitive to the inadequacies of the flesh and the necessity of reliance on the Holy Spirit, Paul is bold to declare that all he does is plant the seed. And equally to

acknowledge the valuable ministry of Apollos in nurturing that seed.

A learned man . . . able in the Scriptures. A scholar is often looked upon today with some skepticism—an ivory-towered ideologue—full of many interesting, if less than crucial, observations about the text. It should be remembered that without such scholars it would be very unlikely that we would have had a text at all. Painstaking research by scholars through the centuries has given us a refined and evermore refined body of divine literature. Thanks to such scholarship the textual variants, which might have been considerable, now occupy a small space at the bottom of the page. Thanks to such scholarship we do have a court of appeal when disputes over the text or its interpretation occur. Of course, it may be argued that the Holy Spirit is the final court of appeal. However, it is impossible to ignore the fact, given the wide diversity of interpretations, many offered by untrained teachers, that the appeal to the Holy Spirit has somehow failed to produce harmony. Either the Holy Spirit is at fault, giving an uncertain sound; or humans are at fault, failing to put in the essential, if admittedly arduous effort to master the text. It is, of course, much easier to take the shortcut of appealing to God for a miracle, than to pay the price of diligent study. Obviously the capacity and desire for such effort is a gift given by God Himself. But those who are given the gift should be allowed to exercise it in functioning as a resource for those who do not have such a gift. Commonly, however, many who choose to appeal God for a miracle regard the gift of scholarship (or knowledge) as superfluous. Thus, many of the Lord's sheep are hurt by inadequate shepherds. As in the medical profession, specialists are essential in the vast arena of knowledge which is beyond the capacity of any single individual to master. The leaders of the people of God must come to grips with this reality, in order that they

may guide the church in its exploration of the most intricate details of God's great revelation to man. Invariably, resistance to such scholarship is led by those who do not have such a gift.

Apollos came to Ephesus from Alexandria. There he displayed a very strong knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures—focusing on the issues of the baptism of John and the Coming of Jesus, whom he identified as the Messiah in his very bold teaching in the synagogue.

However, he had not as yet come into the knowledge of the Holy Spirit, since it was not as yet a matter of record. Accordingly, Priscilla and Aquila took him aside and opened up to him this essential addition to God's revelation. Paul, of course, was not there when Apollos arrived, and so Priscilla and Aquila, having worked so closely with him for so long a period of time, would have been the logical ones to unfold this truth to Apollos. It is very important to observe that since there is today a complete revelation of God in written form, there is no need for a personal revelation to individuals. The effort to depend on direct revelations from God, instead of attending to the existing revelation, would not be favorable to God. We must deal thoroughly with what we have before we can expect something further.

It was then the intention of Apollos to go into Achaia and visit the brethren there. The local believers in Ephesus encouraged him to do so and wrote a letter to the believers throughout that region to receive him as a true messenger of God. That Apollos was an instrument of God, filled with the Holy Spirit, was evident by the effectiveness of his ministry—the believers in Achaia were very much helped. In the great cacophony of voices raised today as claimants to being spokesmen for God, one of the tests for validity of the claims

is the response of the Spirit within the believers to the message. If God is speaking, the inner spirit of the believer will be stirred. The words of the Pharisees had only served to put the people of God under bondage. The words of Jesus and His disciples delivered His people from that bondage. If the Holy Spirit is speaking through a servant of God, even the words that might be corrective in nature will come through with grace. If one goes away from a meeting feeling discouraged and

inadequate, there may be some question as to the source of the message. The words of religionists lead to bondage and discouragement; the words of the Holy Spirit lead to liberty and encouragement for the besieged humans on the earth.

With great conviction and effectiveness, Apollos debated with the Jews, showing them from their own Old Testament Scripture, that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the Messiah whom they had so long been expecting.

Acts 19:1-10

TRANSLATION

And it happened that while Apollos was in Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper region [of Asia Minor] came to Ephesus, and finding certain disciples, he said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said to him, "We have not even heard if there is a Holy Spirit." And he said, "Unto what then were you baptized?" And they said, "Unto the baptism of John." And Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on the One coming after him, that is, on Jesus." And when they had heard, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And Paul having laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they were speaking with tongues and prophesying. And all the men were about twelve.

And he entered into the synagogue and spoke boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading [them] concerning the things of the kingdom of God. And as certain ones were hardened and unpersuaded, they were speaking evil of the "Way" before the multitude, and Paul departed from them and took away the disciples, and reasoned daily in the school of Tyrannus. And this took place for two years, so that all those dwelling in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

COMMENTARY

The Holy Spirit Comes to the Ephesians

Whatever it was that Aquila and Priscilla had added to Apollos' perception of Christ and the "Way," he apparently did not have the opportunity to share it with the Ephesians before he left for Corinth. Now comes Paul to pick up where Apollos had left off. Much close teamwork was evident between Paul and Apollos, although lacking somewhat between Paul and the other apostles. Again, it must be noted that there has never been in all the history of the church from its beginning, a period when all was harmonious and cooperative between the members of the

body of Christ. People often appeal to the early church as an example of the optimum functioning of the believers. This was far from the case. Again, if one were to be transported back to that first century, one would be quite disappointed. The truth of the matter is humans have been inadequate in their relationship to God since the great rupture in the Garden of Eden.

The time had come for Paul to go to Ephesus and establish there the body of believers. Apollos had broken the ground

for him and had moved on to Corinth. The Ephesians were ready and Paul was ready. The immediate issue was the coming of the Holy Spirit. The new covenant which God had ordained for His people was completely inoperative without the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. As the prophets had predicted, God would write the new covenant on the heart—that is, on the inner man. No longer would the keeping of the law be based upon external factors such as the sacrificial system and the Mosaic Law, but on the power of the Holy Spirit within.

Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed? This question has nothing to do with the idea of a “second blessing” or a post-salvation experience of the Holy Spirit. It has rather to do with the historic process in which the Holy Spirit was introduced to various segments of the Jews and God-fearers throughout the Middle East. This would be their first encounter with Him. But the introduction had to come through the apostles to whom the Holy Spirit had appeared in the beginning in Jerusalem. Why did He not appear to groups like the Samaritans and the Jews and God-fearers of other regions separately? The answer is, it would have destroyed the unity of the body. Had the Holy Spirit appeared separately to the Samaritans, for example, they would have certainly assumed that they were the true recipients and that others were “copy cats.” There was already a wall between the Jews and the Samaritans over the matter of a place of worship, the Samaritans believing that they had the true revelation of God on the subject. And so, of course, the Ephesians. By the same token, the Jews of Jerusalem would have believed that the experience of the other groups was only an inferior duplication. So, the coming of the Holy Spirit to the Samaritans and to the Ephesians could not be disassociated from the original revelation at Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. And now the

Jews and God-fearers of Ephesus would be introduced to the Holy Spirit through the Jews of Jerusalem in the person of Paul.

The unity of the revelation was preserved through the power given to the apostles by Jesus at the time of His ascension. *“But you shall receive power after that the Holy Spirit is come upon you: and you shall be witnesses unto Me both in Jerusalem, and in Judea and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth”* (Acts 1:8). The last phrase should rather be translated, “to the extremities of the land.” The Greek word *ge* like the Hebrew *‘eretz* was applied more to the land. What land? The land including Palestine and its neighbors in the Middle East. Jesus commented that the Queen of Sheba came “from the uttermost parts of the earth,” when in reality she came from the southern extremities of “the land.” Such an understanding of the words *‘eretz* in Hebrew and *ge* in Greek, would greatly simplify the matters of prophesy. Often prophetic utterances relate rather to the Middle Eastern arena than to the world at large. The issue surrounding the so-called “Great Tribulation” and the “Battle of Armageddon” occur actually in the Middle East. Ephesus and the whole of Asia Minor represented the extremities of the region that Jesus was referring to.

Ephesus was the last in the chain of the areas that would pertain to the original commission by Jesus to His disciples in Acts 1:8. Acts 1:8 is not given as an evidence of the coming of the Holy Spirit to the individual, but rather the promise to the apostles to whom it was given that their mission would be successful. “Ye shall be my witnesses.” He was giving them a direct assignment with the promise of His power. He was not extending that promise necessarily to all the believers that would come after them. The failure to understand this has put many Christians under guilt feelings

and much uncertainty as to whether or not they have been recipients of the Holy Spirit. That is most tragic. The Holy Spirit does not come as a reward for acceptable Christian performance. His power is the only adequate basis for Christian performance. Nor is adequate Christian service the evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Who can be the judge of what is adequate? Who can be the judge, in fact, of what is the gift of the individual believer? Paul told the Corinthians that he did not even judge himself. The evidence of the presence of the Spirit within us is the desire to have the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. Without the Holy Spirit, there would be no such desire. If the coming of the Holy Spirit is only a starting point, and the desire for service something of human motivation, then we are in the very position of the Galatians, to whom Paul said, *“Having begun in the Spirit are you now made perfect in the flesh?”* Acts 1:8 was a special promise to a special group with a special assignment. That original assignment was basically fulfilled in Paul’s ministry in Ephesus, which indeed reached out to a good part of Asia. That did not, of course, by any means end the era of the power of the Holy Spirit to send forth His ambassadors throughout the world. Much distress and discouragement has been experienced by the believers in the misapplication of Acts 1:8. The tragedy is that it is assumed that everyone has the gift of articulation and vocalization. It is as though the only significant gift is “a mouth.” It is as though the only ones who are in favor with God and possess His Spirit are the vocal ones. If that were true, salesmen and politicians would be God’s favorite sons.

We have not so much as heard if there is a Holy Spirit. Can it be assumed then that they were saved, but not filled with the Spirit? Could it be used to apply to Christians today in the sense that they might be saved, but not filled with the Spirit. Certainly not. The

statement has no relevance to the believers of today. One cannot be saved without the presence of the Holy Spirit. Paul said to the Romans, *“If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His”* (Romans 8:9). What then does it mean? It means that they were believers in the same respect that the Jews were believers up until Pentecost. In one sense of the word the Jews as a nation were “believers”, and, as children of God, would be considered “saved.” Moses, for example, was saved, but not in the same sense as the believers after the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In the Old Testament period believers were affected by the Holy Spirit continually, and on occasion were filled with the Spirit for special assignments, such as Moses in the receiving of the law and the building of the tabernacle. Whereas, on the Day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came to dwell personally and permanently in every believer. Thus, in the Old Testament era it might be said that the believers were “saved”, but not filled with the Holy Spirit.

And so the Ephesians had been informed, regarding Jesus the Messiah and the baptism of John which Jesus Himself had participated in, but apparently had not been given instruction by Apollos regarding the Holy Spirit. This was, in no sense of the word, a case of Christians who had not received some kind of “second blessing” or “baptism of the Holy Spirit,” as some groups have suggested. These were Jews and God-fearers, mostly, who had accepted the Messiahship of Jesus and had been baptized by John in the baptism of repentance but had not as yet participated in the advent of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Were they saved? Yes, certainly, but in the sense that the Old Testament family of God would be considered “saved” or as the disciples themselves would have been considered “saved.” Remember that the baptism of John was not the same as the baptism practiced by the New Testament

church, which followed salvation. The baptism of John was a baptism of cleansing, in which the faithful remnant identified with the national sin of apostasy and idolatry and sought God's forgiveness on the behalf of the entire nation. That is why Peter, on the Day of Pentecost, called for repentance and baptism prior to the gift of the Holy Spirit. Now, of course, even for Jewish believers, baptism prior to salvation is not required. It is a rite practiced after salvation.

And when Paul laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them . . .

There is nothing in the Epistles of Paul to suggest that the laying on of hands is universally necessary for the receiving of the Holy Spirit. Some believe that there is a true "apostolic succession" and that the Holy Spirit and salvation must be ministered through the laying on of their hands. It is well to be wary of any system of belief that requires the mediation of another human being.

And they were speaking in tongues and prophesying. Once again, we are dealing with a phenomenon that was a special manifestation of the Holy Spirit associated with His coming into the world. The special events of Pentecost were no more to be duplicated continuously than were the phenomena of the coming of Jesus at Bethlehem. The sweeping changes brought about by the shift of the Old Covenant to the New Covenant requires sweeping manifestations of God to validate the new message. Hence, tongues and miracles were closely associated with the disciples in these early days prior to the establishing of the inspired record in the New Testament Scriptures. How else would one be expected to believe messengers claiming to be from God but presenting a radical departure from the Old Covenant?

But are such phenomena to be expected today? Yes, but in a different sense for

different reasons and in different measure. Healings do take place today, not uncommonly, but are not guaranteed as a part of salvation. Healing is not thus the unconditional right of every believer who exhibits certainty that God is going to heal. Such teaching is not found in any of Paul's epistles. Any teaching that is of universal significance will have universal coverage in the Scripture. That is to say that things that are vital to every believer, such as the teachings regarding salvation will be adequately and continuously presented in all of the books of the New Testament. It would not be confined to scattered and questionable texts.

Insofar as tongues is concerned, the matter has been dealt with in earlier chapters, but a comment here. There was evidently a gift of tongues which continued after the apostolic era. However, after this episode in Acts 19, there is very little mention of the phenomenon except for a brief passage in Paul's letter to the church at Corinth. If it were a vital part of salvation, or the presence of the Holy Spirit within, it would certainly have been given that important place in the teachings of the Epistles. Not only is it not emphasized, it is rarely mentioned. It is interesting to note that the only church to which instruction was given, was the most troubled church of all. And to them he indicated that he would rather speak "five words in a prophesy than five thousand words in a tongue." Apparently the Corinthians were toying with the matter, and Paul urged restraint. He did not forbid it, neither did he encourage it. In many respects, a large segment of the church today is also toying with it. The practice has been so abused in the church that many stable believers do not want to be involved in it.

And the number of the men was about twelve. It is almost startling to observe the number of those involved in the episode. It was apparently not a

broadly based experience in the church at Ephesus. Paul's letter to the Ephesians makes no mention whatsoever of the phenomenon of tongues. Or, in fact, any of the kinds of experiences that accompanied the original coming of the Holy Spirit. We mention again the most important rule of biblical interpretation, "Make much of that which God makes much of (author unknown)."

And as certain ones were hardened and unbelieving . . . Paul continued presenting his message in the synagogue, but being bitterly opposed by those who were "hardened," he departed from them and continued his ministry in the school of Tyrannus. As with Jesus and the people of Capernaum, the opposition and unbelief was of such a nature that the work of the Holy Spirit was hindered. Often, both Jesus and Paul worked in the midst of opposition. For them, it did not

seem necessary to have an unbroken linkage of faith among those in whose midst they performed miracles (Lazarus for example). Occasionally, however, the atmosphere of unbelief was overbearing. And God chose not to work.

All who were dwelling in Asia heard the word of the Lord . . . The region known collectively as Asia extended to the mountainous regions around Armenia. It did not include the far eastern vastness of China and India. Paul continued for two years in Ephesus in the school of Tyrannus and saw the message reach to the eastern boundaries of Cappadocia, at the extremity of what was then known as Asia. From the simple beginnings of the twelve who first received the Spirit, the Word of God, like the mustard seed of Jesus' parable had become a great tree overspreading the people of Asia, both Jews and Greeks.

Acts 19:11-20

TRANSLATION

God was doing extraordinary miracles through the hands of Paul, so that even napkins and aprons having been brought from [touching] his flesh and laid upon the sick, their illnesses departed, and even the evil spirits went out. And certain of the itinerant Jews, exorcists, laid hands upon those having evil spirits in the name of the Lord Jesus saying, "I adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches." And there was a certain man, Sceva, a Jew, a chief priest, who had seven sons who were doing this. And the evil spirit answered and said to them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?" And the man, in whom was the evil spirit, leaped upon them and overcame and was strong against them, so that they fled from that house naked and wounded. And this became known to all the Jews and Greeks who were dwelling in Ephesus; and fear fell upon all of them and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified. And many of those who had believed began confessing and declaring their practices. And a considerable number of those practicing magic brought their books and burned them before all, and the value of them was counted and found to be fifty thousand pieces of silver. Thus the word grew and was strengthened according to the power of the Lord.

COMMENTARY

The Sons of Sceva and the Abuse Power

In the process of the establishing of the church at Ephesus, there was a great demonstration of power from God, through the hands of Paul, in attending to the maladies of the people of Ephesus. Many healings took place, even in the somewhat uncommon practice of the touching of napkins and aprons which were then taken to lay upon the sick, who were not able to come in person to Paul. There was also a significant amount of the casting out of demons. As in the case of Jesus, the casting out of demons did not require an intensive effort, but merely a word. There were no

long rituals or fastings. Demons were exorcised with a word—"Go!"—and they went. This spectacular demonstration of power was effective to the "power-seekers." Many today seek special power from God for this purpose. They are not so much interested in sharing with others the inner nature of the Holy Spirit, as they are in what the Spirit of God can do for them. They simply want power.

There was in Ephesus one Sceva, a Jew and a priest, who had seven sons. Apparently all of them were engaged in

the practice of exorcism and joined with a group of “wandering” Jews, who went about specializing in this particular power. They had a formula for their activity. It turned out to be their undoing in Ephesus. They invoked the names of Jesus and Paul which practice was woefully void of any of the true power of God. Apparently two of the sons of Sceva attempted to use this formula in casting out a demon. The response of the demon was *“Jesus we know and Paul we know, but who are you?”* It was obvious that they had no authority for what they were doing. The power to deal with demons must come from God Himself. Casting out demons is not a religious exercise to test one’s experience with the Holy Spirit or “spirituality.” There is no way that humans can prevail over Satan in the flesh. It is dangerous to try. Much of the efforts at “exorcism” involve very rigorous sessions of intensive prayer and fasting. With Paul and Jesus, demons went out with a word. It is quite possible that these intensive efforts indicate the lack of the true power of God. There is too much of the flesh in it. The intention is good, but the power is lacking. Of course, many feel that the lack of power is based upon some human failure that needs to be dealt with first. The truth of the matter is that if one were in disfavor with God for some reason, it would not be God who was directing them, in that state of weakness, to engage in casting out demons. Again, much that passes for demon possession today is really a matter of human “orneriness.” Incurable human behavior may appear to be demonic but is a far cry from true demon possession. Of course, it is obvious that Satan himself inspires much mischief when people seem to “act like the devil.” There are several tests for “bona fide” demon possession. One of the common indications is hostility to Christ. The very mention of the name Christ may set up a violent reaction. Obviously, the one who comes to fellow believers seeking help from Christ might be affected by Satan but can hardly be

demon possessed. Another indication is a total personality aberration. It is not merely the common two-faced behavior, but rather a complete change of personality—even of voice and expression. Still a third indication would be that the demon, addressed by the true power of Christ, will respond with immediate submissiveness, as is true in all of the occasions where both Jesus and Paul dealt with demons. Where there is an intensive struggle with a supposed demon, it is quite likely that either one is not dealing with genuine demon possession or that God has not given the power to act in the situation, as was evident with the sons of Sceva. Remember that humans are no match for Satan, and Satan is no match for God.

The man in whom was the evil spirit, leaped upon them and subdued them. Dealing with demons is a most serious matter and not to be entered into lightly. There is a disturbing amount of carelessness in this area in the church today. Contrary to the opinions of many, it is not something that every “spirit-filled” believer ought to be able to do. It is a very special gift.

The demon-possessed man, having as is common, unusual strength, leaped upon the would-be exorcists (possibly only two of the sons) and drove them from the house naked and wounded. The Greek translated word “wounded” is *trauma* from which we get our own English word, which refers to wounds which are serious enough to break the skin and cause bleeding. Thus, they went from the house not just bruised, but bloodied.

The episode became widely known in Ephesus, both with the Jews and Greeks, and “great fear fell upon them.” It is well to be fearful when one confronts the enemy in the flesh, rather than in the spirit. Satan is not to be trifled with. Humans are no match for him. Remember, again, we are no match for

the devil, but the devil is no match for God. Many use the ability to cast out demons as a test of “filling of the Holy Spirit,” but this is risky as well as misleading. The presence of the Holy Spirit in us is not determined by power over demons, but by the desire to follow Christ. Exorcism should be attempted with great caution and only if one is absolutely convinced that the Lord is with one in it.

The fear that came upon the Ephesians was a wholesome fear based upon the recognition that they must not trifle with the matters of the Spirit. Let the Christian beware.

The name of the Lord Jesus was magnified. When the Spirit of God is truly working, and we are not dealing with fleshly efforts to reproduce divine activity, the result is the magnifying of the Lord Jesus Christ. Where the flesh is at work, Christ Himself is obscured behind the carnival atmosphere of the spectacular.

Many of those who believed began confessing . . . Again, the result of Paul’s ministry of the miraculous was concern about sin. The miracles functioned as they were intended to, to bring about belief and commitment to Jesus as the Christ or the true Messiah. So powerful was the impact of the Holy Spirit that the whole system of idolatry was upset. Not only did they confess their idolatry, but they brought their paraphernalia and burned it publicly. The value of that memorable bonfire was estimated at fifty thousand pieces of silver. It is not known exactly what a piece of silver was worth, but it was considerable.

Thus the word grew and was strengthened, according to the power of the Lord. The true work of the Spirit brings not the focus on human achievement in the realm of the supernatural, but solid growth and strength in the power of Christ.

Acts 19:21-40

TRANSLATION

And when these things [events in Ephesus] were fulfilled, Paul determined in his spirit to go unto Jerusalem, having passed through Macedonia and Achaia, saying, "After the things which happened to me there, I must also see Rome." And when he had sent to Macedonia two of the ones who were attending him, Timothy and Erastus, he stayed for a time in Asia.

And it happened at that time that there was not a little trouble concerning 'the Way.' For a certain silversmith, Demetrius by name, who made silver relics of Artemis [Diana], brought not a little gain to the craftsmen whom he had gathered together, and the workers, concerning such things, and said, "Men, you know that out of this profit is our prosperity. And you behold and hear that not only in Ephesus, but almost all of Asia, this Paul has persuaded and misled a considerable number of people, saying that gods who come into being through human hands are no gods at all. And not only this, that our trade is in danger of coming to a bad reputation, but also the temple of the great goddess Artemis is considered nothing and her majesty which all of Asia and the Roman world worships is about to be brought down."

And when those who had come had heard, they were full of wrath and crying out, saying, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" And the city was full of confusion, and rushed with one accord into the theater, having seized two of Paul's traveling companions, Gaius and Aristarchus. And Paul wanted to go into the crowd, but his disciples did not permit him. And certain also of the Asian rulers of high authority who were his friends sent to him urging him not to present himself in the theater. And some were crying out one thing and some another, for the assembly was confused, and the majority did not know to what purpose they had come together. And from the crowd they decided [to call out] Alexander, the Jews having put him forward; and Alexander indicated with his hand that he wanted to give a defense to the people. And knowing that he was a Jew, they began all with one voice, crying for about two hours, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" And the town clerk, having silenced the crowd, said, "Men and women, Ephesians, who of mankind is there who does not know the city of the Ephesians who are custodians of the great

Artemis and that which fell from the gods? These things being undeniable, it is necessary for you to keep quiet and to do nothing rash. For you have brought these men here who have neither desecrated the temple nor blasphemed our god. If then Demetrius and the craftsmen with him have an occasion against one, the courts are open and there are magistrates; let them bring charges with one another. And if you seek anything further, let it be settled in the regular assembly. For we are also in danger of being indicted concerning this riot, about which we are able to render a verdict concerning this uproar.” And having said these things he dismissed the assembly.

COMMENTARY

Paul Confronts Satan’s Counterfeit Deity

Evolved out of the matrix of human prosperity and culture, Ephesus was the epitome of human achievement. Furthermore, it was the center of the worship of the Greek goddess Artemis, goddess of the hunt. She was the counterpart of the Roman goddess Diana and the Semitic Ashtaroth, the goddess of fertility. The combination evolved a cultic worship strongly oriented to fleshly indulgence. The temple to Artemis was a splendid structure about five miles across town from the main thoroughfare of Ephesus. The temple was regarded as one of the wonders of the ancient world.

Accordingly, an extensive trade had developed among the silversmiths of the city, in the producing of silver religious relics and *objets d’art* pertaining to the cult of Artemis. And therein lay a good deal of the trouble for Paul and the community of believers in Ephesus.

A certain silversmith by the name of Demetrius, probably the head of the guild, became alarmed at the great destruction of the religious books and relics and called together his fellow craftsmen to stem the tide. So effective had been the impact of Paul’s ministry that Demetrius was constrained to

declare that nearly all of Asia had been affected by it.

Gods which are made by hand are not gods at all. So blind were these devotees of satanic deities that it astounded them to think that anyone could say such a thing. One would think that it would be clearly understood that the images made were only representations of the real deity, and not to be worshipped of themselves. But obviously the power of the goddess herself had been transferred to her handcrafted and erotically adorned image in the temple.

And her majesty which is worshipped in all Asia and the Roman world is about to be brought down. Not only did the silversmiths fear for their trade, but also for their favorite goddess. The Greek word *oikouneme*, often translated “world,” can be used for a portion of the inhabitable world, which, in this case, added to the word Asia, would have referred to the Roman part of the world (cf. Luke 2:1—“all the world was taxed”). The word was often used to refer to the vast Roman Empire which at that time seemed to be the most significant part of the world.

The devotion to Artemis was genuine and, in fact, quite fanatical, as we shall see later. The silversmiths were, indeed,

worried about their trade, but also genuinely concerned for the reputation of Artemis, which seemed about to crumble under the impact of the message of the true God brought to Ephesus by Paul and his cohorts.

And the city was filled with confusion and rushed together with one accord into the theater. Paul had been about to leave Ephesus when the uproar occurred. He could not leave his companions to the unruly mob and would have braved the arena in order to rescue them. However, not only did his own disciples constrain him, but also some very highly placed rulers of Asia, who were his friends, sent word to him, urging him to stay back.

At that point, one Alexander, of some apparent influence and put forward by the Jews to do what he could, attempted to quiet the uproar, but when it was learned that he was a Jew, the mob started chanting—"Great is Artemis of the Ephesians." They kept this up for about two hours. The uproar continued out of hand until the town clerk finally succeeded in quieting them.

These things being therefore undeniable, it is necessary for you to quiet down and to do nothing rash. Apparently the town clerk had considerable influence, because the tumult subsided, and he spoke to them in a calm and rational manner of the radical actions of that day.

It is interesting to note that there was not the slightest doubt in his mind about the reality of Artemis or the special dispensation that the Ephesians had to be her special subjects and be keepers of some apparent object that had fallen from the sky (perhaps a meteorite), perceived by them to be a special sign from the gods. In the mind of the town clerk, no one on earth could possibly not know of this or accept it as true.

Confident in his religious convictions, the town clerk saw no threat in the messengers of another god. Whatever they had to say would not affect his own allegiance to Artemis or the reality of the sacred trust of the Ephesians. Accordingly, he was generous in his dealings with Paul and his companions, asserting that they had really done nothing amiss. They had not, in his own words, "desecrated the temple of Artemis or blasphemed." He saw no valid charges against them and urged Demetrius and his "cronies" to take their case before the legal system available to them. And, as he had silenced the tumult, so with equal authority dismissed the assembly with a stern warning that they might be called to task for the outrageous behavior of that day.

The story is simple enough—a persuasive presentation by Paul of the truth of Christ, a considerable response of the people; jealousy and harassment by the entrenched religious leadership. It was an old story—ultimate concerns being more on the part of those whose commercial enterprises were threatened. So what gives this particular incident more than usual significance? The point has often been made that we must govern the importance of a situation or teaching in terms of the amount of coverage that it receives. We have used the formula—"make much of that which God makes much of." The amount of attention given to a particular episode or concept should give us some clue as to its importance. In a book which covers the entire process of the coming of the Holy Spirit to the earth and the establishing of the church by His apostolic representatives, for all time on earth, half a chapter out of twenty-eight is devoted to this incident in Ephesus. Were it not for the amount of space given to it, we would give it a passing reference as one of the many incidents of violent opposition which the disciples encountered in their apostolic mission.

So what was important about this particular episode? The answer lies in the fact that the temple of Artemis in Ephesus was something of the “flagship” of the satanic “flotilla” of gods and goddesses that were the demonic forces of Satan sent to counteract the coming of the Son of God in the world. To be sure, the Pharisees were satanically inspired, but probably not demonic presences as such. On the other hand, the whole pantheon of Greek gods and goddesses holding the entire world in blind deception were the very agents of hell. In a certain sense, Artemis represented not merely a humanly devised religious diversion, such as animism or totemism, but a sort of demonic archangel, playing upon the most potent human force on earth—the erotic consciousness—and holding God’s creation now gone astray, in bondage to their own fleshly perversions of the procreative energies created by God for the population of the earth.

How did Paul counter this superhuman force of evil? By relying on the even greater power of God. With the bold determination of rescuing his cohorts, Paul sought to enter the arena but was prevented from doing so. He was helpless in the situation. On the other hand, the Jewish representative, Alexander, at least holding to the one true God, succeeded only in lighting a match to the bonfire. In a most remarkable way, the tumult was resolved by one of Artemis’ ardent worshippers—the town clerk. What was more deeply true was that God Himself made use of this most unlikely instrument to deliver His servants. It was not then any power within God’s servants that prevailed over the enemy, but the power of God making use of a pagan instrument.

One of the most difficult lessons for the church to learn is, in the words of an Old Testament prophet, “Not by might nor by power but by My Spirit, said the Lord.” Invariably, the church tends to put Paul

on a pedestal, as though he had reached a high level of personal perfection and power. Repeatedly, Paul denies his own power, confesses that he does not “count himself to have apprehended, either were already perfect.” The past haunted him—“I am not worthy to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church”; “I thought I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth”; “I am the chief of sinners.” He constantly reminded himself and the believers of his weakness in the flesh—“In my flesh dwells no good thing”; “The good that I would I do not.” He has no confidence in his own personal power or faith—“We are they who . . . have no confidence in the flesh.” And to the Galatians, struggling with legalism—“Having begun in the Spirit are you now made perfect in the flesh?” Paul saw himself as only the channel through which the power of God functioned. Had Paul gone into the arena in Ephesus, bold as he was to try, he would have been powerless against the mob. He would have failed where the pagan town clerk succeeded. He would have been like a conduit unattached to a power source. There was no power in his personal presence adequate to do the job. And, apparently, the Holy Spirit did not want him to go.

Many assume that God will not use us unless we are “good enough” or “dedicated enough.” But how do we ever get “good enough” or “dedicated enough” without the Spirit? Does the Holy Spirit merely get us started and then leave us to perfect ourselves? Then what is our responsibility? Just to be willing. The very willingness itself is an indication that the Holy Spirit is working with us. As a godly old friend who had served the Lord for over fifty years, used to say, “We provide the willingness; God provides the power.”

Paul confronted the epitome of demonic power in Ephesus, the epitome of human achievement. How did he prevail? By

staying back and letting God handle it. God even had to overrule him in that. God's "pipe" was a pagan magistrate. Throughout human history on the earth, God has used men and mountains; and seas and serpents; and winds and flames to accomplish His purpose. "He makes the wrath of man to praise Him" and

"rides upon the wings of the winds." "He makes the winds His messengers and the flames of fire His servants" (Psalm 104). We offer Him a body and soul—not perfect, not powerful, but His to command. Satan may frustrate fleshly efforts, but he is no match for the weakest saint sent in the power of God.

Acts 20:1-16

TRANSLATION

After the tumult had ceased, Paul sent for the disciples and having encouraged them, he said goodbye and went out to go to Macedonia. And when he had passed through those regions and encouraged them with many words, he came unto Greece. And when he had spent three months, a plot arose concerning him by the Jews as he was about to sail to Syria, and he decided to return through Macedonia. And there accompanied him Sopater of Pyrrhus, a Berean; and Aristarchus and Secundus of Thessalonica; and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy; and Tychicus and Trophimus. Now these having gone on before, waited for us in Troas. And we set sail from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread, and came to them in Troas after a five day journey, where we remained for seven days.

But on the first day of the Sabbath, when we had gathered together to break bread, Paul discoursed with them, being about to leave on the next day, and he prolonged the word until midnight. Now there were a number of lamps in the upper room where we were gathered together. And there was a certain young man by the name of Eutychus seated upon the window ledge, who fell into a deep sleep while Paul was discoursing at length; and having gone to sleep, he fell down from the third floor, and was taken up as dead. And Paul went down and fell upon him and embraced him and said, "Do not be troubled, for his soul is in him." And having gone back up, they broke bread and ate sufficiently and talked together until dawn, and so he [Paul] departed.

And we, having gone on before, sailed on a ship for Assos, and there we were going to take Paul on board; for having arranged it thus, he was himself going by land. And as we arrived at Assos and took him on board, we came unto Mitylene. And from there, we set sail on the next day and arrived off the coast of Chios; and next we arrived at Samos; and the day following we came unto Miletus. For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus so that he would not spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying so that, if possible, he might arrive in Jerusalem so that he could be there on the day of Pentecost.

COMMENTARY

Sowing the Seed and Nurturing It

When the tumult had ended in Ephesus, Paul had set out to go to Macedonia and on down into Greece. He called together the disciples to give them a word of encouragement before leaving them. And so also when he came to Macedonia, he gave to them much encouragement. In Greek, “*Logos*”—“the word”—means more than mere words, but rather ideas or concepts. For the Greek student, the singular expression—“many a word”—really means “many thoughts.” The word “encourage,” is the Greek word—*parakaleo*—and is the same word used of the Holy Spirit and translated—“paraclete” or “comforter.” It has often been translated “exhort”, but this misses the fundamental meaning and relieves it of its comforting aspects. The same word occurs in verses 1 and 2, but in the King James Version, the first word is translated by “embrace” and the second time by “exhort.” It is the same word. Thus, a word which should be used in terms of encouragement and consolation is obscured by other translations. We have discussed this word before, but will refresh the mind of the reader. The word *parakaleo* is the Greek equivalent of the Latin word for “comfort.” “Comfort” is from the Latin words which mean “to strengthen together with.” It is from the same root as our word fortress and its derivatives. The word “encourage” is, generally speaking, the most expressive. The word “encourage”, in turn, comes from the French word for heart—*cour*—and thus, the word means “to give heart to” or “hearten.” So as Paul went among the believers from city to city throughout Asia and Macedonia and Greece, he encouraged them in the Lord. He was nurturing the seed. After he had visited the brethren in Macedonia, Paul went on to Greece. He spent three months there, but we are not told, for some reason, exactly what places he visited.

It was Paul’s intention, after Greece, to sail across to Syria, but information came to him about a plot against him on the part of the Jews, and so he went back to Macedonia. A number of the brethren from Macedonia then decided to go to Troas with him.

Now we encounter what is sometimes called a “we passage.” That is, that there is a shift of personal pronouns from a third person narrative about Paul to a first person account of the journey. The “we”, of course, included Luke, who is the author of the book of Acts, as well as the gospel which bears his name. Luke was a physician. He was no doubt of great help to Paul in this capacity. He was also a Gentile, which is important in view of the fact that the three other gospels were written by Jews. He was, of course, articulate. He writes in excellent Greek. And he was called the “beloved” physician, which indicates that he must have had an extremely gracious and engaging personality. There are several of these “we” passages in Acts, indicating that Luke joined Paul from time to time, but was not constantly with him.

The group of men from Macedonia went on ahead to Troas and waited there for Paul. Luke and Paul went up to Philippi and remained there for the days of Unleavened Bread, before going to Troas. In Troas, an incident occurred which seems to be a focal point for this section of the chapter.

On the first day of the week, when we had gathered to break bread . . . The casual mention of the occasion as occurring on the first day of the week indicates that it was a common practice. Nothing is said of a mandatory nature about the particular day upon which the believers would meet. If it was a common

practice then, it is certainly valid now without any New Testament restrictions about it. There has been a considerable controversy the church over this matter of when to meet. Some feel that the law of the Sabbath was never rescinded and that it is mandatory that we keep the seventh day rather than the first day. If this were as important as some people seem to think it is, it would have been very helpful had the Holy Spirit given more explicit instruction about the matter, since the abrogation of the whole legal system would have certainly given rise to confusion as to what particular parts might be required. And, of course, this confusion did exist rather widely in the fledgling church. There are several passages in the New Testament which indicate that the believers did, in fact, customarily meet on the first day of the week, but there are no references to meeting on the Sabbath, except where Paul went into the synagogues for the purpose of addressing the Jewish community. Paul seems to have put the matter to rest in his letters, both to the Colossians and to the Romans. In Colossians 2:17 he warns the believers about letting others judge them in respect to "new moons and Sabbaths." In Romans 14:5 he says, "Some consider one day above another, some consider every day alike. Let each be persuaded in his own mind." Nevertheless, coming together on the first day of the week was a common practice and does not seem to be a central issue. According to Paul's statement to the Romans, it is perfectly legitimate for the believers to meet on the seventh day if they choose, or to meet on the first day, or for that matter on any other particular day. The Old Testament family of God was under strict regulation in regard to these matters giving rise to the assumption that Judaism was as much an organization as an organism. In the New Testament family of God, we shift to the living organism rather than the regulated organization. There is a good deal of flexibility as becomes a familial relationship rather than a legal one.

And a certain young man . . . seated upon the window ledge, fell into a deep sleep . . . fell from the third floor and was taken up as dead. The flesh is ever with us. In a passage of Scripture covering hundreds of miles and numbers of months of missionary activity, one third of the passage is given over to this narrative about Eutychus. No information is given about Paul's visit to Greece or to Macedonia or to Philippi, but much attention is given to this incident in Troas. Luke seems bent on drawing our attention quickly from the rest of the journey to this one specific episode. A young man had fallen asleep during a lengthy discourse by Paul. Had it not been a serious matter, it would almost have been ludicrous. But what an interesting touch of the human! Falling asleep in church has long been regarded as a rather irreverent thing to do. And one might be judged to be disinterested in spiritual matters. However, there may be more incidents of highly motivated worshipers who fall asleep in church than we may care to realize. In fact, there is a physical affliction called "narcolepsy" where those afflicted will fall asleep in any situation. (The author fell asleep on his first date with the lady whom he later married.) The whole episode certainly reflects the irritations of the flesh and helps us to realize that all was not celestial and pious in the early church. There is a tendency to put the early believers on a high pedestal and constantly compare them with what we consider to be a deteriorating quality in the church today. This is most unfortunate because it gives us a false and unrealistic impression of the state of the people of God, characteristically frustrated over the inadequacies of the flesh. Paul was very vocal about this problem, as we have seen in other passages.

Do not be troubled for his soul is in him. Paul went immediately to the young man and embraced him and declared that his life or soul was still in

him. The text had said that he was taken up dead or “as dead.” Quite possibly they only surmised that he was dead. But whether there was a direct act of healing through Paul, or an act of resuscitation, in any event, the incident reflected the care of God for His people, as well as the limitations and frustrations of the flesh, and the people were greatly encouraged by the incident. They continued their fellowship until dawn, and at that time the young man seemed to have suffered no ill effects.

Again, we are not told anything else of what transpired in Troas over the seven day period that Paul was there, giving further confirmation of the importance of this one episode. From Troas, Paul and his company journeyed southward along the coast of Asia Minor, sailing past Mitylene, Chios, Samos, and even Ephesus so that Paul could hasten on to Jerusalem, where he wanted to spend the Feast of Pentecost. He decided to stop at Miletus and to call for the elders of the church of Ephesus to meet with him

there, where he would give them his parting words of instruction and encouragement.

In a passage comprising some sixteen verses and covering many many months and many hundreds of miles of missionary activity, it is quite singular that one third of the passage deals with the incident of the upper room at Troas, where a young man fell asleep during a lengthy sermon. But strangely enough, it comes like a breath of fresh air, calling attention once again to the frustrations of the flesh and the grace of God in the midst of His faltering family. We must ever be careful lest, on the one hand, we place the early Christians on too high a pedestal, or on the other hand expect too much of God’s human family on the earth. There is always the risk of striving for too high a degree of perfection; of becoming discouraged and giving up all together. The words of Christ to Paul ring in our ears—“*My strength is made perfect in weakness*” (II Corinthians 12:9).

Acts 20:17-24

TRANSLATION

From Miletus Paul sent for the elders of the church. And when they had come to him, he said to them, “You know, from the first day that I arrived in Asia, the manner in which [have been with you at all times, serving the Lord with all the lowliness and tears and testings in the things that happened to me by the conspiracies of the Jews; and of the things that were necessary for you, in not declaring to you, and teaching to you publicly and from house to house, testifying thoroughly both to the Jews and to the Greeks repentance unto God and faith in our Lord Jesus. And now, behold, I go unto Jerusalem, bound in the Spirit, not knowing the things which I will encounter therein. Indeed, the Holy Spirit witnesses to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. But under no circumstances do I count my own life of value to myself, except as I may fulfill my course, and the ministry which I have received from the Lord Jesus, declaring thoroughly the good news of the grace of God.”

COMMENTARY

A Final Message to Ephesus—The Good News of the Grace of God

Because of a time problem, Paul had elected to pass by Ephesus and go onto Miletus, where he would find a ship going to Jerusalem. However, he was most anxious to have a final session with the Ephesian elders, whom he would not see again upon this earth. He was going to Jerusalem under what he assumed to be the direction of the Holy Spirit. He summoned the Ephesian elders for his final words to them. What would he say to them? This will be his last personal encounter with them—what will he leave them with as his parting words?

I have not withheld anything of the things which are important to you...

Numberless millions of words had already been written and uttered in the search for the meaning of life and the universe. Philosophy was, of course, the

forte of the Greeks; and religion, the *forte* of the Jews and the pundits of the Middle East. But Paul, in a direct revelation from God, had rejected the questionable tenets of such self-appointed guides and had accepted, instead, the appointment from God to be His messenger in making known to mankind the grace of God and His redemptive plan for His creatures. Thus, all that he said to the Ephesians and subsequently, in his epistles to all the churches were void of human speculation and tradition and trivia. In the centuries of religious writings after Paul, the simplicity of Paul’s message has been overwhelmed by the theological complexities and religious systems crafted in the petty confines of the human psyche. It is essential that we get back to the basic teachings of Paul—“that which is necessary for us to know.”

Paul reminds the elders of three things that characterized his sojourn among them—lowliness and tears and testings. When there is a genuine sense of a divine call, lowliness is not something one must strive for—it is an inescapable reality of the work, as one recognizes one’s total inadequacy to affect anyone’s inner spirit. When the ministry is done through the Holy Spirit, there will be those who get help. However, in the normal course of things there are so many instances where one is unable to help, that the problem is not pride but the will to persevere, in spite of the supposed failures. Paul did not have to strive for humility, it was a natural part of the deep sense of responsibility in the attempt to reach the human spirit. And the tears—not a dramatic effort to curry sympathy and support from followers, but the inevitable flow of compassion that attends the compelling call of God. And the testing—every true servant of God knows the feeling that a very demon of Satan is perched on the shoulder doing all he can to hinder and discourage and frustrate.

Repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus . . . The chief cornerstone of Paul’s entire message—reconciliation to God through Jesus Christ. To the Jews he preached repentance. They knew God; they needed to repent of their national apostasy and rejection of the Messiah. To the Greeks, lost in the wilderness of human philosophy—here is the true object of faith, not myths and legends and superstitions but the true author of the universe, the Logos, which they had so assiduously sought to comprehend.

And now I go bound in the Spirit unto Jerusalem . . . These are words worth remembering. Later on the question will come up as to whether or not Paul had really followed the right course. It has been alleged that if he had not followed this particular course of action, he would not have been apprehended on false charges and spent time in prison. In fact, some of the brethren tried to persuade him not to go, on the grounds that they had themselves received a word to give to him. But Paul had felt “bound in the Spirit” to do it. He was seeking to do what he thought God wanted him to do. He was not going to Jerusalem for personal gain or any other selfish reason—he was going because he thought that’s what he ought to do. It should be observed here that we humans have very little capacity in our natural minds to figure out what God wants. We think we know. Hosts of books and articles have been written on the subject of how to know the will of God. But the mind, so bound by misinformation and misunderstanding; biases and habit patterns of thought, is a very unreliable instrument when it comes to figuring out the mind of God. The history of the Church is strewn with the wreckage of well-meaning but misguided leaders, who have drawn the people of God off into some religious “goose-chase”, supposing they had special insights and instructions from God. It is tempting for some to want to be “special”—to pride oneself on one’s ability to be God’s special messenger and “guru,” but the truth of the matter is that the human mind is always subject to misconceptions. Knowing the mind of God for oneself is a problem—presuming to know it for others

is very risky. The only way we humans can ever be assured of the will of God is if He, by His own power, is able to compel us and to see to it that we ultimately do what He wants. Paul really had no choice about going to Jerusalem. He was not going on the basis of his own human rationale or “rules for determining the will of God.” He was literally compelled by the Spirit to do what God wanted. In determining what God wants us to do, the best prayer we can pray is, “Dear God, see to it that I do what you want.”

But under no circumstances do I count my life as of value to myself, except insofar as I may fulfill my course . . . As Paul was compelled beyond himself to go to Jerusalem, and not by his own rationale, neither did he know what awaited him there, except that the same Spirit who compelled him to go also witnessed to him that “bonds and afflictions awaited him.” He could not turn back, in spite of the perils ahead. As Paul was compelled by the Spirit to declare the truth of God, so he was compelled by the Spirit to face suffering and affliction. Of one thing he was certain—the grace of God would be with him.

In this matter, he had no self-ambition, nor did he see himself as attempting a noble mission. His life was of no value to himself, except as he was able to be an instrument in the cause of Christ. His greatest passion was to finish the path that had been assigned to him by his Master.

To give a thorough declaration of the good news of the grace of God. If Paul’s chief mission was to present

Christ to the world, he presented Him as the revelation of God’s grace. The phrase “good news” is often used as a smoother rendering of a Greek word—*euangelion*—which really does not have a good English equivalent. The word literally means “victory proclamation.” The phrase “good news” has, in its modern usage, lost its vitality and has often been used of trivia. The best translation of the word is “victory proclamation.” Essentially, God has won out over the forces of evil. Satan may have his day, but he has already been defeated, and it is only a matter of time when he will be utterly destroyed. There is no escape for him—he is bound for certain destruction. No doubt he does not realize this and is still allowed, for reasons known only to God, to continue for a time ravaging the earth and testing the saints of God.

God’s grace toward mankind has evolved a successful process of redemption. It is a process, not based upon human religious effort, but the power of God Himself to enter the very spirit of His human creatures. In most emphatic and lucid terms, Paul declares this truth in his letter to Titus (3:4,5)—“*But after that the kindness and love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy, He saved us by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, which He shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior.*” This was Paul’s great message—not rules and regulations for finding the favor of God, but an act of divine power beyond capacity of His creatures.

Acts 20:25-38

TRANSLATION

And now, behold, I know that you will no longer see my face, all of you among whom I have passed, preaching the kingdom. Therefore I bear witness to you on this day, that I am pure from the blood of all; for I have not been neglectful in not declaring to you all the will of God. Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among whom the Holy Spirit has appointed you as overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He has acquired for Himself through His own blood. For I know that after my departure, grievous wolves shall enter unto you, not sparing the flock, and of them there will arise from among you men, speaking deceptive things to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be watchful, remembering that for three years night and day I ceased not to warn each one of you with tears. And now I commit you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you an inheritance among all who are sanctified [set apart unto God]. I have desired no one's gold or silver or raiment. You yourselves know that these hands provided for my needs and for those who were with me. In all things I have showed you that thus laboring, we must help the weak, the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, "It is more blessed [touched by God] to give than to receive."

And when he had said these things, he knelt with all of them and prayed. And there was a good deal of weeping by all, and they fell upon Paul's neck and kissed him, being more greatly distressed at the word which he said, that they were no longer going to see his face. And they accompanied him to the boat.

COMMENTARY

The Message of the Gospel—The Word of God's Grace

Ye shall no longer see my face . . .
 This is a crisis moment for the believers in Ephesus. They had been nurtured by Paul for some three years; they would not see him again on this earth. These would be his final words to them. He identifies them as those among whom he has gone "preaching the kingdom." What kingdom? There is a good deal of

confusion over the various designations of the kingdom. It is variously referred to as "the kingdom of God", "the kingdom of Heaven", "the kingdom of Christ", and "the kingdom of Our Lord." Over against this kingdom there is the "kingdom of earth" or the "kingdom of this world"; and, of course, the "kingdom of Satan." At the present time, the kingdom of this

world is under the influence of Satan, who is regarded as the “prince of this world.” In time the kingdom of this world will become part of the “kingdom of God”—“*The kingdoms of this world or become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ.*” It is not necessary or even advisable to make a distinction between the various names that are applied to the kingdom of God. What Matthew calls the “kingdom of Heaven” Luke calls the “kingdom of God.” The probable reason is that Matthew writes from the Jewish perspective and Luke, from the Gentile. The Jews were very reluctant to use the names of God, because of the possible chance of using them frivolously or profanely. To them, profanity was not a matter of cursing, but merely using the name of God in some trivial way. In any case, the ultimate distinction in the matter of the kingdoms is between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan.

Paul’s mission, in general, was to make known to mankind the kingdom of God or the realm that pertains to the Spirit. Both Jesus and Paul made a strong point of the transient and unprofitable nature of the kingdom of earth. They never really attempted to mix the two. That is, they did not see the power of the Spirit sanctifying the realm of the earth or the flesh. Jesus said, “The flesh profits nothing”; Paul said, “In my flesh dwells no good thing.” There is in the church today a common attempt to imbue the flesh with religious qualities. That is, that by disciplining the flesh, one may bring about spiritual growth.

The coming of the Spirit of Christ into our spirit lifts us immediately from citizenship on earth to citizenship in the kingdom of God. We are thus pilgrims on the earth, and during our stay, however temporary, it is important that we conduct ourselves wisely and righteously, but that does not make us more spiritual. Jesus said to the Pharisee, Nicodemus, whose life had been given to religious

exercise, “*That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit*” (John 3:6). He told him thus, in effect, that all the religious exercise in the world would not change his flesh to Spirit. And Paul said, “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.” He also said to the Galatians, “Having begun in the Spirit, are you now made perfect by the flesh?” There are many principles by which one may improve one’s life in the Spirit, after one has become a citizen of the kingdom, but until that time no amount of religious effort will have any effect upon the Spirit. On the other hand, when one has passed from citizenship in the kingdom of earth to citizenship in the kingdom of God, the principles of spiritual growth are important but are not the gauge of one’s citizenship. So Paul’s great mission was to open the door to the kingdom of God, although he had a good deal of say about the process of life on the earth.

Take heed to yourselves and to all the sheep . . . If God’s domain is called a kingdom, his subjects are referred to as sheep. And, accordingly, the overseers are shepherds. It is most significant that at the birth of Jesus the angels appeared, not to royalty nor to the religious hierarchy, but to simple shepherds on the hillsides of Judea. The people of God have been identified as sheep throughout the Bible. On the one hand we are God’s children, related to Him in a familial bond; but on the other hand we are regarded as His sheep. Both designations have vital meaning to our identity with Him. Christ, the Lord, God omnipotent, who reigns over the universe, revels not in His royalty, but in His place as the “Great Shepherd of the sheep.” We are not royal subjects, whose identity with Christ is in terms of governance, but rather integrally related to Him as children, as well as brothers and sisters. Our identity as members of His family secures for us our eternal life and oneness with God—“partakers of His divine nature.” The designation of

“sheep” speaks of the tenderness with which God watches over His people. It speaks also of our complete dependence on Him for our daily care and sustenance. It further reflects the nature of our service to Him—not as horses or oxen or mules, destined to be “burden-bearers”, but “sheep of His pasture”, feeding on His bounty and sheltered in His care. The frenetic pace at which the believers are driven today reflects more of the spirit of the “cattle-drover” than the shepherd. God did not create His people simply to be “burden-bearers.” In fact, He invited us to come to Him and find tranquility and relief from the toil—*“Come unto Me all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light”* (Matthew 11:28-30). The frenzied pace with which the church today presses the believers to perform tends to destroy the quiet and enriching spirit of the family unit and replaces it with the sterile and barren mood of the workplace. One tends to feel not like the beloved member of a family, but an impersonal unit of a work force. One tends to feel appreciated only in terms of performance and quotas. This, of course, reflects upon the total lack of confidence on the part of the leadership in the power to motivate and equip His servants according to His own will, without the continual prodding and herding of the “cattle-drover.” Paul told the Corinthians, “The love of Christ constrains me (not love for Christ, but love of Christ).” Thus, the Spirit of Christ within, reached out through him in constraining love toward those around him. Paul did not serve Christ because he “owed” Him something, but the very Spirit of Christ within him reached out through him. Paul was not “prodded” by the flesh, but compelled by the Spirit. So Paul confronts the elders of Ephesus and tells them to tend to the church of God as shepherds.

Which He has acquired to Himself through His own blood. The deep personal relationship between Christ and His body of believers is demonstrated by the fact that He acquired them by His own blood. The phrase, “acquired them for Himself” is a Greek word *peripoieomai*—for which there is no good English equivalent. But its liberal meaning is “to acquire for oneself and to place in a protective shelter.” Sometimes this word is translated by “a special possession.” John 10 depicts in a graphic way, this concept of the shepherd and the sheep and the sheepfold. There is nothing in this picturesque image that smacks of the stable of horses or herds of cattle.

Grievous wolves shall enter in, not sparing the flock . . . and these “wolves” would come not only from without, but from within—*“Men shall arise from among you, speaking perverse [misleading] things, to draw away the disciples after them”* (Acts 20:30) Self-styled teachers from within the “body,” ill-equipped and ambitious for a following, have indeed wreaked havoc in the church. The bogus nature of their calling is reflected in their callous attitude toward the sheep, concerned more about their own penchant for a platform than the welfare of the sheep.

And now I commit you to God and to the word of His grace . . . What then is the safeguard? It is God and the word of His grace. Religious voices today are legion. Deceptions abound. Even the very elect can be misled by unscrupulous or misguided usurpers of personal power. The history of the church has been blighted with claims of illusory visions and bogus revelations by which the unwary have been drawn off into *cul de sacs* of offbeat religious movements.

What is the answer? How do we avoid deception? Our only hope is a close vital relationship to God, as presented in the Word of God, taught by those who have

mastered its meaning, as Paul had advised Timothy, diligently pursuing the truth of God's Word.

Which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all who are sanctified [set apart as God's people]. One of the great perils of today in regard to the church, is the tendency to perpetuate theologies and ideologies derived not from the Bible itself, in a mastery of the Word, but from questionable and unverifiable private revelations and from traditions which are so encrusted with human philosophical systems that the simple

meaning of the Scripture is often obscured.

One very important antidote, then, to the endless confusion and error in regard to the faith is the kind of respect for the Word of God on the part of His servants, that compels them to give themselves to the mastery of it, rather than relying on human traditions and private revelations. Only thus can God's sheep be truly nourished and gather strength to resist the deceptions and illusions of the "wolves" in sheep's clothing.

Acts 21:1-16

TRANSLATION

And as it came time to depart from them and to set sail, we set a straight course and came to Cos and on the next day unto Rhodes and thence to Patara. And having found a ship crossing over to Phoenicia, we embarked and set sail. And having come in sight of Cyprus, and leaving it, we sailed on the left side unto Syria and went down to Tyre; for there the ship was unloading its cargo. And seeking out the disciples, we remained for seven days; which ones were saying to Paul through the Spirit not to go up to Jerusalem. And when we had finished the days [of our visit], we went out, all of them accompanying us, with the women and children outside the city, and we knelt down on the shore and prayed. When we had taken leave of one another and embarked on the boat, those returned to their own place.

And we continued the voyage from Tyre and attained unto Ptolemais. And having greeted the brethren, we remained with them for a day. And the next day we went out and came to Caesarea and entered into the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the “seven,” and remained with him. And this one had four daughters who were virgins, who prophesied. And when we had remained many days, there came down from Judea a prophet by the name of Agabus. And he came to us and took up the belt of Paul, and having bound his own feet and his hands, said, “Thus says the Holy Spirit: ‘The man whose belt this is, so shall the Jews bind in Jerusalem and deliver to the hands of the Gentiles.’” And when we heard these things, both we and the local brethren were urging him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, “What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am not only ready to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem on behalf of the name of our Lord Jesus.” And not being able to persuade him, we kept going up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, “Be done.”

And after these days we made preparation and went up to Jerusalem. And one of the disciples from Caesarea went up with us, bringing with him one Mnason from Cyprus, an old disciple with whom we were going to lodge.

COMMENTARY

The Road to Jerusalem—Fellowship and Prophecies

Cos, Rhodes, Patara—Paul makes his way by ship down the coastline of Asia Minor. At Patara he caught a ship going to Phoenicia. He was determined to get to Jerusalem in time for the Passover. At Tyre, on the Syrian coast, the ship unloaded its cargo and Paul sought out the group of believers that were meeting there. This had evidently not been one of his own developments, so he was not familiar with their meeting place. The Greek word used here—*aneurisko*—means something more than merely “finding”, but rather “finding after some search.” Paul remained with this group for seven days, which seemed a little odd since he had passed up Ephesus in order to get to Jerusalem in time. We are told very little about the group itself, except that it was composed of men, women and children, so it was a fairly substantial assembly. We are not even told who was responsible for the establishing of the group. Nor have we any clue as to the nature of Paul’s ministry while he was there. For some reason it was not regarded as important.

The one item mentioned in connection with the visit was of singular importance. They, like others, were urging him not to go to Jerusalem. The text actually says that they urged him “through the Spirit.” Exactly how valid was their suggestion is not clear. Apparently Paul had been receiving word in a number of places with reference to his trip to Jerusalem, that there would be considerable trouble. Perhaps the believers in Tyre had received a similar message and concluded from it that he should not go. Paul is completely convinced that he must go in spite of the warnings, which he took not to be a deterrent to his plans, but rather a challenge to his resolve.

If God gives us a word, even through others, it will come through to us as such. When Paul had ended his stay and completed whatever his purpose was, the whole assembly, including women and children, accompanied him to the shore, where they knelt and joined in prayer together. Apparently, what Paul had said to them in the course of his stay had resulted in a very strong uniting of their hearts together. Perhaps what he had said was not as important as the result, which provided him with additional fortification for the trials that awaited him in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit seems to be able to knit the hearts of the believers together beyond the capacity of human words. It is worthy of note that in all the travels of Paul through the numerous cities and towns and villages that there was a strong current of power through the Holy Spirit, uniting their hearts beyond the bounds of space and time and human frailty.

The party continued by boat from Tyre to Ptolemais, where they spent one day. (Apparently, Luke is still with the party, with the use of the personal pronoun “we”.) Nothing further is indicated of their visit and they continued the next day to Caesarea. Caesarea was one of the bright jewels in Herod’s crown. It had been given to him by Augustus Caesar, and he had continued to develop and expand it into a most beautiful city. Masada at the other end of Palestine was another gem—a fortification high on a plateau in the Negev. One of Herod’s achievements in Caesarea was a magnificent arena opening out to the sea, the acoustics of which were provided by the breezes from off the water, which carried the sounds from the stage to the amphitheater. It was a marvel of a sound system in the ancient world.

And here lived Philip “the evangelist,” who had been one of the “seven.” A reference, of course, was to the seven deacons that had been chosen in the early days of the church to tend to material matters such as the care of the poor and the widows. This was the origin of the office of the deacon, which today has been expanded considerably into a very responsible position in many assemblies. The qualifications of these deacons were that they should be “full of wisdom and of the Holy Spirit.” The first of these deacons named was Steven, whose powerful message so pierced the heart and conscience of the Pharisees that they descended on him in a rage and stoned him to death, thus making him the first martyr. The second one in the group was Philip, selected as a deacon, but possessing the gifts and qualifications that soon brought him the classification of “evangelist.” In that capacity he had a most notable ministry. It was he who had been selected by the Holy Spirit to take the message of Pentecost to the Samaritans.

Samaria had been part of the ten northern tribes of Israel who had separated from the two southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin—known collectively as Judah. The ten northern tribes were known simply as Israel. Their history begins with the rejection of Rehoboam as their king, after the death of Solomon his father. They had appointed Jeroboam as their king, and from that time on their fortunes were in decline. Finally, they were vanquished by Sargon II from Assyria, and a large part of the population was deported to Babylon, being replaced by Assyrians. Large enough numbers of the peasant population had been left behind and were able to continue their Jewish culture, but based on a special version of the books of Moses known as the Samaritan Pentateuch. In fact, the Samaritans assumed that their version antedated the Torah of the Jews. For this reason, the Jews and the Samaritans were in

contempt of each other. The Jews would not even pass through the land of Samaria which separated Judea from Galilee, but rather went a circuitous course up the eastern side of the Jordan, in order to avoid any contact. (See the author’s discussion in the commentary on John 4.) In 621 B.C., the city of Samaria was vanquished by Sargon II and came ultimately under Roman rule, as it was during the time of Christ. Jesus’ compunction to go through Samaria (see John 4), is one of the remarkable episodes in the gospel. It reveals the fact that in spite of the apostasy of the northern tribes of Israel, God still had a noble destiny for them.

The prophet Micah describes the fall and recovery of Samaria. In fact, he is the one who gives that precise prophecy regarding the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. *“But thou, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall He come forth unto thee, that is to be ruler in Israel, whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting”* (Micah 5:2). The future recovery and destiny of Samaria is summarized by Micah in chapter 7—*“Who is a God like unto Thee, that pardoneth iniquity and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He retaineth not His anger forever, because He delighteth in mercy. He will turn again; He will have compassion on us; He will subdue our iniquities; and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depth of the sea”* (18, 19). So God’s promise of recovery is as sweeping to the northern tribes of Israel, represented by Samaria as to the tribes of Judah, though their apostasy was far more extensive. There were several important spiritual revivals in Judah, but there were never any in the northern tribes of Israel. So Jesus’ meeting with the woman of Samaria by the well of Jacob was an episode of epic significance. And as Jesus was giving his final instruction to the apostles before ascending to the father, he makes a

special point of including Samaria. It is also noteworthy that as a result of a parable by Jesus, the name Samaritan has become synonymous with deeds of charity.

The assignment to convey to the Samaritans the grand message of the coming of the Holy Spirit was given to Philip. After a most significant ministry among them, Philip was then called to go down to Gaza in the far south of Palestine and join an official of Ethiopia to present the message to him in his chariot. This was no doubt part of the reason why north Africa was evangelized early in the spread of Christianity. A seaport, Hippo Regius in Carthage (now a city in Algeria) became a center of Christianity and was one of the five major regional patriarchates (bishoprics) of the early church. After this episode with the Ethiopian official, Philip went to Azotus (modern Ashdod) and then, apparently, up to Caesarea where Paul was now visiting him. Nothing whatever is known of Philip's work between the time he encountered the Ethiopian official and the time Paul was visiting him, but he was obviously held in very high esteem by the body of believers.

Philip had four daughters who were prophetesses. What exactly was their official role in the church? How does it comport with Paul's very strong statements in regard to the place of women in the church? There is, of course, no conflict here. The prophet Joel hundreds of years earlier had given the famous prophecy quoted by Peter at Pentecost that in the days of the final recovery of Israel, "Her sons and her daughters would prophesy." However, Paul instructs the church not to put women in authority over the men (I Timothy 2:12), nor to be dominant in the assemblies of the church (I Corinthians 14:34). It is nowhere suggested that they should not have a most important and influential place in the body of believers in general. The wife of Aquila—

Priscilla—is a most notable example of the great influence and blessing that women can have in the church. She was quite influential in the life of Apollos, one of the leading teachers of Paul's day. And of course, there was Lydia who was one of the key people in the establishing of the church in Philippi.

It is, however, a difficult matter to integrate Paul's attitude with the whole trend of the modern women's movement. Those who do not regard the Bible as strictly inspired merely set aside Paul's statements as being out of place in the Bible. Those who hold to the infallible accuracy of the Scripture simply ignore the statements. Interestingly enough, the denominations which use I Corinthians 14 as the foundation of their whole system of "speaking in tongues" completely ignore the last part of the chapter which urges women to be in the background in the assemblies. Some see Paul's attitude as a private opinion and not to be taken literally; some see them as unfortunate insertions by some eager but misled copyist of the manuscript. Some struggle with the statements and wish Paul hadn't made them. If we must accept the statements as given, we must regard them in the light of other Scriptures that show women in a place of some prominence. It is always important to balance the statements in Scripture against each other. It is obviously essential to weigh individual statements against the message of the Scripture as a whole and against the practical realities of the world we live in. While Paul was quite strong in restricting the position of women, he was equally strong in his appreciation of the ministry and influence of a number of women. It is admittedly difficult to come to any ultimate conclusions. It is always legitimate to examine difficult passages from a scholarly perspective to determine whether or not they are a verifiable part of the original manuscripts. It is not legitimate to discredit these passages merely on the grounds that they do not seem to fit with the attitudes of modern

society. There is no question but what Paul intended to limit, to some degree, the ultimate authority of women over the body of believers. It is equally certain that the ministry of the women was regarded as equally important to the ministry of men.

It is noteworthy that in the number of days that Paul spent with Philip, a man of great stature in the church, the only definitive statement that Paul makes regarding Philip is that he had four daughters who prophesied. That has to be significant.

However, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea during the visit and made a most emphatic statement regarding Paul's trip to Jerusalem. In a dramatic gesture, he took Paul's belt and bound himself with it, indicating that the man who owned the belt would be thus treated in Jerusalem. There was no

insistence by him that Paul should not go. He was only stating that there would be much trouble. However, Paul's colleagues assumed it to be a warning that he should not go, and pressed him in the matter until finally they saw that it was futile and simply put him in the Lord's hands. Actually, that is all that anyone can do when confronted with difficult decisions. As is indicated by this entire debate over whether or not Paul should go to Jerusalem, it is difficult for us humans ever to know absolutely what the exact mind of God is in any situation. We can only put the matter in His hands and trust that He will see to it that we do what He wants. Paul did go to Jerusalem; he did have much trouble there; he did go through some of the severest trials of his life. Whether or not he should have gone is not for us to say.

Acts 21:17-26

TRANSLATION

And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us warmly. And the next day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. And when he had greeted them, he recounted each one of the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they had heard, they were glorifying God, and said to him, “Behold brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews who have believed, and they are all zealous of the law. But they have been informed concerning you, that you teach all the Jews who are [scattered] among the Gentiles that they should depart from Moses, saying that they should not circumcise their children nor walk according to the customs. What then is it? They will surely hear that you have come. Do this, then, which we say to you. There are four men of us having a vow upon themselves. Take these along with you and be purified with them, and pay the charges for them that they may shave their heads; and all will know that the things which have been reported concerning you are nothing, but that you yourself also live by the keeping of the law. But concerning the Gentiles who have believed, we have notified them of our judgment that they keep [that part of the law concerning] idolatry and blood and things strangled and fornication.” Then Paul took the men the next day and was purified with them, as he was entering into the temple, declaring the fulfillment of the days of purification, until the sacrifice had been offered on behalf of each one of them.

COMMENTARY

James and the Issue of Judaism

In Jerusalem, Paul and Luke and those who accompanied them were welcomed warmly by the brethren. Apparently James was the leading brother of the group. It was he who had been the moderator at the session with Peter some years earlier, where the issue had been raised concerning the relationship of the Gentile believers to the law. The matter had been disposed of in a spirit of unity and goodwill. The council had decided that the Gentiles would be excused from the

obligations of the law, except for several instructions regarding idolatry, blood, and promiscuity. Now it is Paul’s turn to bring before them the years of ministry among the Gentiles and the work of the Spirit through him. Once again, the council is quite open to the realities of God’s purposes for the Gentiles and Paul’s special mission to them.

However, there is a problem. Although it is readily acknowledged by the Jewish

leaders, that God intends to bring salvation to the Gentiles, and that they are exempt from the laws which govern the Jews, the Jews feel quite strongly that they still have an identity with the law and that such an identity cannot be lightly set aside. While they have accepted the general thesis that the sacrifice of Christ had superceded the animal sacrifices as the vehicle of salvation, they could not readily abandon the traditions that had held them together for centuries. Thus it was that the leaders were quite concerned about the reports of Paul's apparent indifference to that law, even to the point of instruction that went counter to it.

In reality, the reports were not unfounded. Paul had indeed declared in the synagogues of the Diaspora (Jews scattered throughout the Gentile world) that it was neither circumcision nor uncircumcision that was crucial to salvation, but the sacrifice of Christ. It was not that he had ever forbidden the observance of the laws and traditions, but rather had attempted to show that these things were only symbolic and instructive and not the basis of salvation. The law had been the forerunner of God's ultimate intention for mankind. It was, as Paul had said to the Galatians, *"like a pedagogue (child trainer) to direct the intention of the people of earth to the ultimate realities of God and the spirit world and to prepare them for the meaning of the sacrifice of Christ."*

Devout Jews had been greatly offended by the apparent slighting of that which had been the cornerstone of their culture for generations. Paul had never intended, of course, to dishonor the law, but rather to put it into perspective. He had stated very clearly in his letter to the Romans that the law was part of God's redemptive process and that it was "holy and just and good." It was only that the law, without the sacrifice of Christ was not adequate for salvation. But, of course, the sacrifice of Christ was really within the system of the Old Covenant. Jesus had been the sacrifice to end all sacrifice—the ultimate sacrifice

provided by God Himself. Under the law of Moses, the sacrifice was an essential part of the atonement (the reconciliation of man to God). The sacrifice of Christ would end for all times bondage to the incessant routine of the cumbersome chore of the daily offering of sacrificial animals. This should have come as a great relief to the Jews, but instead it seemed to threaten the very fabric of their social order and their national unity.

The elders, who had gathered together with James to discuss the matter with Paul, apparently felt that while they had certainly accepted the sacrifice of Christ as essential to salvation, there had to be the recognition of the right of the Jews who chose to do so, to continue in the traditions that had become vital to them. They suggested then that Paul might participate with four other brethren in entering into a vow with them. We are not told the nature of the vow, but it would have been some kind of voluntary offer of service or of self-denial. Paul had already taken such a vow in Cenchreae (Acts 18), thus indicating his own concurrence with the general idea. Obviously, he did not see it as essential to his relationship to Christ, but rather as an acceptable way to forestall needless controversy and hindrances to his ministry among the Jewish people.

Many times needless barriers have been raised to hinder the ministry of the Word of God by failing to observe social and cultural patterns that are of themselves not crucial to the issues of salvation. Many practices, in fact, that go under the name of Christianity are not from the Bible, but from human traditions. While it may appear to us that Paul's actions seemed somewhat contradictory to his emphasis on freedom from the law, we must assume that Paul had his reasons and that he did what he believed sincerely God wanted him to do. The expression of one's faith is a highly personal matter and should not ever be interfered with by others who have no way to know what God wants for someone else.

Acts 21:27-36

TRANSLATION

And as the seven days [of the vow] were about to be completed, some Jews from Asia, having beheld him in the temple, took control of all the crowd and laid hands upon him, crying, "People, Israelites, give help. This is the man who is teaching all things contrary to the people, and the law, and this place; and yet indeed brought Greeks into the temple and profaned this holy place." (For they were beholding Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with him, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple.) And all the city was influenced, and there was a rushing together of the people; and they seized Paul and dragged him outside the temple, and immediately shut the doors. And while they were seeking to kill him, a report went up to the commander of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. Who immediately took soldiers and a centurion and descended upon them, who, beholding the commander and the soldiers ceased beating Paul. Then the commander came near and seized him and commanded that he be bound with double chains, and inquired who he may be and what this happening was. And some among the crowd cried out one thing and some another. And he, not being able to know for sure because of the tumult, ordered him brought into the citadel. And when he came to the stairs, it came about that he had to be carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd; for the multitude of the people were following, crying, "Kill him!"

COMMENTARY

The Craftiness of the Enemy—The Bogus Case Against Paul

Although it was somewhat contrary to Paul's own perception of the new liberty in Christ Jesus—freedom from the rituals and regulations of the law—Paul agreed to comply with the wishes of the elders at Jerusalem and to enter into a formal vow with some of the Jewish brethren, and thus to counteract certain rumors among the Jewish brethren, that he was showing contempt for the law of Moses. Although Paul had specifically and carefully tried to make it clear that

he was not in any way dishonoring the law, but rather showing that the sacrifice of Christ had been a fulfillment of the law and a deliverance from the necessity of the rituals and sacrifices, since the coming of the One who was the fulfillment of the types and symbols of the sacrificial system. The regimentation and regulation of the outward symbols was now replaced by the vitality of the inner presence of the One whom they symbolized.

Nevertheless, in spite of the theological differences, it was appropriate for Paul to comply with the wishes of the elders at Jerusalem, who were the obvious leaders of the general body of believers, since it would promote harmony in what was a most difficult transitional period between the era of law and the era of grace. And since it was nothing that a Jew could not perform in good conscience should he choose to do so.

Satan has often been successful in dividing the body of believers over matters that are not of crucial importance. Harmony is more important than ideology or methodology where there are no certain guidelines in the Scripture. It was this sort of thing that Paul had in mind when he wrote to the Corinthian church about the divisions that were among them.

However that may be, Paul's efforts in this respect were not enough to satisfy those who sought desperately to find a case against him that would eliminate him. Satan never rests in his efforts to discredit the servants of God. If there are no valid charges, he will trump them up. He will falsify; he will nit pick; he will stir up the jealousy and envy and selfishness of the human nature with rumors and misunderstandings and distortions. He seems able to twist things and turn truth into a lie. One is reminded of Kipling's words—"If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools . . ." Satan is, of course, the master of deceit. The grid patterns of our human brains, crisscrossed with nerve paths that reflect self-centeredness, pride and envy, are ready receptacles for the perfidious "whisperings" of Satan. Humans seem always ready to believe the worst both in circumstances and in persons. His distortions, to which we are susceptible, give us far more trouble than the actualities. Why we listen to him is a mystery, but listen we do. But what is our defense? How do we counteract it?

While there are many complex factors involved in the human personality, the basic response is to filter things through Christ. But how do we do that? Before accepting a questionable view of a situation, ask Christ about it. What about this, Lord? Please see that I have the right perspective.

. . . **whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple.** Jews had come from Asia, bent on eliminating Paul. They thought they had their case. They had observed Paul in the city of Jerusalem in the company of a Greek from Ephesus and seized upon the assumption (or hope) that Paul had taken him into the temple—a very serious violation of the Jewish law. Of course, they had not actually seen Paul take him into the temple, but their suspicions were enough for them to hastily construct a *cause celebre*. The Jews demanded the death penalty. It had been the same with Jesus. The source of this perfidious purpose to "get" Paul was the same as with Jesus—the archenemy, Satan. There were certainly a large number of Jews stirred up in the "rabble-rousing" efforts that really could not have explained their fanatical animosity toward Paul. It is only by the grace and power of God that the believer survives the ceaseless siege of Satan. Make no mistake about it—humans are no match for him. There are those who speak of "spiritual warfare" or "doing battle with the devil." That is foolish talk. Only God can successfully wage war against the devil. Our job is not to fight Satan, but simply "stand fast." Though the forces of hell rage against us, we hold our position. Paul tells the Ephesians that we must put on the armor of Christ (ch. 6). All the pieces of armor that he mentions are symbolic of Christ—truth, righteousness, faith—are ours when we have Christ within. Whenever the battle seems to overcome us, it is an indication that we are trying to fight Satan in the flesh. We must

turn the battle over to Christ and just hold steady. Don't try to figure things out or conquer feelings or take hasty action—just stand fast. Christ will bring about what he wants in your life, in spite of Satan. We are told by Peter to “resist the devil.” To resist means to stand; it does not mean to charge. Only Christ has the power to engage the enemy.

For the multitude of the people were following, crying out, “Kill him!” Assiduously concerned with the purity of the premises, they were not hesitant to shed innocent blood. The crowd, stirred

up by the leaders to a demonic frenzy, would have killed him on the spot, had not the Roman commander of the garrison intervened. God often uses citizens of Satan's own kingdom to execute His purposes.

So great was the tumult that the soldiers had to literally lift Paul up and carry him into the citadel. But when the Roman commander sought a reason for the uproar, no one seemed to know for sure—everyone had a different story. Why they wanted to kill him, no one seemed to know for sure—all they knew was that they wanted him dead.

Acts 21:37-40, 22:1-5

TRANSLATION

And as he was about to enter the citadel, Paul said to the commander—“Is it lawful for me to say something to you?” And he said, “Do you know Greek? Then you are not the Egyptian who, before these days rose up and led away into the desert some four thousand men of the terrorists?” And Paul said, “I am a man, a Jew of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of a not insignificant city; and I petition you to permit me to speak to the people.” And when he had permitted him, Paul stood upon the staircase and motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was much silence, he addressed them in the Hebrew tongue, saying, “Men, brethren, and fathers, hear me now my defense to you.” And when they heard that he had addressed them in the Hebrew dialect, they were the more quiet. And he said, “I am a man, a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, and brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, trained according to the strictness of the ancient law, being a zealot of God, even as all of you are today; who pursued this Way unto death, binding and delivering up unto prison, both men and women, as also the chief priest will bear witness to me and every elder, from whom also having received letters to the brethren, I went unto Damascus, having brought the ones being bound there unto Jerusalem in order that they might be punished.”

COMMENTARY

Paul’s Defense Before the Jews

We enter now a new phase in Paul’s life and a new phase in the story of the book of Acts. Glorious things have been done in the development of the body of Christ and in the life and ministry of those who were charged with the responsibility of seeing to the spread of the message of salvation. One of the most remarkable of these events was the conversion of Paul and his subsequent success in spreading the Word throughout “all of Asia” (Asia Minor). Now Paul would enter the last phase of his life, which will be, by far, the most trying. He had faced a great many hardships and persecutions and

distresses. And always each succeeding persecution seemed to result in a greater expansion of Christianity. Now his ministry as himself would have perceived it will know the confining frustration of chains. If one were writing a biography of Paul, one might have titled this last phase of his life as the “The Conflict of Confinement.” Satan seems at last to have repelled the powerful thrust that Paul was making into his own maleficent kingdom. But, as in the case of Joseph and his brethren of old, God had a purpose in allowing this seeming calamity: “*You meant it for evil, but God*

meant it for good.” Later on, Paul will make this same declaration to the Romans—“*And we know that to those who love God, He works all things together for good . . .*” (Romans 8:28). What has appeared to be frustrating and devastating to his ministry, proved indeed to be the most crucial time of his life, in the writing of a good part of the New Testament literature that is ascribed to him. Without these letters, we would be limited indeed in our understanding of the meaning and purpose of God for His creatures in this universe. There is nothing that Satan can do to God’s children or to His work that God cannot turn to His own advantage.

We pick up the story as Paul is being literally carried into the citadel by the soldiers on the orders of the commander. On the staircase, Paul addresses him—“***Am I permitted to speak for myself?***” Paul had spoken to him in Greek. He was startled. “***Do you know Greek?***” Thus Paul begins a saga of charges and defenses and confinements that will consume, for the most part, the seven last years of his life.

The commander was startled because he had already assumed that Paul was a certain seditious Egyptian—leader of a group of terrorists (literally, assassins), who had gathered some four thousand followers in the desert. When Paul convinced him that he had the wrong man, he immediately changed his attitude and permitted him to speak to the people. Paul stood on the staircase and gaining their attention, he spoke to them in the Hebrew tongue.

When they heard that he addressed them in the Hebrew tongue, they were the more silenced. Why did they think he would not address them in the Hebrew tongue? What did they think his crime was? The elders of Israel had

claimed he, as a Jew, had violated the temple by bringing into it a Greek companion. The crowd had been stirred up against Paul sufficiently to demand his death. They were calling for his blood but apparently did not know the nature of his crime. Once more we see Satan at work here, as with Jesus, in the stirring up of the crowd. The whole crowd had cried out for Jesus’ crucifixion, when, in fact, they had personally witnessed from him nothing but benevolence and compassion. It was obvious, in the case of Jesus, that his death was essential to redemption. So too, with Paul, we must assume that God had some very important purpose in allowing for this outrage of Satan. Having now in hand the vital literature written by him, during his prison years, we could readily presume that what appeared to be a gross injustice, was nevertheless a part of God’s purpose for Paul. But did Paul know that at the time? Probably not. For Paul it was a frustrating time of hindrance in the fulfilling of God’s commission to him. It is very important for the servant of God to remember that it is, after all, God’s work and not ours. If it is God’s work, His servants will certainly be the object of Satan’s attacks. Conversely, if one is the object of satanic attacks, one may take comfort from the fact that one must be doing something right.

However that may be, the crowd did quiet down after they heard Paul speaking to them in Hebrew. He spoke to them of his flawless Jewish pedigree and his unflagging zeal for the preservation of the religion of their forefathers. But then, painful as it must have been for him to recall (according to numerous statements of unworthiness) he spoke of his fanatic zeal to stamp out the followers of Jesus, whom he had considered to be an impostor.

Acts 22:6-16

TRANSLATION

And it happened that while I was going and drawing near to Damascus, there was suddenly out of heaven a great flash of light around me, and I fell on the ground and heard a voice saying to me, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" And I answered, "Who are You, Sir?" And He said to me, "I am Jesus, the Nazarene, whom you persecute." And those who were with me behold the light, but did not hear the One speaking to me. And I said, "What shall I do, Lord?" And the Lord said to me, "Rise up and go into Damascus; and there it shall be told you about all the things which I have appointed for you to do." And as I was not seeing, as a result of the glory of that light, I was led by the hand of those who were with me, and came into Damascus.

And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, as was testified by all those dwelling in Judea, came to me and stood by me and said to me, "Brother Saul, receive your sight." And the same hour I was able to see him. And He said, "The God of our fathers has touched you beforehand that you may know His will, and see the Just One, and to hear His voice out of His mouth, because you shall be a spokesman for Him to all men of the things which you have seen and heard. And now what are you going to do? Rise up, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling upon His name."

COMMENTARY

Paul's Defense—His Conversion and Call

Paul continues his address with the story of his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. The story is very well known and has been discussed at length in chapter 9 of this commentary (q.v.). But here, we are dealing with a much different aspect of the story—the implications of its disclosure to the mob which was bent on killing him. If it was a simple declaration of the truth, it had to be the worst possible

defense he could use. This mob was not all that far removed from the very ones that called for the crucifixion of Jesus. Perhaps there were a number there who had actually participated in it. If Jesus' declarations of the truth had impressed Pilate, they only stirred up the mob to greater frenzy. And such was the impact of Paul's defense. He must surely have known as a "Hebrew of the Hebrews" that almost

everything he was saying could later be used against him.

In the first place, he openly declared his conviction that Jesus of Nazareth was the true Messiah; and that he had come to this conviction through a personal revelation from God; and second, that he was irrevocably committed to follow Him. And third, that God had revealed to him that he was to be His own spokesman, declaring His truth to the world; and, as if this were not enough, in the fourth place, that he was to share this truth with the “hated” Gentiles.

What shall I do, Lord? In addition to the implications for his defense of this recounting of his conversion experience, there is also the aspect of Paul’s own attitude toward this startling and critical episode in his life. We are quite familiar with the particulars of the historical account. What we have here is Paul’s own personal assessment of it. One notable difference is Paul’s attitude toward the disclosures of Ananias.

In the matter of dreams and visions and revelations, the revelation is only part of the miracle. The equally important part is the miracle of receptivity. Given Paul’s avid bitterness toward the figure of Jesus, whom he considered to be an impostor, why would he not have dismissed the whole thing as a fantasy or hallucination? Or given his knowledge of some Old Testament prophets who had been misled by Satan, why would he not have considered it a satanic delusion? Miracles do not of themselves produce faith. Certainly the Pharisees were conspicuously and stubbornly unmoved by the miracles of Jesus. And it has been so throughout all of human history. One can always find rational explanations of

the most remarkable of miracles, if one willfully chooses not to believe. Why should Paul, the quintessential Pharisee and persecutor of Jesus be any more open to these miracles than were his fellow Pharisees? The answer no doubt lies in the heart of Paul and in the purposes of God. However reprehensible had been Paul’s attitudes and actions toward the Christians, it had been, nevertheless, an expression of his own deepest loyalties to God, whose honor he had sought to preserve in the wake of this “seditious impostor.”

There it shall be told you concerning all the things which I have appointed for you to do. Paul’s interpretation of this statement was considerably stronger than the original account suggests. The original record of the incident uses the phrase “what you must do.” Paul uses a far stronger word that implies a mandate or divine ordination. Thus he considers the whole episode a mandate from God Himself. The dialogue between Paul and Ananias had obviously been far more extensive than is recorded either in the original account or here. But what Paul declares is what impressed him—that he had been appointed by God beforehand “to know the will of God and to see Jesus (the “Just One”) and to hear the sound of His voice.” And further that he was to communicate what he had seen and heard to all mankind.

Paul had often marveled that God would use him, in spite of his past, and often remarked about his own unworthiness, but never doubted that God had spoken to him in the cataclysmic hour on the Damascus road. This would be his testimony to the Jewish mob, and for it they would demand his blood.

Acts 22:17-29

TRANSLATION

And it happened that while I was returning to Jerusalem and praying in the temple, a vision came to me, and I beheld Him saying to me, "Hurry, and come out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not receive your witness concerning Me." And I said, "Lord, they know that I was imprisoning and beating in the synagogues those who believe on You. And when the blood of Stephen Your witness was poured out, I myself also was standing by and consenting with them, and keeping the garments of those who were killing him." And he said to me, "Go, because I will send you far off to the Gentiles."

And they were hearing him until this word, and they lifted up their voices saying, "Take this man from the earth, for he is not fit to live." And while they were crying out and tearing their garments and casting dust unto the air, the commander ordered him to be brought into the citadel and examined with whips in order that he may know the cause for which they were thus crying out against him. And as they were tying him up with thongs, Paul said to the centurion standing near, "Is it lawful for you to beat a man who is a Roman and uncondemned?" And when the centurion had heard, he came to the commander and declared to him, "What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman." And the centurion came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman?" And he said, "Yes." And the commander answered, "With a great price have I obtained his citizenship." But Paul said, "But I was born to it." Immediately then those who were about to examine him stood away from him; and the commander was afraid, knowing that he was a Roman and that he had bound him.

COMMENTARY

Paul's Defense Concluded—The Cry for Blood

As if he had not already irretrievably damaged his case by speaking of his conversion, Paul now gives a final blow in telling of his experience in Jerusalem after his conversion, where it was revealed to him in a vision that the Jews would not receive him there and that He was sending

him to the Gentiles. He was urged by the Holy Spirit to leave Jerusalem quickly since the Jews would not receive his message of Jesus as the Messiah.

As Paul's mission was presented to him, he reminded the Lord of his outrageous

behavior toward his own followers. The Lord's response to him was direct and brief—"Go! I have a job for you to do." He completely ignored Paul's protestations of weakness.

It was a most encouraging response. He was telling Paul, in effect, that all of his past didn't matter; it was forgiven and forgotten; get on with the work. The words must have stuck in Paul's mind. Years later, he would say to the Philippians, "*And reaching out to the things that are before, I press toward the goal, pressing on to the prize of the upward calling of God in Christ Jesus*" (Philippians 3:13,14). Occasionally, Paul had to be reminded of this. It was not what he was that mattered, but what Christ was in him. In a moment of despair over his own inadequacies, God reminded him again—"My grace is sufficient for you, because My strength is made perfect in weakness" (II Corinthians 12:9).

Throughout the Bible, there are constant reminders of the inadequacies and failures of the human instruments which God used to bring about His purposes in the world. Moses, Abraham, David, the prophets—all had rather serious flaws, but God accomplished His purpose through them. Nor did He pay much attention to their protestations. Moses had vowed to God that he could not speak (he had been talking to the sheep for forty years). Gideon, one of the judges, responded to the call by reminding the Lord that his family was of little consequence in Israel and that he was least in his father's house. David was involved in a scandal that made him a synonym for sin for all time, but he was a giant in God's redemptive history. Jeremiah claimed that he could not speak, because he was a child. God told him, "I set you apart from your mother's womb." Peter said, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." God ignored all the petty rhetoric. He already knew all about it. But He was not depending

on human strength anymore than a hydraulic lift in a gas station depends on the strength of the one who pushes the lever. The musical instrument is of no value apart from the artist who plays it.

It is not that God is indifferent to sin or human failures and offenses, but He deals with those on a different basis. We might say that He deplores the sin, but employs the sinner. Sin is not without its scars and consequences, but God is longsuffering toward His people and ever open to the cry of the penitent. A note in passing—the very desire for forgiveness is the guarantee that forgiveness is given. One does not seek forgiveness unless the Holy Spirit has touched one within. If we did not have the Holy Spirit in us, we would not seek forgiveness from God. The scars of Paul's early transgressions never left him, as is indicated by numerous references to it throughout the epistles. But his heart was at peace with God. Like David, his sin was ever before him, but he could say along with David, "*As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us*" (Psalm 103:12). And so, having run the gamut of human failure, Paul was a fit vessel to proclaim God's message of grace and salvation to the Gentiles.

Take this man from the earth, for he is not fit to live. With his statement concerning his mission to the Gentiles, Paul's defense was completely shattered. The fury of the mob was diabolically disproportionate to the offense. In fact most of them had little understanding of what the whole matter was about. They might normally have scoffed at this visionary, ridiculed, heckled, but kill him? What was the point? All of the milk of human kindness seemed wrung from the breast of these people who claimed to be above all nations on earth, the children of a merciful God. Such was their frenzy that they were tearing their clothes and throwing dust in the air. For the Jews, this was a ritual thing—usually

done as a sign of penitence and sorrow at a time of great distress (see Job 42). Here, of course, it was a gross mockery.

Is it lawful to beat a man who is a Roman and uncondemned? Paul did not often appeal to his Roman citizenship, nor was he particularly proud of it, but occasionally it came in handy. He remained pretty much uninvolved in the entire process of Roman government. His exhortation to the citizens of Rome (ch. 13), was that they should be generally submissive to those whom God had allowed to be in secular power, not because these authorities were submissive to Him, but because they were instruments through which He kept the godless world in some kind of control. As Paul reminded Timothy—laws are for the godless. There he drew the line. He did not, of course, promote the idea of patriotism. Nor, of course, would he have condoned such things as emperor worship, for which many of the believers had died in the arena. He himself had been executed by the Roman government for alleged crimes against the state. It must have been a temptation to Paul to use his citizenship, because when he did so he seemed to receive an immediate benefit. Why didn't he use it more often? Presumably Christ, from whom he received his orders, did not always direct him to do so.

Paul was rescued from the mob and taken into the citadel, where the commander ordered him interrogated by beating, as was a customary procedure. It was a way of seeking the truth in a situation where there was no other means of knowing it. As the soldiers were preparing to carry out the order, Paul

disclosed his Roman citizenship. The commander was immediately affected and stopped the proceedings. Laying hands on a Roman citizen was a serious business. The tide immediately turned in favor of Paul, and yet, strangely enough, the “wheels of justice” ground very slowly, even though it was a religious issue of the Jews, in which Rome had little interest and dragged on for years. The commander was in a precarious position, caught between Rome and Jerusalem, as was Pilate at the time of Christ, and was interested only in keeping the volatile situation under control. He had no choice but to continue Paul's confinement and refer the matter to higher authorities.

The commander admitted to Paul that his own citizenship had been bought with a considerable price. Paul was in a much stronger position, having been born to citizenship. The circumstances of Paul's birth had been providential (Galatians 1:15) and we assume that his Roman citizenship was as much a part of God's plan as was Jesus' own birth to the throne of David, through Joseph. The total extent to which God involves Himself in everyone's birth is still a considerable mystery. In some cases in the Bible it was quite obvious. But as far as the masses are concerned, the Bible is not clear at all. The important point here, of course, is that Paul had been born a Roman citizen and that in this particular case as in some others, it was part of the chain of events that would affect the rest of his life and ministry.

Acts 22:30-23:11

TRANSLATION

And the next day, wanting to know for sure that for which [Paul] was accused by the Jews, [the commander] freed him and ordered the chief priests to come together and all the Sanhedrin, and he brought Paul and stood him in their midst.

And Paul gazed on the Sanhedrin and said, “Men, brethren, I have conducted myself in all good conscience before God until this day.” And the chief priest, Ananias, ordered those standing by him to hit him in the mouth. Then Paul said to them, “God is about to strike you, white-washed wall! And do you sit in judgment over me in terms of the law, and order me to be hit contrary to the law?” And those standing by said, “Do you revile the high priest of God?” And Paul said, “I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written ‘You shall not speak evil of the leader of your people.’”

And Paul, knowing that part of them were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, cried out in the Sanhedrin, “Men, brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of Pharisees, and concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead, I am being judged.” And when he had said this, there was a debate between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the multitude was divided. For the Sadducees say there is no resurrection, nor angels, nor spirits, and the Pharisees confess both. And there was a great cry; and certain of the scribes who were of the faction of the Pharisees argued vehemently, saying, “We find nothing evil in this man; and if the spirit spoke to him or an angel?” And there arising much tumult, the commander was afraid that Paul would be torn in pieces by them and ordered the soldiers to go down and snatch him out of the midst of them, and bring him into the citadel.

And the next night, the Lord stood by him and said, “Be of good cheer; for as you have born witness of the things concerning Me in Jerusalem, so also you must bear witness concerning me in Rome.”

COMMENTARY

Paul’s Defense Continued—Before the Sanhedrin

The Sanhedrin was an august body—the supreme council of the Jewish people. The word means, simply, “council.” Its origin is really unknown. It was in force during the Greek and Roman era. It had rather sweeping powers over its own people, but was somewhat limited as far as its civil jurisdiction was concerned. Some matters had to be left to the Roman government, such as the crucifixion of Jesus. (Of course, Pilate gave them the right to pronounce the death penalty on him.) The Sanhedrin was composed of seventy elders, with the high priest presiding over it. It lost much of its power after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.. The Roman commander was hoping that this body could finally resolve the matter of Paul. And so, the next day, after Paul had been rescued from the mob, the commander of the garrison brought him before the Sanhedrin. He was quite unprepared for what followed, being unfamiliar with the explosive nature of the issues which were raised; nor the potential tumult that would be evoked by what appeared to be a simple matter of Jewish law. He had presumed the Sanhedrin to be a responsible body of Jewish elders.

I have conducted myself in all good conscience before God until this day.

The demonic nature of the harassment of Paul by the Jews was indicated by the astounding reaction of the high priest to Paul’s simple statement. He ordered those standing nearby to slap him in the mouth. Understandably, Paul responded in anger—“God is about to strike you, you whitewashed wall”; not “shall strike”, as in some translations. It was not a threat that God would punish him for hitting Paul. It was rather a prophetic statement, that God was about to destroy the whole system, as predicted by Jesus in his statement regarding the temple—“not one stone shall be left upon another.” The prophecy was fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. by the emperor Titus. This really marked the beginning of

the end for the priestly system as it flourished in the first century A.D..

Paul was aroused by the incipient hypocrisy of the whole situation. “*Do you judge me on the basis of the law and command me to be struck contrary to the law?*” It was a biting question. Having no answers, they appealed to rank—“*Do you know who you are talking to?*”

I did not know he was the chief priest. Absurd! How could Paul, a Pharisee of Pharisees, not recognize the presiding figure of the Sanhedrin? It had to be sarcastic on Paul’s part. He makes a statement right out of the Mosaic law—“*You shall not speak evil of the leader of your people.*” It is reasonable to assume that what Paul was implying was, “*Are you really a high priest? You are certainly not behaving like one.*” It might be akin to a statement made by the Queen Mother to George III (King of England during the American Revolution), “*Be a king.*” Of course, he was already king, but after a series of weak monarchs on the throne, the Queen Mother was suggesting that if he is going to be king, he should behave like one. It was a stinging rebuke and there is no recorded answer. The group was caught off guard.

Paul moved on. Confirming the point that Paul knew exactly what was going on, he was keenly aware of the makeup of the group. He knew that part of them were Sadducees, and part of them were Pharisees. The Sadducees, sharing leadership with the Pharisees, were more involved with the political process than the religious. They were pragmatists, shunning the spiritual aspect of things; they accepted neither the existence of spirit beings, such as angels, nor the idea of a spirit existence after death.

For hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged. Seizing the opportunity, Paul stirred up a bitter debate between the two factions. The

strategy worked admirably. So great was the tumult that followed, that the commander feared for Paul's life and ordered the soldiers to rescue him and to bring him into the citadel. And Paul didn't know he was addressing the chief priest?

“Be of good cheer . . . you must bear witness concerning me in Rome also.”

A most important clue to what was going on. Whatever transpired; however long it took; God wanted Paul in Rome. He could have released Paul instantly as he did Peter. He could have allowed him to be executed, as with Stephen and James. He had other plans for Paul. Nor could the Jewish hierarchy, nor all the Jews nor the commander of the garrison, nor the Roman emperor have altered one iota of that plan. Nor did Paul, through the long and tedious years when he was held in the vice-like grip of circumstances, ever doubt that ultimately he must see Rome.

There is a vital lesson here. No one, who is in the hands of God, need fear the

circumstances God has allowed. The emotions may pitch and toss on the restless sea of the human psyche, but in spite of these feelings, God moves inexorably to accomplish His purpose in the lives of those who have committed themselves to Him. *“And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, and are the called according to His purpose”* (Romans 8:28). Do you love God? If you didn't, you wouldn't care about having His purpose in your life. Do you care about having His purpose in your life? If you do, you are called. Do you struggle with human feelings of discouragement? Frustration? Resentment? Impatience? So did Paul. But God paid no attention to his human emotions. His strength was made perfect in Paul's weakness (II Corinthians 12:9). Inevitably and inexorably, God worked out His purpose in Paul and through this weak and beleaguered instrument, communicated His will to the world.

Acts 23:12-22

TRANSLATION

And when day had come, the Jews made a conspiracy, putting a curse on themselves, saying that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. And there were more than forty who made the conspiracy; which ones came to the chief priests and to the elders, and said, "We have cursed ourselves with a curse that no one should eat until we have killed Paul. Now, then, inform the commander with the Sanhedrin so that he may bring him unto you, as being about to investigate more certainly the things concerning him; and before he comes near, we are ready to kill him." And the son of Paul's sister, having heard the plot came and entered the garrison and declared it to Paul. And Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Take this young man to the commander, for he has something to declare to him." He took him then and brought him to the commander and said, "The prisoner Paul summoned me and asked me to bring this young man to you, having something to say to you." And the commander took him by the hand and having taken him aside privately inquired, "What is it that you have to declare to me?" And he said, "The Jews have agreed together to ask you so that tomorrow you would bring Paul unto the Sanhedrin, as though you were about to inquire more certainly concerning him. Do not therefore be persuaded by them; for more than forty men of them have plotted against him, which ones have put a curse on themselves lest they eat or drink until they have killed him; and now they are ready to receive the promise from you." The commander then dismissed the young man, having charged him "not to speak of anything of these things that you have revealed to me."

COMMENTARY

Paul and the Crucible—The Enemy Thwarted

With demonic fury the Jews pressed their pursuit of Paul. A coterie of about forty of them had vowed neither to eat nor drink until they had killed him. They would get very hungry. It had not been an idle thing. They had even gone to the priest to make it official and binding. We are never told what ultimately became of

the ones who had taken the vow, but presumably, in the customary self-deceptions that the Pharisees fostered, they would find some loophole. That their plot had been masterminded by Satan, rather than by human mischief-makers, was signaled by the nature of the plot, which was laced with lies.

Godless societies in the world today reflect the same satanic deceptions. Truth, for them, is relative. Words mean whatever they want them to mean at the time. Jesus calls Satan the “father of lies.” Truth cannot be built on falsehood; neither can an honorable society be built on deception.

It is hard to imagine that religious leaders who used the name of God so profusely and whose lives were immersed in sacred rituals, should be so false. But Jesus, addressing the Pharisees directly, called them *“fools, blind guides; hypocrites, whitened sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but within are full of dead men’s bones and of all uncleanness”* (Matthew 23). Such were the “wolves” whom Paul faced in the crucible of his prison ordeal.

And the son of Paul’s sister, having heard the plot, came and entered the citadel and declared it to Paul. The perfidious scheme of the Pharisees had been lethal in its treachery, but God was certainly equal to it. The intricacy of God’s planning on behalf of His servant

goes quite beyond all human capacities. If one would try to work out one’s daily schedule with the utmost sensitivities to divine purposes, one would never be able, even so, to manage the maneuvering of God to handle the concerns of each of His servants. That Paul’s nephew should have been around in the first place was of crucial importance. That he should have been in a situation to overhear the plotting of a clandestine group was remarkable to the point of miraculous, but certainly consistent with God’s ability to handle the situation. We are told nothing else about the nephew. We had not as yet been told that Paul had a sister, much less why she should be in Jerusalem at this time rather than in Tarsus, where the family estate had been. Nor is it any less remarkable that the young man should have gained access to the garrison; that the centurion should have been willing to take him to the commander; and that the commander should have taken him seriously. But take him seriously he did, and moved to handle the situation, as we shall see in the next episode.

Acts 23:23-35

TRANSLATION

And having called two of the centurions, [the commander] said, "Prepare two hundred soldiers so that they might go to Caesarea, and seventy horsemen and two hundred flank guards, [to leave] at the third hour of the night, and provide a beast that they may set Paul upon him and take him safely to Felix the governor." He then wrote a letter which read, "Claudius Lysias, to the most excellent governor Felix, greetings. This man having been seized by the Jews and being about to be killed by them, I came in with the soldiers and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman. And wanting to know fully the accusation with which they charged him, I brought him unto their Sanhedrin, which found him accused concerning matters of their law, but having no charges worthy of death or bonds. And having been informed of a plot against the man, immediately I sent him to you, charging his accusers to tell you about him."

The soldiers then, in accordance with their orders, took Paul and brought him by night unto Antipatris. And the next day [the soldiers] returned to the garrison, having committed the horsemen to go on with him; which ones entered Caesarea; and having delivered the letter to the governor, presented also Paul to him. And when he had read the letter and inquired concerning the province he was from, and finding that he was from Cilicia, he said, "I will hear you out when your accusers have come." And he ordered him to be kept in the residence of Herod.

COMMENTARY

God Manipulates the Might of Rome

It served the purpose of God to put His servant, Paul, into the judicial and political process of the Roman Empire. He did not leave him to the whim of the Jewish hierarchy, as He did Jesus. It had served God's redemptive purpose to let Jesus be crucified. It now served His revelational purpose to let Paul be moved about under the aegis of Rome. From a revelational point of view, God

had, by the maneuvering, afforded Himself during this period of time the opportunity of communicating to Paul His will and purpose for mankind, and through Him to the world, in the form of crucial epistles which became part of the New Testament. This seems rather obviously to be an important result of the long period of idleness forced upon him at this time. However, there were

no doubt many other factors involved in God's plan for Paul—factors which neither Paul nor anyone else would have known or understood. Like the weaver of fine tapestries, the grand design of the master craftsman, vital and vivid in his own mind, is not obvious to the viewer until it is complete. So God wove the threads of the life of Paul. In the crafting of His design, God uses many diverse elements of this world—kings and commoners; empires and cities and villages; men and machines; mountains and meadows and oceans and rivers; beasts and birds and insects—all at His disposal and subject to His ultimate will. How He uses them and when and why are often beyond our human comprehension. And, in our ignorance, we doubt and wonder and weep and wail, but God presses onward inexorably to accomplish His purpose and manifest for all eternity: His own glory, which is itself beyond the human capacity to envision or define.

And so it was that the commander of the garrison at Jerusalem, induced undoubtedly by God Himself, engineered the escape by Paul from the fury of his Jewish enemies. Peter had been whisked from prison by an angel; James was executed; Jesus was delivered over to the Jewish mob by the Roman official, Pilate, while Paul was rather handily delivered by a Roman official who occupied the same position that Pilate did. And thus it is in the world today—managed ineptly by human overseers, ravaged by Satan, but ultimately presided over by God. And thus it is that the believer, for reasons known by God alone is obliged to run the earthly gauntlet which God has allowed for him. Some suffer one thing, some another; some are healed and some are not; some are allowed riches and some bear grinding poverty; some are constantly afflicted, and some have relative ease. It seems unfair, but there is no way for the human mind to sort out what is altogether one's own fault and

what may be allowed by God for His particular purposes. In any case, one does one's best to function soundly, but ultimately must leave the outcome of one's life to God. And there is no use to compare ourselves to others—it can only bring envy or arrogance. The best thing one can do is leave things in the hands of God and trust the Master Craftsman to carry out His design as He sees fit.

And thus was Paul spirited away to Caesarea under cover of pre-dawn darkness, escorted by a sizable contingent of Roman soldiers. Had it been necessary, God could have raised up an army twice that size. Remember that wherever the welfare of God's people are concerned He has limitless resources. It is not a matter of God's power, which is totally adequate, or our faith which is totally inadequate—it is a matter of His will. Whenever we bring into the picture the issue of our human capacity, either of faith or faithfulness, we become confused. In this episode, Paul's worthiness or faith or piety never came up. God would inexorably execute His purpose on Paul's behalf. It is not that faith or faithfulness on the part of humans is unimportant, but that they are never adequate to be the basis of God's actions on our behalf.

When Paul arrived in Caesarea with his escort, he was presented to Felix with the letter from the commander. He quickly assessed the situation and deterred the matter to such time as Paul's accusers might arrive on the scene. Meanwhile, Paul would be quartered in the residence of Herod. Presumably it would be a comfortable place. Caesarea was one of the jewels among several that Herod had himself been responsible for. But here, Paul would wait. Was it frustrating to him, in view of his compelling desire to spread the Word of God through the world? Probably. Did he understand what in the

world was going on? Probably not. But God would have His way.

Acts 24:1-9

TRANSLATION

And after five days the chief priest, Ananias, with certain elders and a certain spokesman—Tertullus—brought to the governor charges against Paul. And when he had been called, Tertullus began to make the charges saying, “Much peace being achieved through you, and reforms coming to this nation through your provision, to everyone and everywhere, we receive with all thankfulness, most excellent Felix. And lest I detain you further, I beseech you in your gracious reasonableness to hear us briefly. For having found this man a troublemaker and stirring up strife for all the Jews in the world, and a ringleader of the heresy of the Nazarenes, who also attempted to profane the temple, and whom also we seized and wanted to judge him according to our law. But the commander, Lysias, with much violence snatched him out of our hands and sent him to you. He commanded his accusers to come to you, for he himself was not able to discern concerning all these and know all these things of which we are accusing him.” And the Jews joined in the attack, alleging these things to be so.

COMMENTARY

Formal Charges Before Felix

Five days had gone by without a word from Paul’s accusers. Had the Roman commander not intervened, they would have killed Paul on the spot. Now they take their time bringing their accusations to the governor, Felix. The high priest had heard the charges against Paul in the Sanhedrin, and now led the crusade against him. Although he was the titular head of God’s people, he had not the slightest idea what that meant. So blind was he to the whole meaning of redemption as it was unfolded in the Old Testament Scriptures, that he failed to recognize the fulfillment of its purpose in the coming of Jesus the Messiah. He thus became the enemy of God in all that He was doing in the salvation of His people. And so

enraged was he at God’s servant that he would have had him killed on the spot, had it not been for the intervention of the Roman commander. Now he waits five days to put in his appearance. Vacillation and whimsy are common characteristics of Satan’s demonic agents. And when Ananias finally does come before Felix, he is a groveling sycophant—a fawning flatterer. There is nothing here of the bold prophets and priests of Israel’s history. There is nothing of the spirit of Elijah, thundering against the infamous King Ahab; or Samuel challenging the mighty Saul. Instead of being the champion of truth, the words of Ananias are mere instruments of expedience and deception. Without the Spirit of God, truth has no meaning. Where there is no

God, there is no truth; and where there is no truth, there is no courage. Everything is relative. The Pharisees, bereft of all genuine ties to God, were like rudderless rafts floating on a sea of uncertainty. And so Ananias came before Felix, bowing and scraping in obsequious flattery and begging but a moment of audience with a Roman governor who was the antithesis of all that the people of God stood for in a decadent world. Felix was by reputation a vile man of cruelty and debauchery.

The charges against Paul were not worth the trek from Jerusalem to Caesarea. Legally Felix could do nothing about them since they were matters of religious culture. But the Jews hoped to gain his favor and join them in getting rid of this true agent of God who was their enemy. Had Felix been a man of integrity, the whole performance of Paul's accusers would have been despicable. But noble, Felix was not, as we shall see in the next episode.

Acts 24:10-23

TRANSLATION

The governor having motioned to him, Paul answered saying, "Knowing that you have been a judge with respect to this nation for many years, I am able to give a defense concerning myself, you being able to know full way that it has not been more than twelve days since I went up to worship in Jerusalem. And that neither in the temple did they find me disputing with anyone nor stirring up the crowd either in the synagogue nor throughout the city. Nor are they able to prove to you the things of which they are now accusing me. And I confess this to you, that according to the Way that they call heresy, so do I serve the ancestral God, believing all things which are according to the Law and are written in the Prophets; having hope in God, in which these also themselves have their expectation, that there is about to be a resurrection of the just and the unjust. In respect to this, I might myself also endeavor to have a conscience without offense toward God and man continually. And throughout many years I have come giving alms and offerings unto my nation, in which circumstances they found me purified in the temple, not with a crowd nor with disturbance. But certain Jews from Asia, who need to come before you, and to accuse me if they have anything against me. As for these that are here, let them say if they found anything unjust while I was standing before the Sanhedrin, or concerning this one utterance which I cried out while standing among them, that "Concerning the resurrection of the dead, I am being judged by you this day."

And Felix put them off, and so that he might know the things concerning the Way more exactly, said, "Whenever Lucias the commander comes down, I will know more thoroughly the things concerning you," and ordered the centurion to keep him and give him liberty, and not forbid any one of his own people to serve him.

COMMENTARY

Paul Before Felix

The Roman governor, Felix, before whom Paul now makes his defense, was not a noble person, as one might expect of a representative of the Roman Empire. He was procurator of Judea from 52 to 60

(A.D.). He was reputed to have "the power of a king and the mind of a slave" (Tacitus). Probably one of the factors in the downfall of Rome was the series of weak-minded and debauched leaders

from the Caesars to the centurions, who could not cope with life itself, much less an empire. It was Paul's misfortune, or perhaps God's purpose, that he should have to appear in this "carnival" court.

The Jews presented their case—a juridical farce—which should have been immediately dismissed for lack of legal substance. But it was to this court that Paul must give his defense.

Assuming that in a Roman court he would receive some kind of justice, Paul addressed Felix as someone who would be knowledgeable about the Jewish law and, of course, sensitive to Roman justice. He therefore expressed his appreciation at being able to present his case. In simple bold strokes, Paul presented the facts. He had gone up to Jerusalem—a devout Jew, to worship. He had caused no disturbances; had no disputes with anyone; and had in no way profaned the temple. Nor were the Jews able to prove their accusations. He had been a follower of the Way (of Christ) which they had called heresy, but at the same time he had held true to the teachings of the Law and the Prophets, having hope in God, and in the resurrection, in which they also hoped. He had endeavored to maintain a conscience free of offense toward God and man. But there were certain Jews from Asia—malcontents, who had persistently sought to stir up trouble against him. If

they had a case against him, they should be there to make it known. Or, if those who had some case against him at the meeting of the Sanhedrin, they should have spoken up. The high priest himself was present at the Sanhedrin and brought no charges against him there. But all they had was an outcry he had made defending the truth of the resurrection from the dead. There was really no substance whatever to the charges. A Roman governor should certainly have understood that.

If Paul thought he would find justice before Felix, he was sadly mistaken. Caught between a Jewish wife, a highly Jewish constituency, and a Roman government, he opted for indecision. The matter was postponed. The case was frivolous. Lysias, the commander from Jerusalem, knew that and would probably have released him had it not been his fear for Paul's safety. He had sent him to Caesarea merely for his own protection. He assumed that if he had freed Paul, they would have killed him. But Felix postponed the matter, ostensibly to await the arrival of Lysias from Jerusalem, but Lysias had already given his opinion. It was an obvious dodge. Meanwhile, Felix ordered Paul to be held in custody, but sought to make him comfortable in his captivity. It was a masterful stroke—the Jewish leaders would be satisfied and Paul would not be abused.

Acts 24:24-27

TRANSLATION

And after some days Felix, having come down with his wife Drusilla, who was in Judea, sent for Paul, and heard him concerning the faith which is in Christ Jesus. And conversing with him concerning righteousness, and temperance, and the judgment about to come, Felix began trembling with fear and answered, "Go for now—I will call for you at a more convenient time"; at the same time hoping that money would be given to him by Paul; wherefore also he called for him more often to speak with him.

But two years had passed, and Felix had taken a successor—Porcius Festus; but wishing to curry favor with the Jews, Felix left Paul bound.

COMMENTARY

Personal Encounters with Felix

Paul must have been exceedingly frustrated. A case involving an alleged infraction of Jewish law should have been easily dismissed for a Roman citizen. Days passed and finally Felix called for Paul to give him an audience, together with his wife Drusilla, a Jewess. Paul spoke to them at length about the faith which centered around Jesus Christ. It was a rare opportunity. The potentials for spreading the Word throughout the Roman Empire were obvious. Whether or not Paul saw it as merely a political ploy is not certain. He spoke to them concerning righteousness and temperance and the judgment which was to come. The word "temperance" seems strange coming in connection with the weightier matters of righteousness and the coming judgement, but the matter is cleared up with a closer examination of the Greek word *egkrateia*, which is so translated. Actually, "temperance" is not the best translation,

but there is no simple English equivalent. It really means "inner strength" in terms of the presence of Christ within the spirit. It is not just a human willpower or strength, but that which comes from the possessing of Christ within. In Galatians 5:22, where it is usually translated by "temperance", it is identified as a gift of the Holy Spirit. Felix certainly needed this word of instruction, since his life, by reputation, was one of debauchery and decadence—a sure path of destruction. Where would he get the strength to change all that if not by a higher power within him? Struck with fear and trembling at Paul's words, it was obvious that Felix was hit pretty hard. As usual, confronted with reality, Felix simply deferred the matter—"I will call for you at a more convenient time." And he did in fact call him—quite often. But he apparently did so hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe for his release. The skeptical would assume, of

course, that there was nothing more to it, and that it would be a waste of Paul's time to talk to him. The truth of the matter is that God often uses such ulterior motives to bring about purposes beyond the human understanding. In any case, that word of God was given and God only knows the extent of its effect.

For two full years Paul languished in Caesarian captivity. How intensely Paul must have felt the hindrance to his work is indicated by another incident where he was on a mission to Macedonia. He was supposed to meet Titus in Troas, but when he got there, Titus was not there. Paul said, "*I had no rest in my spirit.*" It

was not a matter of human emotion—impatience or anxiety—but a deep concern for the people to whom he was sent to minister. He told the Romans that he had great heaviness and continual sorrow within his heart for his people.

But despite all the distress that Paul had to endure, the ultimate reality is that God had His purposes in the matter. The wretched "puppet" Felix, wanting to curry favor with the Jews, left Paul bound. Had God wanted Paul out of captivity, all the legions of Rome could not have held him.

Acts 25:1-12

TRANSLATION

Festus then, having arrived at the province, went up after three days unto Jerusalem from Caesarea. And the chief priest and the leaders of the Jews informed him against Paul, and entreated him [Festus], asking a favor concerning him, that he would send him to Jerusalem, while they were making a plot to kill him on the way. Festus then answered that he would keep Paul in Caesarea, since he himself was about to go soon. "Those then among you," he said, "who are able to go down with me, if there is anything in the man that is disorderly, let them accuse him."

And when he had tarried among them not more than eight or ten days, he went down to Caesarea; and the next day, having sat on the judgment seat, commanded Paul to be brought. And when he had come, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, and brought many and serious accusations which they were not able to prove; Paul having defended himself, "Neither concerning the Law of the Jews, nor concerning the temple, nor concerning Caesar have I done anything wrong." And Festus, wanting to gain favor with the Jews, answered Paul and said, "Will you go up to Jerusalem and there be judged by me concerning these things?" And Paul said, "I am standing at the judgment seat of Caesar. I have done the Jews no injustice, as also you well know. If then I have done anything unjust and worthy of death, I do not refuse to die; but if there is nothing of these things with which they have accused me, no one is able to deliver me over to them. I appeal to Caesar." Then Festus, having conferred with the counsel, answered, "You have appealed to Caesar, to Caesar you will go."

COMMENTARY

Paul Appeals to Caesar

The infamous Felix was succeeded by one Porcius Festus. Little is known of him, either before or during his rule, except as he was involved in the case against Paul. There are various clues, however, within the chapter, that indicate that he was a

man of greater integrity and efficiency than Felix. On the other hand, as was essential to a Roman governor in the troublesome Jewish province of Judea, he had to curry the favor of his volatile subjects. A few days after his arrival in

Caesarea, he went up to Jerusalem. (Jerusalem is south of Caesarea, but since it is on a hill, one always ascended to it). The Jewish leaders immediately seized the opportunity to approach him with their obsessive pursuit of a case against Paul. As usual, the Jews were bent on treachery, intending to kill Paul on the way. Festus, however, though he wanted to gain favor with them, suggested (probably providentially) that if they had any charges against Paul they should come back to Caesarea with him, where he would entertain their case when they got there. Undaunted, the Jews agreed. They would have gone to the ends of the earth to rid themselves of this fellow who was a constant menace to their nefarious purposes. For two years, Paul had languished in prison under the protection of Rome. Here was an opportunity to reopen the case and have another chance at him. They could not let it pass.

When their “day in court” had arrived, they resurrected their tired and flimsy charges, but, of course, could prove

nothing, especially in a Roman court, which cared nothing for their religious vagaries. So Paul, probably inspired by the Holy Spirit, appealed to Caesar. Festus had wanted to send him back to Jerusalem, which, of course, would have been disastrous. But Paul, seizing upon his Roman citizenship and recognizing that the tribunal before which he stood was under the jurisdiction of Rome, insisted on standing before Caesar. It was a masterful stroke. The Jews could not hope to win in Rome. And God had, indeed, declared that he must go to Rome.

Throughout the book of Acts, one thing has been irrefutably certain—God has been in charge. His purposes have been inexorably executed. To be sure, it had seemed often that humans were in charge of Paul’s destiny, but that was only from the limited perspective of the earthly scene. Does He want Paul in prison? Paul will be in prison. Does He want Paul in Rome? Paul will go to Rome.

Acts 25:13-27

TRANSLATION

When some days had passed, King Agrippa and Bernice arrived in Caesarea and greeted Festus. And as they remained there many days, Festus presented to the king the things concerning Paul, saying, "A certain man has been left a prisoner by Felix, concerning whom the chief priests and the elders of the Jews informed me, asking a judgment against him. To them I answered that it is not customary for Rome to deliver up [to one's enemies] any man, before the accused has opportunity to give a defense face to face with his accusers concerning the accusation. When therefore they had come together here, I made no delay, and having sat upon the judgment seat, commanded the man to be brought; concerning whom, the accusers having stood up, brought no accusation which I considered to be of evil, but they had certain matters against him concerning their own religion and concerning a certain Jesus, who had died, whom Paul alleged that He was alive. And being uncertain concerning these questions, I was saying that he might go to Jerusalem and there be judged concerning these things. But Paul, having made an appeal that he should be reserved unto the disposition of the emperor, I commanded that he be kept under guard until I could send him to Caesar." And Agrippa said to Festus, "I myself will also hear the man." Tomorrow, he said, he would hear him.

On the next day then, Agrippa and Bernice came with much pomp and entered the audience hall together with officers and prominent men of the city, and commanded Festus that Paul should be brought. And Festus said, "King Agrippa, and all men who are present with us, behold this man concerning whom all the multitude of Jews interceded with me, in Jerusalem and here, crying out that he must no longer live. And I found him to have practiced nothing worthy of death; and this man himself having appealed to the emperor, I decided to send him. Concerning whom I did not have anything definite to write to the honorable sir. For which reason I brought him before you [all] and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that an investigation having been made, I might have something to write. For I consider it unreasonable to send a prisoner, and not indicate the charges against him."

COMMENTARY

Paul Before Agrippa

Agrippa was a rather minor figure in the great juggernaut of the Roman pursuit of world dominion—an empire that reached from North Africa to Central Europe and the British Isles. His full title was Herod Agrippa II. He was the son of Agrippa I who, in turn, was the grandson of Herod the Great. He ruled over only a small part of his father's kingdom. He was hardly a footnote in the spectacular rise of the mighty Roman Empire. That was, of course, from the viewpoint of the secular historian. But God, who sees not as man sees, elected to turn the spotlight on the insignificant Agrippa, who had touched the life of his cherished and vital servant, Paul. Paul was more important to God than any emperor who had ever ruled the Roman Empire, or any other empire, for that matter. Paul was not there to serve King Agrippa, but King Agrippa was there, at God's behest, to serve Paul. The Roman Empire, through its various agents, had been dispatched by God to save the life of His servant and to execute certain of His purposes.

Believers little realize what tremendous forces God sets in motion for the effecting of His purposes in regard to one of His children. The constant search on the part of believers, for visible expressions of the love and presence of God, often overlook the far greater activities of God—behind the scenes, insuring the preservation of each individual spirit. Paul tells the Philippians—*“The peace of God, which passes all understanding, shall keep [garrison] your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus”* (4:7). Although it may often seem that God is not delivering us or helping us in circumstances that are hard to bear, be assured that He will not let Satan go one step beyond that which He has Himself ordained for the accomplishment of certain purposes. The evidence of this truth is seen in the fact

that however difficult the situation, God always seems to give His children the grace to bear up and to retain their ties with Him. It is not a matter of human feelings of victory, which are in the flesh, but of the deep desire within the spirit to return again and again to Christ for help.

And as for Festus, the lesser official, governor of the province, he seemed to exceed himself in his ability to sort out the legal implications of the charges that were brought against Paul. In the first place, and to his credit, he stood up against the Jewish demands that Paul be released to them. **It is not customary for Rome to release a man [to his enemies] before he has had a chance to defend himself before them.** In the second place, he ascertained that Paul had done nothing worthy of death, even if the charges were true, which, as a matter of fact, as he pointedly declared, had no substantial evidence. Not knowing what else to do, he would have sent him back to Jerusalem to be tried there before a religious counsel, but Paul appealed to Caesar. So Paul was kept under Roman protection and the Jews were once again foiled in their attempt to destroy him. All events were actually going according to God's time clock (although humans have not always learned to tell time by GST—God's Standard Time.)

So comes now King Agrippa and Bernice (his incestuous consort), accompanied by the pomp and fanfare which befits a “peacock potentate” of minor standing. (It has always been thus—the less the power, the more the pretense.) However, though Agrippa was of little importance in

Rome, he was, nevertheless, the ultimate authority in the province of Judea.

Why Agrippa came to Judea is not clear. Perhaps it was merely to greet the newly installed governor; perhaps it was providential. In any case, he and Bernice stayed for some days, and Festus, possibly looking for new ways to entertain his illustrious guest, brought up the case of Paul, who had been left prisoner by Felix, his predecessor. Festus had been uncertain as to exactly what he should say to Rome, concerning the prisoner he was sending them. He therefore welcomed the opportunity to present the case to Agrippa and have some authoritative help.

But what is the ultimate import of this

passage? In part, at least, it is irrefutable evidence that throughout his entire ordeal, Christ was with Paul. It was never pleasant for Paul—always frustrating—but certainly an important part of God's integral plan for the development of His church and the salvation of the world at large. It is not for us to understand or to integrate the episodes of our life, but to live them out and leave to God the ultimate meaning and purpose of His grand design for ourselves personally and for His people. Whether one is a Paul, or a simple member of the family with a more obscure gift and purpose, it is still the same—Christ, the Head, using His Body—fiber, sinew, neurons, to fulfill His purpose in the universe He created.

Acts 26:1-11

TRANSLATION

And Agrippa said to Paul, "You are permitted to speak for yourself." Then Paul stretched forth his hand and gave a defense: "Concerning all the things with which I am charged by the Jews, I count myself fortunate at being about to give a defense before you, especially since you are familiar with all the Jewish customs and questions. Therefore I ask your longsuffering to hear me. My way of life from my youth, which was from the beginning among my countrymen in Jerusalem, is known by all Jews, that according to the strictest sect of our religion, I have lived a Pharisee. And now, for the hope of the promise which was unto our fathers by God, I have stood being judged, in that which our twelve tribes, serving in worship constantly night and day, hope to attain, concerning which hope I am being charged by the Jews, O King. Why should it be judged incredible with you that God should raise the dead? I once thought with myself that I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus the Nazarene; which also I did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priest; and in killing them, and in every synagogue, often punishing them, compelling them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I was pursuing them even unto foreign cities."

COMMENTARY

Paul's Defense Before Agrippa

Once again we are confronted with the reality that God was Himself orchestrating the entire process of Paul's interactions, both with the Jews and with the governing officials of Rome. It must have seemed wearisome to Paul who had been brought again and again to speak before the authorities, and even perhaps provide diversion for them. It would have seemed to be a very simple case as far as Roman jurisprudence is concerned. It was a matter of Jewish custom and had nothing to do with the Roman government, except that the Jews were not allowed to pronounce the

sentence of death. And they wanted Paul dead. They would go to any length to achieve this perfidious goal. Hence, they had engaged the Roman juridical system to accomplish this end, in spite of the fact that they must have realized that their case would be hard to prove in a Roman court. It was a "long shot," but so obsessed were they with the determination to destroy Paul that they would go to any lengths. But while the Roman officials in charge of Judea might have been persuaded by them to do them a favor, the Jewish and Roman leaders together were no match for God. Not only

did God have His own purposes, but He would use the officials and leaders to accomplish them. Hence, Paul would inevitably arrive in Rome under the conditions which God had Himself ordained, even though such conditions had often been to the discomfiture and frustration of His faithful servant.

It was therefore part of the divine plan that Paul should stand before Agrippa. He had already appealed to Caesar and there was not much else Agrippa could say. The case was extremely simple for a Roman ruler. It would hardly have seemed a difficult thing for the governor merely to have said that there were charges brought against this man which were primarily questions of Jewish custom and had little relevance to Roman law and was being sent to Rome simply because the man, a Roman citizen, had appealed to Caesar. It would not have seemed so terribly complicated, and yet at every turn the Roman authorities dragged their feet and somehow perceived this thing to be far more complex than it was. It was therefore obvious that God had a particular time schedule. It did not comport with the Roman authorities; it did not comport with Paul's own interests; but certainty was part of God's own plan.

At stake in the plans and purposes of God is the rescuing of the world from Satan. He employs His servants on earth to accomplish this task. But how does one go about saving the world? How does one go about planning or orchestrating a mission devoted to this end? Only God knows. One of the chief criteria in understanding the work of God in the world today was expressed by Isaiah over 2,500 years ago—*“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts”* (Isaiah 55:8,9). How does one save the world?

Put God in charge. He is “the Lord of the harvest.” He must send forth the laborers as it pleases Him. He seems quite equal to the task. And He often seems quite extravagant with His servants. He uses them at will. Often, after a lifetime of training and development, He may have only one particular task in mind for that particular servant, but it will fit into the mosaic of His grand design. For example, Jochebed the mother of Moses, provided a deliverer for Israel. Hannah gave birth to Samuel, who was God's anointed spokesman to guide Israel in the promised land. The Jewish maiden, Esther, became queen in order to deliver Israel from annihilation. Her uncle Mordecai said, *“Who knows but what you have come into the kingdom for this hour?”* Those who have been instrumental in bringing to Christ such God-appointed leaders as Martin Luther, or others in our century, had they done nothing else would have served a vital purpose. Did it matter to God that Paul languished in prison precious years that might have been crucial in the spread of the gospel? Apparently not. That is to say, it did not thwart His purpose, although, obviously He cared about His servant. And what of all the martyrs, cut short in their potential service? If we function today on the basis of rationale and computerized statistics, we shall miss the essence of the understanding of God's work in the world.

What does He want from us as His Body? Only He knows. What does He want of each of us as individuals? We must leave that to Him. God had His timetable for Paul and it went according to His own good pleasure.

So Festus brought Paul to Agrippa. Paul had been seized by the Jews; held without charge; brought before petty officials, who wanted diversion; and now, once again, beleaguered by yet another futile audience. However, probably as a

result of the grace of God at work within him, Paul was apparently in good spirit at this session.

I consider myself fortunate at being about to give a defense to you this day. Surely Paul must have been aware of the limits of any earthly ruler under the ultimate authority of God. And yet, he was in no wise disrespectful of him, nor of Festus, who had held him in prison without cause, for the sake of the Jewish leaders. He seemed in a rather conciliatory and open mood both toward Festus and toward Agrippa. He seemed to harbor no bitterness or resentment. Had he, in his prison years, come to grips with the realities of his true position before Christ? Had he put himself so completely in the hands of his Master, as to leave to Him the disposition of his life? Looking at his situation from the human perspective, one cannot help but think of the frustration that must have overwhelmed him, given his keen compelling to do the work of Christ in the world, and yet completely stopped in his efforts to do so. We cannot place ourselves in Paul's position, because God does not give us the grace to engage in speculation about it. We cannot put ourselves in another's circumstances. As we look at God's unfathomable ways of dealing with others of our fellow believers, it is unsound for us to try to imagine how we would handle their experience. God will give us, at the appropriate time, the grace to handle the circumstances that He has allowed to come into our lives. He will not give us the grace to think about it, either our future circumstances or the circumstances of another. In spite of all evidences to the contrary, Paul was obviously where God wanted him to be and somehow he had come to rest in that assumption.

I count myself fortunate . . . The word is worth noting, especially since it is used by Jesus in the so-called "beatitudes." "*Blessed are the poor in spirit.*" The word

"blessed" that Jesus uses is the same one used here by Paul. But was Jesus saying that the poor in spirit were fortunate? Hardly. We must go back to the classical roots of the word. The Greek word is *makarios*. It was used to indicate a special touch from the gods. For example, a young Greek hero was being honored at a banquet on his behalf, and his friend said to him, "You are surely *makarios*—touched by the gods." The idea comes across in English as good luck or good fortune. But surely Jesus was not saying that people were "lucky." Whereas the Greeks were saying "touched by the gods", Jesus was really saying "touched by the true God." So a proper translation would be, "touched by God are the poor in spirit." Some translators have found in their Greek lexicons, the word "happy." To use that in translating Jesus' words is a misunderstanding of the old English usage of "happy." In old English, the word "hap" meant fortune or luck. We see it in our words "happen", "happening", "happenstance." So "happy" really meant in old English usage, "lucky or fortunate." To use it in translating Jesus' words is a gross misconception. The Greeks used the word in connection with the belief that all of their fortunes were in the hands of their great pantheon of gods. Jesus used the word to indicate that all of the circumstances of His people were in the hands of the true God. With Agrippa, Paul is using the word in a different sense. He was not so much calling attention to the involvement of God in the matter, although he may have believed that, but rather using it in terms of a common idiom of the day, as we may use the word "fortunate" without any reference to "luck." It was important to discuss the word since it was used by Jesus in the Beatitudes. He could hardly have been using it in the casual sense that Paul did.

Forthwith, Paul began his defense. He was pleased to stand before Agrippa, because he knew him to be familiar with the Jewish faith. Agrippa was, as a

descendent of Herod the Great, himself a Jew. His position with Rome was based upon his own knowledge of Jewish issues, important in governing the people, together with a certain duplicity of nature that made it possible for him to be submissive to his people's oppressors. In view of this, Paul's capacity to contain himself was remarkable indeed. He presented to Agrippa the familiar religious issue that had brought him there. And then presented a sketch of his own background and the circumstances that caused him to shift from a vehement hostility toward Jesus the Nazarene, to the position of being his principal champion in the world.

The detailed account of Paul's fanatical hostility toward Jesus and the

persecution of His followers, even unto death, reveals at once the depth of Paul's sin and the power of Christ to redeem. It should be a lesson of great hope for all who struggle with the past and the power of Christ to forgive, to say nothing of His power to lift one from the pit and use one for His glory. Paul considered himself to be "the chief of sinners." His confession was not unjustified. And yet, touched by the Holy Spirit, he was able to accept the forgiveness of God (more difficult than it may seem) and to become, therefore, the chief spokesman for the limitless grace of God. The very fact that one wants to be forgiven is the assurance that one is forgiven, for without the power of the Spirit within, a human being would not be interested in the forgiveness of God.

Acts 26:12-23

TRANSLATION

“While I [Paul] was going unto Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, at midday, I saw along the way, O King, a light shining around me and those who were going with me, above the brightness of the sun. And as we were all falling on the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew tongue, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goad.’ And I said, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And the Lord said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise, and stand upon your feet; for unto this purpose I have appeared to you, to choose you out beforehand as a servant and a witness, both of the things which you have seen and the things concerning which I shall appear to you; raising you up from among the people and from among the Gentiles, unto whom I am sending you, to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness unto light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a portion among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.’

“Whence, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but to those in Damascus first, and also to those in Jerusalem and all the region of Judea; and to the Gentiles, proclaiming repentance and turning from God, and doing works worthy of repentance. For the sake of these things the Jews seized me in the temple and attempted to murder me. Having attained help therefore from God, I have stood until this day, bearing witness to both small and great, leaving out the speaking of nothing of the things which the prophets and Moses spoke which were going to take place—that Christ must suffer, that He must be the first of the resurrection of the dead, that He would proclaim light to His people and to the Gentiles.”

COMMENTARY

Defense Continued—Conversion and Call

The essence of what Paul was saying to Agrippa about his hostility toward Christ and His followers, and his subsequent conversion and call had been given in previous accounts. What was the

importance of its repetition here? Was there something added that would give us new insights into the matter? Again, we follow the principle of making much of that which God makes much of. It is of

note that in the relatively brief review of the personal episodes in Paul's life, some forty-six verses are given to Paul's encounter with Agrippa. The stage was set for another recounting of his conversion experience, so we must therefore conclude that this further narrative is quite important. So we look for variables. What has Paul said here that was not made known or made clear in the previous accounts. In the other narratives we have the nefarious trip to Damascus in search of Christians; the startling and devastating vision; and the instructions, delivered in part by Ananias in the city. There it is revealed to him that he is a chosen vessel to carry the name of Christ before the Gentiles and their rulers in addition to God's people, Israel.

In Paul's recounting of this conversion experience to the mob at the temple, at his first arrest, Paul adds the phrase, "chosen in advance." And now, in his relating of the narrative to King Agrippa, he adds further that he had been **lifted out from His [God's] people and from the Gentiles. And also that he was to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness unto light and from the power of Satan unto God; and that they might receive forgiveness of sins and a portion among those who are sanctified by faith which is, in me [Christ].** Obviously there had been a good deal more that had passed between Ananias and Saul in that epochal encounter, but we are only given brief glimpses, as it seems vital to the record. In his own memory of the episode, what seemed always incredible to Paul was that God should take him, a blasphemer against Jesus and a murderer of His people, and purify him and lift him up as a special oracle to present the gospel of Christ to the Gentiles. He never felt worthy of this. He never regarded himself as anything but "the chief of sinners." This, of course, explains why he was never confident in the flesh nor in his own power over it.

God alone had lifted him from the path of perdition and kept him from the power of Satan. His selection by God for this assignment, as well as his power to perform it, were in his mind the work of the Holy Spirit in him. In his letter to the Romans, he expresses his weakness in the flesh to do anything apart from the power of Christ. To the Corinthians, he professed the same weakness and attributed his strength to overcome, strictly from the grace of God, whom he quotes as saying, "My strength is made perfect in weakness."

The ultimate lesson in this entire scenario is that God has the power to lift the vilest of sinners out of one's self and circumstances and use one to fulfill noble and divine purposes. The key point is that it is God's power and God's purposes and God's timing.

The lamentable cry of the church today is, "Get going for God." The assumption is that the only reason one does not "get going" is because of one's own weakness or unwillingness. The word of God is, "*My strength is made perfect in weakness, and I will send you when and where I choose.*" The task of converting the world is not left to human inadequacy. Paul is the great example of this truth. Unfortunately the church neglects this truth and attempts to promote motivation by human leverage. The result of such a humanistic approach is inefficiency in the work, misuse of the people, and needless feelings of guilt. What God wants one to do, one will do apart from human factors. If Christ has an assignment for us, He will make it known. If we are not sure, we had better wait. If one moves apart from the Lord, one may find one's life consumed in things the Lord has not ordained one to do. If we make our own choices in regard to service, we may not have time for God's choices.

Thus, Paul had explicit instructions as to God's purpose for him. God's instructions

to us may not be so explicit or obvious—certainly not so spectacular—but in one way or another the Lord of the harvest will see to it that His servants know what to do. But how do we know? In general, there are certain principles that may be applied, if one really wants to do what the Lord wants: (1) We cannot trust human judgment—our own or others; (2) Therefore, we must ask the Lord to see to it that we do what He wants, in spite of ourselves; (3) Generally speaking, Christ will give us the desire to do what He wants us to do; (4) He will give us both the capacity and the compelling to do the task; (5) Circumstances will come together in such a way that one who wants what the Lord wants will be doing what the Lord wants, in spite of human weakness.

So go in peace, and trust the Lord to fulfill His purpose in you, in spite of human inadequacy. God calls whom He will, in spite of unworthiness; commissions the task, in spite of inadequacy; and controls the circumstance, in spite of opposing forces that would hinder the fulfillment of His purpose. Once again we hear the word of God in Paul's victory cry to the Corinthians—"My grace is sufficient for thee, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."

I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. The power of the individual to be obedient to the call of God depends on three miracles—the communication, the reception, the execution. It is a miracle that God is able to communicate with His creatures on earth. But it takes a miracle also to convince the hearer that it is indeed from God. And it takes a miracle for human beings to be able to execute God's word. We hear much of human virtue—willpower, perseverance, courage. Unfortunately, no human virtue is ever adequate, either to discern or to carry out divine instruction. If human resources must be called upon, the validity of the

commission may be questionable. That is, God does not give one a call to do what He has not already gifted one to do. If one's obedience to God's call is based on human virtue, then one has something to boast about. Paul confronted that issue with the Corinthians—"What do you have that you did not receive [as a gift]? And if you received it, why do you boast as though you had not received it?" (I Corinthians 4:7). The problem at Corinth was one which is rampant in the church today—people comparing themselves with one another and making judgments about one another. "The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you." Paul was not disobedient to his calling, but everywhere acknowledges that his capacity and compelling to respond to the call came not from his own pernicious and unreliable flesh, but from the power of the Spirit of God within him.

Doing works worthy of repentance

...This phrase seems out of place on the lips of Paul who was continually wrangling with the legalists over "good works" as a means of salvation. The issue must be addressed. What does he mean by the expression "good works?" To the Ephesians he said, "*For by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is a gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast*" (Ephesians 2:8,9). And in a similar vein he said to Titus, "*But after that the kindness and love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy, He saved us, by the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Ghost, which He shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior . . .*" (Titus 3:4-6). On the other hand, James says, "Faith without works is dead." In resolving the apparent contradiction, much depends on our understanding of the word "works." In the letter to the Hebrews—a book written to the Jewish people scattered throughout the world (the Diaspora, as they were called)—they were told that if

their sacrifices of animals would avail to the purifying of their flesh, the blood of Christ would “purify them from” dead works, to serve the living God. And so, at the outset we must distinguish between “dead works” and “living works.” There is a vast difference. We are accustomed to thinking of works in terms of particular deeds per se rather than the inner qualities which the deeds represent. The deeds themselves may be empty gestures made with uncharitable motives. Thus, one makes a large donation to an orphanage, not because one cares for the orphans, but one wants the accolades or some other self-serving benefit. Jesus saw the “works” of the Pharisees in this light. They were attempting to buy favor with God without the inner love of God. The rituals and sacrifices which they performed were void of faith and, therefore, had no connection with redemption.

On the other hand, “living works” were the genuine outward expression of the inner presence of Christ. This is the sense in which Jesus used the term when He said, *“This is the work of God, that you believe on Him who sent me”* (John 6:29). And this is the sense in which Paul uses the word in Ephesians 1:19,20—*“And what is the surpassing majesty of His power in us who believe, according to the energy of the might of His strength, with which He energized Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenlies”* (Author’s translation). The Greek word here is *energeo*. It is the word from which we get our English word “energy.” This meaning is sometimes obscured by the translation “work in.” In Philippians 2:13—*“For it is God who works in you, both to will and to do of His good pleasure.”* The word is again, *energeo*. The sentence should be translated, *“For it is God who energizes you, both in the willing and the energizing for His good pleasure.”* In the previous verse (12) Paul says to *“Work out your own salvation.”* Here the Greek word is *katargadzo*, from

the same root that has to do with outward expression of an inner state. Thus, in a paraphrase, “Let the inner energy of the Spirit express itself outwardly, because it is God who energizes us to work out His purposes in us and through us.”

This usage of the Greek word *ergos*, which is usually translated “work” has many applications as an active process, as, for example, the working of yeast in a loaf of bread; or the combining of active ingredients to accomplish a result not possible by the individual elements. We call this “synergism”—directly from the Greek word *ergos*. Water is a good example of this in the combining of hydrogen and oxygen. This, of course, is the sense in which Jesus said, *“This is the work of God, that you believe on Him who sent me.”* He was not interested here in obligatory services performed as a “bartering chip” with God. In the same vein he said, *“By their fruits ye shall know them.”* Grapevines produce grapes, fig trees produce figs, but thistles produce thistles. Thistles cannot produce grapes. If the Spirit of Christ is not the energizing force within, the works, whatsoever they be, will be dead. If the Spirit of Christ is within, there will be an active expression of that energy, be it only the vitality of caring to have the presence of Christ within. Both Paul and James would have accepted this. Paul was against using works as a way to earn salvation. James was against the idea of faith that would not have an outward expression of any kind. The most viable evidence of Christ within, is belief in God—the desire to identify with God and to have Him within us in the presence of Christ. Whereas humanitarian deeds may abound in certain circles of the socially sensitive, only the energizing presence of the Holy Spirit can produce the working of faith in God.

So in the pragmatic realities of Paul’s encounter with Agrippa, he spoke of a revelation to the Jews that would evolve

in a genuine relationship to God based upon repentance from the dead works of Jewish ritual religion and a vital energy from God expressing itself in a desire to please Him—"living works" worthy of repentance.

For the sake of these things the Jews seized me and sought to kill me. For the grand proclamation of salvation by grace, Paul became the enemy of the Jewish leaders. Obviously these leaders did not want to have their power over the Jews—secured in the matrix of bondage and fear—dissipated by the liberating revelation of the true grace of God. Their system of religion had produced only the arid wasteland of rituals and obligation.

What Paul had to say was really nothing new. Had the Pharisees been conversant with the Old Testament Scriptures, and

had they been true men of God, mediating to the people of God the truth of God as it had been once delivered to Israel, instead of being fabricators of their own brand of religious bondage, they would have known that the things Paul was saying were true—clearly taught throughout the Old Testament Scriptures in statement and symbol. But the lust for power had obscured the truth, and they had become rather the agents of Satan than the spokesmen for God.

Paul's simple message was that Christ the Messiah—the hope of Israel—had indeed come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth; that He would suffer and die; be raised from the dead; would bathe the world in light. Such truths were hardly grounds for execution.

Acts 26:24-32

TRANSLATION

While he [Paul] was defending himself with these things, Festus spoke out with a great voice, “You are mad, Paul. Much learning has driven you to madness.” But Paul said, “I am not mad, as you say, most excellent Festus, but I declare truth and soundness of words. For the king knows concerning these things, before whom I am speaking boldly, for I am not persuaded at all that he can overlook these things; for this was not done in a corner. Do you believe the prophets, King Agrippa? I know that you believe.” But Agrippa said to Paul, “To a little degree you persuade me to be a Christian.” But Paul said, “I would to God, that not only to a little degree, but to a great degree, not only you, but also all who are hearing me today, might become such as I am, except for these bonds.”

And the king rose up and the leaders and Bernice, and those who were seated together with them, and departed, saying to one another, “This man has done nothing worthy of death or bonds.” And Agrippa said to Festus, “This man was able to be released if he had not appealed to Caesar.”

COMMENTARY

The Ultimate Response

Blinded by the terrestrial splendor of the greatest empire on earth and caught up in the power process of petty provincial governments, Festus was totally obfuscated by the implications of a spiritual that he knew nothing about. He didn't have a clue as to what Paul was talking about. Typical of the inane responses of the uninformed, he pronounced Paul mad. So much for Festus. Agrippa was another story. But Agrippa was a Jew. He knew, and Paul knew that he knew. But if Festus was blinded by the vainglories of earthly empire, Agrippa was blinded by the traditions of earthly religion, to say nothing of the compromises of his ascent to a seat of power.

To a little degree you persuade me to become a Christian. The translation “almost” is not adequate. Paul had made some points. Agrippa was moved—not enough to embrace Paul's message fully, but if the seed had found some fertile soil, who knows but what it would someday take root. Paul accepted the statement as viable. He did not give to Agrippa the common evangelistic prod—“Almost is not enough.” He did not condemn him. He hoped sincerely that Agrippa and all those that were with him would somehow accept the truth, not in a small way, but in a large way. Paul gave no indication that this was a vain hope. Perhaps he saw in Agrippa's statement, a potential known

only to God. It is common in Christendom to make hasty and humanistic judgments. Only God knows what is going on in the heart of individuals. The church has its forms and formulae; its doctrines and dogmas; its modes and methods. By these it judges the world. There is the constant tendency to classify and categorize; to put in neat packages; but in the end, God alone knows who are His and who will be. And God alone knows the parameters of salvation and faith. In the Western world we are so accustomed to demand “ideological boxes.” Everything must fit the pattern and conform to the criteria, and be processed and pigeonholed. Actually we understand so little of the realm of the Spirit and the workings of God. We do not even understand our human brains. What is an idea? What is a belief? What is commitment? What is an absolute? What is the minimal requirement for salvation? We really do not even know that. We can know that we are a child of God because we want to be one. But we cannot know for sure who else is a child of God. Did the seed planted in Agrippa’s heart ever come to fruition? We do not know. Has the seed planted in the heart of some friend, some relative, some associate been enough ultimately to produce faith? We cannot always know. We can plant the seed as Paul did, and trust the Lord of the harvest to do the rest. One can never know what the tiniest seed planted in the

most seemingly indifferent hearer will ultimately accomplish in the purposes of God. So we give the Word, as Paul did. It is not for us to push or press or judge. Paul summed it up to the Corinthians—I have planted, Apollos watered, but God gives the increase. For reason, God had Paul before Agrippa. It would bring forth the result He intended.

This man was able to be released . . .

Spoken by Agrippa, it was not an idle observation. Paul and Festus had given their opinions—Agrippa gave his judgment. Paul would have been released. But he had appealed to Caesar. God wanted Paul in Rome. Bond or free was immaterial. He must go to Rome, and he must go in God’s time and in God’s way. Could he have figured this out for himself—never! We have our methods of steps and conditions for finding the will of God. In the final analysis, we can never really figure it out ourselves. Our only hope and consolation is that God has the power to fulfill His purposes in the lives of those that want him to. How often He must circumvent the schemes and systems of those who have developed their humanistic ideologies and theologies, in order to accomplish what He Himself wants to accomplish.

God wanted Paul in Rome—to Rome he must go.

Acts 27:1-12

TRANSLATION

And as it was determined that we should sail into Italy, they delivered Paul and certain other prisoners to a centurion by the name of Julius of the Imperial Host. And having embarked on a ship of Adramyttium, which was about to sail to places in Asia, we set sail, there being with us Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica. We put in at Sidon; and Julius, making use of the opportunity, kindly permitted Paul to go to his friends and receive care. And having departed thence, we sailed to the leeward of Cyprus on account of the wind being contrary. And having sailed across the open sea by way of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we came down to Myra of Lycia. And there the centurion, having found a ship of Alexandria sailing to Italy, put us on board. And sailing slowly for a number of days, and with difficulty coming by Cnidus, the wind not allowing us to go further, we sailed to the leeward of Crete, alongside the cape of Salmone. Sailing with difficulty along its coast, we went to a place called Kali Limenes [Fair Havens], near to which was a city—Lasea.

And a good deal of time having already passed, and the voyage being risky on account of the fact that the fast [on the Day of Atonement] had already come, Paul urged them, saying, “Men, I perceive that with damage and much loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives, will be the voyage that we are about to take.” But the centurion was persuaded rather by the navigator and the captain than by the things being said by Paul. And the harbor being unsuitable to spend the winter in, the majority set their will to sail away thence, if by any means they might be able to attain unto Phoenix, a harbor of Crete (which faces northwest and southwest), to spend the winter there.

COMMENTARY

At Last—To Rome

It had been a long and trying siege. Too long had Paul languished in the citadel of fools. He had been the victim of false and diabolical religious leaders; the vacuous and malleable crowds; the

Roman military—commanders and centurions and dutiful soldiers; and the Roman government—pompous and petty sycophants groveling for a place in the empire. At last, under the orders of

Agrippa, he was remanded to the court of Caesar. Would the ordeal now be over? It seemed too good to be true. And indeed it was. The archenemy of Christ and of Paul would seek to squeeze the last ounce of endurance from the intrepid warrior of God. But we are getting ahead of the story. Luke the physician, the inspired author of Acts, will take over fifty verses to relate the details of this harrowing voyage. It would seem to be unnecessary to provide such an intricate travelogue in a book which covers three decades of Paul's life in the space of twenty chapters. Following our principle of "making much of that which God makes much of," we must pay attention to the details as they are presented to us. What is God's purpose here? What does He want us to learn?

Julius, the centurion. For the voyage, God had provided a centurion of the Imperial guard. This particular centurion would show Paul much favor during the trip and would later save his life.

Sidon—a visit with the believers. Handpicked by God as Paul's escort to Rome, Julius gave him unprecedented favor. Expressed in the text as an act of kindness, Julius allowed Paul to visit the body of believers that existed in Sidon. This was indeed an astounding act by one who represented the greatest empire on earth, an empire given to godlessness and committed to pursue relentlessly the followers of Christ. Sidon was a center of commerce and culture; and at the same time a symbol of paganism and idolatry. It was linked by Ezekiel to Tyre, whose king was a classic type of Satan himself (Ezekiel 28). There was here an assembly of believers, apparently known by Paul who visited them and "received from them some personal care." This is one of the fascinating details of this chapter. Hounded by Satan throughout his long ordeal, God now elects to use one of Satan's earthly jewels to provide the beleaguered servant with comfort and

care. Amazing episode!—a servant of Rome sends a servant of God to the city of Satan to be ministered to by the followers of Christ. It had to be Julius. No other centurion of the Roman Empire would have suited the purpose of God.

Matters navigational. The details of the ship's course may seem to be routine and unimportant. The truth of the matter is that the timing had to be precise, given the elements of nature and the movements of the ship, to accomplish certain purposes of God. In the experience of the author, many events, including frustrating delays and altered courses, beyond the control of the author, have been vital to the perfect timing necessary to accomplish some particular purpose that the Lord had in mind. These purposes have been not only beyond the control of the author, but not even foreseen by him. Thus, there is no possibility of taking credit for any phase of things whatsoever—sensitivity to the will of God; feelings or faithfulness—none of these have been involved in the overriding purposes of God for His servants. Obviously, the initial desire to do what the Lord wants and to follow His lead is essential to put us in a position in which God is able to work through us. But one's own particular capacities to find the will of God and do it are always subservient to the overriding desire of God to accomplish His will in a servant. Paul, himself, was often in the position of not knowing what it was that God had in mind. One of the outstanding lines in Paul's epistles was to the Corinthians—*"When we came to Macedonia, we had no rest in our flesh, but in everything we were afflicted—without were fightings; within were fears. Nevertheless God . . ."* (II Corinthians 7:5,6). The contrary winds; the open seas; the maddeningly slow pace along the leeward coasts of the islands; even the Alexandrian ship all had their place in God's purpose. At last they came to Kali Limenes on the coast of Crete.

Fair Havens—formula for disaster.

The name Kali Limenes means Fair Havens. Most of the villages on the Greek islands are simple. One does not expect western type hotels and resorts. The name, "Fair Havens," may suggest to the reader some kind of special place to spend the winter. But such was not the case. Voyagers to Rome were not used to conveniences of any kind—in fact, were accustomed to some pretty rugged realities. So Fair Havens must have been at best, a rather dismal place to consider spending the winter. So dismal it was that in spite of Paul's predictions of dire consequences, the people were generally and adamantly opposed to staying there. Paul's sagacious advice was summarily ignored. But this was also part of God's plan. He did not want them to stay there. Had they stayed there, they would not

have been shipwrecked. But why would that not have been advisable? Because it did not fit with God's plan. He wanted them shipwrecked on Matta. Does that seem bizarre? It was by human standards, but God was never swayed by human standards. The shipwreck would take place, Paul and the people would be spared and God would accomplish a particular purpose. The people left Kali Limenes for their own reasons, but God had them leave for His reasons. This is an extremely important principle in fulfilling God's purpose. Our reasons for doing a certain thing may be totally different than God's reasons, and, in fact, may be quite fleshly, but God accomplishes His purposes anyway.

Next will come the storm.

Acts 27:13-26

TRANSLATION

And when a south wind blew gently, supposing to have gained their purpose, they moved out and sailed as close to the coast of Crete as possible. But soon after, there blew against it [the coastline], a fierce wind called Euroclydon. And the ship having been driven, and not being able to head into the wind, we let it drive and were carried along. And running on the leeward of a certain island called Clauda, we were able, with much difficulty to secure the lifeboat, which having taken up, they were using aids to brace the ship. And fearing lest they should fall into the Syrtis [a treacherous tide], they lowered the sail, and so we were driven. And we being greatly tossed by the storm, the next day were throwing things overboard. And on the third day they let down the sail by hand. And neither the sun nor the stars having appeared for many days, and the storm pressing on us not a little, the rest of the people gave up all hope of our being saved.

And after they had gone a long time without food, Paul stood in the midst of them and said, "It was necessary, O men, for you to have given attention to me and not departed from Crete, suffering this damage and this loss. But now I urge you to be of good cheer; for not one life of you shall be lost, but rather of the ship. For an angel of the God whom I serve, stood by me this night, saying, 'Do not fear, Paul, you must stand before Caesar; and behold, God has given to you all the many who are with you.' Therefore be of good cheer, men, for I believe God that it shall be even as it was spoken to me. But we must be cast on a certain island."

COMMENTARY

Battered by the Storm—Still in the Hands of God

The ordeal continues. Satan is relentless in his badgering of the servant of God. The craft, of modest size as compared to the vessels that travel the Mediterranean today, was helpless in the angry elements. Even the sailors—inured to the erratic and merciless raging of the Mediterranean—had given up all hope of being saved.

So where was God? Had not His servant suffered enough? Delivered at last from incarceration, would he now be destroyed by the elements? That is a penetrating question. Not all of God's children are spared the catastrophes and cataclysms of this satanic realm. Up to a point there had been no guarantees. Later, Paul would be beheaded by the same world

power that now had guaranteed (?) to him safe passage to Rome. But all the might of Rome could not prevail against the might of Satan. Conversely, all the might of Satan cannot prevail against the might of God. The whole matter must be resolved in the inscrutable purposes of God.

And, indeed, it did serve the purpose of God to, Himself, guarantee Paul's safe passage to Rome and all of his travelling companions with him.

But when did Paul know this for sure? It had been indicated to him that he must go to Rome and stand before Caesar, but evidently it was necessary for an angel of God to verify this promise—which, indeed, he did in the dark of the night in the storm tossed vessel on the raging Mediterranean sea.

A crucial question—Do angels stand by us today? Do they speak to us? One often hears the statements—“The Lord was sure with me”; and “The Lord told me to do this or that.” How real is this? Was Paul in a special position of privilege? Can we have the same attention today? As far as the Lord's standing with us is concerned, if it were not for His presence, it is doubtful that Christians would survive on the earth. That is because Satan would destroy us if he could. Thus, while we are no match for him, he is no match for God. He can only do what God allows him to do. Sometimes, for His own purposes, as with Paul's storm at sea, He allows the contrary winds of the enemy to blow against us. But we are never out of His care, and Satan is never allowed to go beyond God's own will in the matter. What happens to non-Christians is quite another thing. One cannot guarantee to them that “everything will be all right.”

But for the Christian, the word of Paul to the Romans is quite clear—“*We know that to those that love God all things work together for good, for those who are the called according to His purpose*”

(Romans 8:28). This is a very broad statement. It may appear to be limited to a certain select few, who are especially “spiritual” or “devoted to God” or possessed of a divine calling. But it is far broader than one may suppose. In the first place, the word “love” here—means “caring”, and is true of all who care to come to Christ and care to stay with Him, whatever their degree of spirituality may be. The word does not refer to some special kind of fleshly feelings of affection for Him. If one cares to have Christ within, one loves Him in the *agape* sense. Similarly, the word “called” does not refer to some special divine mission, but rather to all who are members of the *ekklesia*—those who are the “called out members of the family of God.” One does not have to be very special to be included in the idea that for Christians, all things do work together for good, within the framework of God's purposes. In Hebrews 1 we are told that, “*The angels of God are sent forth to minister to those who are the heirs of salvation.*” All who are part of the family of God are subject to this angelic ministry.

As to whether or not angels actually speak to us, that is a different matter. Many people claim this, and there is no way to verify their claims. But, of course, that is the very problem. How does one really know? Countless claims of divine messages through the ages have led to disaster (as witness the Jim Jones tragedy of Guiana). Recently a young couple entered into a suicide pact, claiming to respond to a word from God. The tragedies are endless. After had a century of listening to such claims, the author is quite cautious about accepting them. But there are many ways that God has of indicating His will. If He does not, in these days, speak to us as He did to Paul of old, that does not mean that He does not, in a very positive way communicate His desires to us.

The more one listens to such claims, the more one recognizes that we humans know very little about what God wants.

The best way to insure that we have His will in our lives is simply to commit our way to Him honestly and sincerely, and assume that whatever He wants will be effected in us. Jesus said, "*Without Me, you can do nothing.*" The human flesh is completely inadequate to determine the will of God through its own mechanisms of reason or analysis. After half a century of following the Lord, the author still does not always know for sure what the Lord wants. Therefore one must simply pray that the Lord will "see to it that we have His will."

He has many ways of accomplishing in us His purpose, whether or not we are always smart enough to figure them out. Manuals on "how to find the will of God" must be taken with great caution. There are really two fundamental principles—the desire of a human to do God's will and the capacity of God to effect His will.

In the case of Paul, he had little choice. But in the pragmatic realities of it, God has many ways to see to it that His children do His will. Many believers, including the author, cannot claim to have actually heard the voice of God. But after all, our communion is Spirit to spirit and that is where the real work is being done. Whether or not the human mind enters into the process is secondary.

Does God function today as He did with Paul? Absolutely. Does He move in mighty ways to minister to His people? Absolutely. Do we always know what He is doing? Absolutely not. Do we always know what He is going to do or wants to do? Absolutely not. Does that affect His working in our lives? Absolutely not. Humans never have been any good at "outguessing" God, in spite of their claims to the "inside track."

Acts 27:27-38

TRANSLATION

And when it was about the fourteenth night, while we were being driven in the Adriatic, about midnight the sailors were thinking to themselves that we were drawing near to a certain area of land. And they took a sounding and found it to be twenty fathoms; and sailing a little further along, they sounded again and found it to be fifteen fathoms. And fearing lest we would run aground on a rocky coast, they cast four anchors from the stern and prayed for the day to come. And the sailors, seeking to escape from the ship, pretended as if they were about to lower an anchor from the stern. And Paul said to the centurion and to the soldier, "Except these remain in the ship, you will not be able to be saved." Then the soldiers cut the rope of the lifeboat and let it fall away.

And when daylight was about to come, Paul encouraged all of them to take food, saying, "It is the fourteenth day that you have been watching anxiously and going without food, you have taken nothing. Therefore I encourage you to take food, for this is for your salvation; for not one hair of your head shall be lost." And when he had said these things, he took bread and gave thanks to God before them all, and broke it and began to eat. And they were all encouraged, and they themselves took food. And there were about two-hundred and seventy-six people in the ship. And when they had filled themselves with food, they began to lighten the ship, casting the grain into the sea.

COMMENTARY

The Ordeal Continues

For weeks the ship was driven by the elements and yet was still under the care of God, "Who makes the clouds His chariot and rides upon the wings of the wind . . ." (Psalm 104:3). To the voyagers it certainly did not seem so. They were now in utter despair. And when the sailors thought that they might be nearing land, their hope turned to panic, as they feared to be dashed upon the rocky coast. In fact, so

great was their terror that they conspired to flee the beleaguered ship. But Paul, the lowly prisoner, was now in command and this time the soldiers heeded his advice, cuffing loose the lifeboat and keeping the sailors on the ship. When God is in charge, it matters not who is the agent, He will execute His will. Monarch or minion; wind or wave, all will ultimately be His servants.

Now in full command, Paul urges them all to eat. He takes bread and prays to God—His own God—in the midst of the generally pagan voyagers. Not only will God be in control, but He will also receive the glory. In the midst of the raging sea, when all hope seems gone, Paul addresses the God of heaven and earth and brings encouragement to the hearts of the fellow travelers. Miraculously the mood changes from panic to peace, and the voyagers eat heartily and are filled. Filled with proper nourishment, reasoning returns, and the inertia of terror is replaced by the activity of courage. The boat is lightened and the grain jettisoned into the sea. The details of this section are rich with the implications of divine oversight. Storms may come; the ship may be battered and driven; the heart may grow faint with fear; but in the hands of God, the soul is safe. Sea or ocean; waterway or lake; all is but the “bathtub” of God. The spirit that is possessed by God is

indestructible. Eternity is now. Even the “shuffling off of the mortal coil” is but the emerging into the realities of the spirit realm. Let Satan do his worst—“If God be for us, who can be against us?” The ultimate end of the believer is eternity with God. At the worst, we are ushered into His presence. And if we suffer in this life? *“My grace is sufficient for thee, for My strength is made perfect in weakness”* (II Corinthians 12:9). Many of God’s children have suffered the ravages of the earthly realm, but always the grace of God is sufficient. Remember, He will not give us grace to think about the possibilities of earth’s torments. He will not give us the grace to bear the torments of others. But when our turn comes to suffer the ills of earth, His grace will be sufficient. On the raging Mediterranean, in the battered ship, Paul found the grace of God to be adequate and became the channel of God’s cheer to His fellow travelers.

And next the shipwreck.

Acts 27:39-44

TRANSLATION

And when it was day, they were not familiar with the land; but they observed a certain bay having a shore, into which they decided, if possible, to beach the ship. And cutting away the anchors, they committed themselves unto the sea. At the same time, releasing the ropes of the rudders and hoisting the mainsail to the wind, they headed for the shore. And striking a reef they ran the ship aground. And the prow stuck fast and remained unmovable, but the stern was broken up by the force of the waves. It was the advice of the soldiers that they kill the prisoners, lest any swim away and escape. But the centurion, willing to save Paul, prevented them from their intention, and demanded those who were able to swim to jump overboard first and head for the land, and then the rest, some on boards, and some on parts of the ship. And thus they all came to be saved on the land.

COMMENTARY

Shipwrecked!

Once again we are struck with the details. At daybreak they saw the land which they had suspected, but it was totally unfamiliar to them. We know it today as the isle of Malta, as familiar to us all as Tahiti. By plane, it is, of course, but minutes away from Italy. However, in those days, time and distance being precious, ships would have had little occasion to go there in their direct course from Crete to Syracuse. At the time, however, the hapless voyagers had no idea whatsoever where they were. Observing a bay with a sandy shore, in contrast to the miles and miles of rocky coast, they decided to head for it, hoping to run the ship aground at the best available spot. Cutting the anchors loose and committing themselves unto the sea, they released the ropes tying fast the rudders, hoisted the mainsail, and headed for the cove. But unfortunately (or maybe fortunately) they were

unaware of the reef between themselves and the shore. The prow of the ship buried itself in the reef and the stern was broken up by the waves. They would all get wet, but they were close enough to the land to make it. As Paul had promised, according to the word of the angel, not a hair of their heads was lost.

Every detail of the account is important. The effort of the sailors to escape surreptitiously—all hands were sorely needed to bring the ship into the bay. The reef, which held the ship fast while the people escaped; the selection of the centurion (as indicated earlier) was vital to Paul's salvation, since the soldiers wanted to destroy all the prisoners; every detail was vital to the purpose of God in this dramatic episode.

But what are the lessons to us. This is certainly not a manual for shipwrecked

sailors. Nor do we have a challenge to perseverance. The grace of God certainly sustained Paul, but there was nothing much he could do. The ship was in the grip of a storm. But did not Paul exhibit great faith? Yes, he certainly exhibited faith, but whose faith was it? It was not a faith born of flesh, as Paul himself would agree—*“In my flesh dwells no good thing.”*

What we do have here is a demonstration of the power of God in the face of the enemy, nor should we say that Paul was victorious. The victory was not Paul’s—it was God’s. In another situation of adversity, Paul said, *“Thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ”* (II Corinthians 2:14). Christians may talk about being victorious, but in reality it is the victory of Christ through us. Paul did not consider himself to be victorious—it was rather the grace of God in the midst of his own weakness. In the case of the disciples on the Sea of Galilee, they were fearful and faithless, but God stilled the storm anyway. Jesus challenged their faith, not because they should have had more faith, but rather that, apart from the presence of the Spirit within them, they could not have more faith.

In the Gospels, Jesus often challenged the faith of the people that he helped, but he helped them anyway. He himself said that the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. The message of Jesus throughout the Gospels is that the weakness and inadequacy of the human flesh was why He had come. Throughout thousands of years of human history, there was never any evidence that mankind could be saved apart from a direct intervention by God. The human soul has always been bankrupt. So everywhere Jesus went, He was continuously playing out the inadequacy of the flesh, whether in the Sermon on the Mount, where human morality was inadequate; or in the miracles, where human faith was unreliable; or in his clashes with the

Pharisees, where human religion was totally bankrupt.

In the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, a new force was unleashed within the heart of man, which would give him a power that transcended the processes of the flesh in all of its efforts to attain a place above the animals. Paul had expressed his own weakness in the flesh on a number of occasions. On one of these occasions—a crisis in Troas—he admitted his weakness—*“Our flesh had no rest, but in everything we were being afflicted—without were fightings, within were fears . . .”* (II Corinthians 7:5). So he would be the first to admit that his strength, in the midst of the storm on the Mediterranean, was a victory of the grace of God within Him. Helpless in the grip of the storm, and a prisoner of his Roman keepers, he prevailed through the power of Christ within him. It was not his to battle Satan and stop the storm, but to stay in the ship and see the workings of God. As long as Christ was in the ship, it would not sink. The faith and grace in this situation was not human confidence and courage, but rather the faith and grace of God within the spirit of Paul. To the Galatians, Paul says, *“The life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God . . .”* (2:20). It was not faith in God, but the very faith of God resident within our spirits by the presence of Christ.

God had His own purposes for allowing Paul to be shipwrecked on the island of Malta. We may not know exactly why, because God has ways that are beyond our ways, and thoughts that are beyond our thoughts. In that respect, it is well for us in the hour of adversity not to try to outguess God. We may not understand this side of glory. Nor may Christ even be able to explain it to us at this point, given the limitations of the human mind. We can trust Christ to give us both peace in the matter and the grace to bear it. We cannot assume that He will give us the explanation. In the case of Paul, the

reasons for the shipwreck may not have been all that obvious, but one thing is worth considering. The island upon which they were shipwrecked, known at that time as Melita, but known to us as Malta, was not in the normal course of shipping. Paul had an important ministry there, which reached people that might not have otherwise been reached.

The assumptions we have made in regard to this section are not mere speculations, but are based upon general principles throughout the New Testament, and some very specific passages in Paul's letters to the believers. The applications are many in terms of our own individual circumstances, but are reliable guideposts in the time of crisis. The details in this chapter are many and may seem tedious, but they are all important,

as we have shown. Things in our lives that may seem unnecessary distresses, such as disappointments and frustrations and aggravating incidents, may be as much a part of God's ultimate purpose as the more significant crises.

Perhaps the most all-inclusive statement regarding the issues of this chapter may be this—**When Christ is in the ship, it will go where He wants it to go, under conditions that He directs, and it will not sink as long as He is aboard.**

But how do we know that He is in the ship with us? Because we ask Him to be, and we want Him to be. But how do we know He hasn't left the ship? Because He says, "*I will never leave you nor forsake you*" (Hebrews 13:5).

Acts 28:1-10

TRANSLATION

And when they had been saved, they knew then that the island was called Melita [Malta]. And the natives offered not the usual kindness to us, for they kindled the fire and welcomed us all to it, on account of the rain which had set in and the cold. And Paul gathered up a good deal of wood, and when he laid it on the fire, a snake came out because of the heat, and fastened itself on his hand. And as the natives saw the reptile clinging from his hand, they were saying to one another, "This man is certainly a murderer, who, having been saved from the sea, justice did not permit to live." He then shook the reptile into the fire and suffered no harm. But they [the natives] expected him to be about to swell up or to fall dead suddenly. And while they waited a long time and beheld, nothing amiss happened to him, they changed their minds, saying that he was a god. Now in the area around that place there were lands which belonged to the chief of the island by the name of Publius, who welcomed us and entertained us hospitably for three days. And the father of Publius was lying in bed, having been seized with a fever and dysentery, to whom Paul came and prayed, and laid hands upon him and healed him. But this having occurred, the rest of the people on the island, having sicknesses were coming and were being healed. And they honored us with many honors; and while we were setting sail, they provided for us things for our necessities.

COMMENTARY

Salvation Comes to Malta

The minute details of Paul's voyage to Rome, so carefully recorded and yet so apparently inconsequential, now come to their fruition. The narrative does not take brief note of the voyage, but reports every change of course and every coastline. Indeed, every lash of the storm and every crash of the waves had its ultimate fulfillment in bringing the vessel to Malta, to break up on its shores. Any variation in these details and the vessel would have missed the small cove of the small island.

So why Malta? As indicated in the last chapter, Malta was not on the main sealane to Rome. It was essential in the mind of God that Paul should bring the gospel to this isolated group of natives. As Jesus "must needs go through Samaria", so Paul must needs be cast upon the island of Malta.

The natives exhibited extraordinary kindness to the hapless voyagers. "Native" is a more appropriate translation than "barbarian", as some

texts have it. “Barbarian” is a direct transliteration from the Greek *barbaros*. The word is what we call in English literature, an “onomatopoeia”, which means a word that sounds like its pronunciation—“crash”, for example. The Greeks felt that everyone who did not use the Greek language was merely uttering guttural sounds—“bar-bar-bar.” Hence, barbarians were not savages per se, but only non-Greek speaking people.

They had built a fire and invited the voyagers to warm themselves. An intimate insight into Paul’s character is given us in an incident connected with the fire. With unassuming industry and practicality, Paul set about to gather wood for the fire. Paul was no “ivory-towered theologian.” Nor was he in any way impressed with his own self-importance, although he was indeed the major channel through whom God had elected to present the glorious truth of His ultimate intention to dwell within the spirits of His people.

Paul had indeed himself been the pivotal point of the transition from the Old Covenant process of the law—leading to the necessity of the redeemer—to the actual in-working of the Holy Spirit, bringing mankind to his ultimate destiny under God. As Moses was the turning point in the redemptive history of Israel, so Paul was the turning point in the redemptive process of all mankind. And he was gathering sticks for the fire. It was reminiscent of Jesus, recently risen from the dead, making breakfast on the beach for His disciples.

Certainly such pursuits seem always crass and unworthy of grand spiritual aspirations, but there is nothing like involvement in the frustrating processes of human life to keep things in perspective—to keep one from becoming so heavenly-minded as to be no earthly good. There are not a few religious groups today, who despise the earthly, and thus become disoriented and

incapable of functioning on the earthly plane. Jesus was the true man-God person, who fulfilled His responsibilities as a human with equal vigor as with His responsibilities as the Son of God. And thus, He becomes for all of us an example of the capacity of God to integrate the common cosmos, of which we are all a part, with the eternity of His own Spirit realm. If we are the creatures of God, which we are, it should be perfectly natural to blend both aspects of life.

In the course of his gathering wood, Paul was bitten by a venomous snake—so deadly that the natives expected him to fall dead immediately. They had assumed that he must be a murderer, whom justice would not permit to escape. Their simple assumptions about justice, superstitious as they were, nevertheless reflected the remnants of the image of God in man, which is the basis of all human morality in the world today. Apparently a vestige of God yet remains within the heart of man, so that the world has maintained itself in some sort of functional and rational stability. This “ethos” or “morality” is what enables human beings to live together on the earth with any degree of civility at all. When Paul did not fall dead, the natives changed their minds and began to regard him as a divine being.

It is very important at this point to consider the issue of “snake-handling” or the protection of believers from all manner of earthly ills, which falls into a similar category. There is a disputed passage in Mark 16 which seems on the surface to indicate that believers will be immune from any kind of harm on the earth. The text indicates that they will be able to consume poison and be bitten by snakes, for example, and feel no harm. At the fanatical level are the “snake handlers” who judge their spirituality and personal power by picking up rattlesnakes and suffering no ill effects.

Of course, there are some major problems in this. In the first place, the

entire passage is questionable, not even occurring in many of the better manuscripts. However, if it does indeed have a place in the text, the obvious implication of the text is that if one suffers ill effects in the line of duty, so to speak, they will have their protection. There is never any indication that taking such risks is a test of spirituality. But first, one may say that this attitude represents only a very small cultic group of religious fanatics. That is certainly true at the extreme level, but, unfortunately, there is a very large segment of Christendom that take risks of similar folly in the name of demonstrating the power of God (or perhaps their power with God). That is, of course, the very kind of presumption that Jesus challenged in Satan's familiar testing of Christ. When he wanted Jesus to cast Himself off the pinnacle of the temple to prove that He was from God, Jesus indicated that it was not appropriate for man to put God to the test. And yet, many Christians do that every day. As for example, "Oh, God, if you love me, heal me." Nor is it even sound to put humans to the test—"If you have enough faith, God will heal you." But whence comes faith after all? It is not of ourselves, as the Scripture clearly teaches.

Human faith is nothing more than transient feelings of confidence. The faith God gives is of the Spirit and is not dependent on human feelings of one kind or another. When God wants to exhibit His power or accomplish His purpose, He gives the inner faith for it. It is certainly not a matter of guilt—"If only I had more faith." If God wanted something to be accomplished through you, He would give you the faith for it. In the famous "mountain passage", since only God can

give faith, He certainly does not give it for whimsical "mountain moving." He gives faith when it serves His purpose—not ours. But all human efforts to "get God to do something" are of the flesh at least, or possibly, as in the case of "snake-handling", could be of Satan, who might have power over a serpent.

In Paul's case, it was essential that God help him, and so He did. God could have kept the snake from biting Paul in the first place. However, the miracle was itself an instrument for bringing salvation to Malta. It is most important to understand that in the early days of Christianity, when there was no resource of authority such as the New Testament, it was necessary for God to demonstrate His power through earthly instruments and earthly miracles. It would be safe to say that God's dealings with His own people today are not on the basis of demonstrations of power, but on the basis of His own divine purposes in a given life. For some, His purpose is to work a "miracle" of one kind or another; for a great many, His purpose is to bring about their growth and His glory through affliction. And we have another miracle in the healing of Publius' father, adding to the further opening of the doors to the people of the island.

Many of the islanders then came to Paul with a variety of afflictions, and he healed them. Once again, this universal healing had nothing to do with God's individual purposes, but rather with the need of confirming to them the authenticity of the message of God. That Paul and his message were received by the natives was demonstrated in their honoring of him and in their generosity toward the voyagers in supplying provisions for the continued journey.

Acts 28:11-22

TRANSLATION

After three months we sailed on a ship which had wintered on the island—a ship of Alexandria bearing the figurehead of Dioscuri. And having put in at Syracuse, we remained three days; whence having sailed around [the coast of Sicily], we arrived at Rhegium. And after one day, a south wind coming up, we came the second day unto Puteoli, where, finding brethren, we were encouraged by them to remain seven days; and thus we came unto Rome. And there, the brethren, having heard the things concerning us, came to meet us at the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns, whom, when Paul had beheld, he gave thanks to God and took courage. And when we had entered Rome, Paul was permitted to remain by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him. And after three days it occurred that those who were the chief of the Jews summoned him. And he came together with them and was saying to them, “Men, brethren, I, having done nothing contrary to the people or to the customs of our ancestors, was delivered over as a prisoner of those of Jerusalem, into the hands of the Romans, who, having examined me, intended to release me, because there was no cause of death in me. But the Jews, opposing [the ruling], it was necessary for me to appeal to Caesar, not as though my people had any accusation. For this reason therefore I have urged you to see me and to speak with me, because for the sake of the hope of Israel I am bound with these chains.” And they said to him, “We have neither received letters concerning you from the Jews, nor have any of the brethren come here to declare or to speak any evil concerning you. But we think it best to hear from you the things which you think; for concerning this heresy it is known to us that it is spoken against everywhere.”

COMMENTARY

Rome at Last—The Critical Encounter

The fearsome ordeal has ended; God’s objective has been gained; the people of Malta have now the gospel of God; and the voyage continues to Rome without incident. They sailed first to Syracuse, a Greek colony on the East coast of Sicily and then to Rhegium, another Greek colony on the tip of the Italian peninsula.

Before reaching Rome, the vessel put in at Puteoli, where Paul encountered a group of Christians, who encouraged him to stay awhile. The use of the word “encouraged” here is very instructive. It is often translated “exhort,” which is a harsh usage of the word. Of course, given the tendency of many Christians to

“battle” one another, it is to them the preferred translation. Actually, it is the same word as the one used for the Holy Spirit—*Paraclete*—which casts Him in the role of “Comforter.” The word is better translated by “encourage” than by “exhort.” Nevertheless, Paul was encouraged to stay and apparently, allowed to do so.

And so to Rome. Just south of Rome at a town called the Forum of Appius, Paul was met by a group of Christian brothers at a place called the Three Taverns. Despite the gratifying events on the isle of Malta, Paul was in need of encouragement and was greatly cheered by the sight of them. It was as though he were coming to the finish line of a grueling race. The tape is in sight; a last ounce of energy is required to finish; the crowd brings him in with their cheers.

In Rome, Paul was permitted to stay in his own private quarters with a personal guard. Three days later he was summoned before the Jewish leaders of

Rome. Their attitude toward him was vastly different than their brethren in Jerusalem. The truth of the matter is that they had not even heard from Jerusalem, either by letter or by visit. As far as they were concerned, they had no case against Paul. Had Paul not appealed to Rome, the sniveling cowards of Jerusalem might have gotten away with their nefarious schemes with naught but an offhanded effort in the despicable and insignificant (in the eyes of the world) province of Judea.

Apparently, without hostility or rancor, the Jewish brethren of Rome wanted to hear Paul’s views on a rather notorious heresy which had come to their attention, and concerning which there had been much controversy. It is obvious why Satan would have done everything is his power to destroy Paul and keep him from Rome. It is equally evident that God had a crucial assignment for Paul in Rome, and nothing would prevent his executing of it.

Acts 28:23-31

TRANSLATION

And having set a day for him, many came to him in his own lodging while he was expounding and declaring resolutely the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus from the Law of Moses and the Prophets, from morning until evening. And some were being persuaded by the things he was saying, and some were not believing. And while they were disagreeing with one another, Paul sent them away, saying one word—“Well has the Holy Spirit spoken through Isaiah the prophet to your fathers, saying, ‘Hearing you shall hear, and not understand; and seeing you shall see, and not perceive. For the heart of this people has become dull, and with their ears they hear with difficulty, and their eyes have become closed; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and they turn, and I heal them.’ Be it therefore known to you, that this salvation has been sent by God to the Gentiles, and they shall hear.”

And he remained two whole years in his own hired quarters, and received all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God, and teaching the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, publicly and unhindered.

COMMENTARY

Mission Accomplished—The Message to Rome

It was an unprecedented opportunity. A great many—possibly all, at one time or another—of the Jewish community, came before Paul to hear the grand proclamation of the new covenant of deliverance. The legal matter had evidently been resolved as far as Rome was concerned, and there was obviously no further pursuit of the matter on the part of the Jewish leadership. They were, in fact, remarkably open to hear the words of Paul regarding this notorious heresy. Apparently it did not seem significant enough to the Jews in Rome—far removed from the central controversy—to make an issue of it. So

Paul was able, boldly and thoroughly, to present the truth which represented the culmination, in Jesus Christ, of God’s redemptive purpose for His people.

Apparently, those to whom Paul was speaking were exclusively or predominantly Jews. As usual, some were persuaded by his words and some were not. It is always distressing to the servant of God to see people turn away unmoved by the message. And it is tempting to wonder where one has failed them. This confirms the fact that one is well familiar with, that large numbers were unaffected, not only by Paul and

the apostles, but by Jesus Himself. The presumption is, of course, that we should ever have the power to persuade anyone. Jesus said, *“Without Me you can do nothing.”* In this case, Paul seems quite aware of the problem. As he engaged them in endless debate, He reminded himself, as well as them, of the poignant prophecy of Isaiah to their forefathers—their hearts and eyes and ears had become impenetrable, and God had turned away from them. In fact, in response to his warnings to them, God had executed upon them a judicial hardness of heart, *“Lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and I should turn and heal them.”*

And herein lies one of the inscrutable mysteries of the purposes of God, and one of the stumbling blocks to the unbeliever—how can God even turn away from anyone, much less engage in the hardening of their hearts? Perhaps it is like the parent of a wayward offspring. A parent extends grace upon grace upon grace, and kindness upon kindness upon kindness, only to have every effort despised and every extension of help greedily exploited. Finally, the parent realizes that their help is having a negative effect. Not only is their effort not helping that one, but it is, in many respects, hindering the maturing of the young person. Finally, in desperation and with torn heart, the parents must make a decision to so distance themselves from the offspring, that they will no longer be able to be tempted by the appeals for help.

So with God and His people, Israel. His great heart of grace could not bear to

resist their cries for help, plaintive and appealing, and yet He knows that His persistent efforts to help them had only made them worse. In the order of things in His universe, He cannot allow the Israelites—His own children—to make a mockery of His grace. He must cut them off. And yet, He did allow a window. Whatever was meant by the judicial act of hardening, it did not exclude any individual who desired to follow God and would belong to that “faithful remnant” spoken of by the prophets and by Jesus and by the apostles.

Nor were the words of Jesus carelessly given—**“Whosoever will, let him come unto Me.”** Had there not been a genuine opportunity of the expression of free will, the words of Jesus would have been a hollow mockery. And indeed, many thousands of Jews in Jerusalem did respond to that initial proclamation from Pentecost and turned to the Messiah. So also, in the ministry of Paul and the apostles across Asia and across the Mediterranean to the Western world. Whatever the debate about the “judicial hardening” of Israel, the reality remains that the invitation was genuine and unrestricted, and Jewish Christians across the world today are the testimony of that irrefutable expression of the grace of God.

And Paul remained two years in his own private quarters, apparently able to proclaim, without restriction or interference, the entire truth of God’s redemptive purpose on the earth—both with the Jew and the Gentile.