

George Philip Bible Readings

Acts

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Introduction

The writer of Acts is Luke, the beloved physician and companion of Paul on many of his travels (Col. 4:14). The former book referred to is Luke's Gospel (Luke 1:1-4) in which he set out to write a full and accurate account of the life and ministry of Jesus. In Acts 1:1 he refers to the former account as recording the things Jesus *began* to do and to teach up to the point of his ascension to heaven. He thus anchors the whole story in history. Luke may have envisaged a three-volume work, the Gospel, Acts and a further church-history section, each filling the standard papyrus roll of some thirty-five feet. Following on from the Gospel, Acts tells of the work continuing through the disciples by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Epistles in due time expounded the theological basis on which the work was and still is based. Right from the start Luke makes it plain that the life of the church and its message are grounded in what had been accomplished in the past in the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. This was how Luke ended his first volume of the story (Luke 24:44-53). The cross and resurrection are central. The promise of power by the Holy Spirit had been given.

The last sight that the disciples had of their Master was of the ascended Christ with his arms raised in blessing. That is how we believers live from day to day, under the blessing of the risen, ascended Christ. Luke's objective is to state clearly the facts of salvation history and in 1:3 he refers to the 'infallible proofs' (AV), the 'convincing proofs' (NIV), of the resurrection, just as Paul later recorded them in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8. There is nothing secret or hole-in-the-corner about the facts of the Christian message (26:22-26). It is history and the attempts to explain it away are simply intellectual and moral escapism. It either happened as it is recorded and was witnessed to or it is a total hoax which makes all Christian profession and activity a charade and a folly (1 Cor. 15:12-20). We must be clear that the ongoing work of Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit, did not stop at the end of Acts. That means the Acts of the Apostles is an unfinished story and must be considered as *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive*: telling how things happened at the start but not laying down the essential pattern of the life and work of individuals and the church for all time to come. For the doctrine and practice of the church we must go to the Epistles.

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1:1-3

The disciples had to grasp the fact of the resurrection. For forty days Jesus appeared to them in a variety of places and, having persuaded them that it really was himself (Luke 24:39), he disappeared again, only to come back at a later time. On one occasion Jesus appeared to a great company of believers (1 Cor. 15:3-8). The disciples had to be sure that Christ, alive for evermore, was with them in grace and power, whether or not they could see him. He had promised to be always with them (John 14:18; Matt. 28:20) and they had to live in the truth and confidence of that promise. So must we! It is not *feeling* that he is there that is important, it is the *fact* that counts. He is with us. Jesus did not ascend to the Father immediately after his resurrection because he had still a ministry to carry out for his disciples, which they could only grasp in the light of the resurrection. He spoke to them about the kingdom of God which had come near in his life, death and resurrection and in the proclamation of these facts by the men commissioned to do so. Of course, as Luke will make plain, the kingdom had not yet finally come. Its full glory still has not been realized. That will not be until Christ comes again. Then and only then will every knee bow in heaven, earth and hell (Phil. 2:9-11). But there is no doubt about the final issue, nor about the intervening years and processes whereby that kingdom comes. The victory had already been won. As we grasp this fact we will be able to go on in faith, and to cope with all the apparent contradictions of Christian experience. We do not struggle towards victory. We stand in the victory of Christ given to us.

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1:4-5

The risen Jesus was emphasizing truths he had already taught his disciples. No matter how excited or willing they were, they could of themselves do absolutely nothing. This teaching about the gift of the

Spirit and his indwelling power was not something new, as John 14:16-17,25-26; 15:26; 16:7-8,12-15 make plain. Of course, the Spirit of God had been mightily in the world before this, as is seen in the creation story (Gen. 1:1-2) and indeed right through the Old Testament, for example in Judges 6:34; 1 Samuel 16:13; Isaiah 61:1. It was by the eternal Spirit that Christ carried out the work of atonement (Heb. 9:14). Now Jesus spoke of a new era being ushered in when, according to the promise in Joel 2:28ff, there would be a widespread outpouring of the Spirit of God upon the whole world. Jesus was kindling in the disciples' hearts a spirit of expectation so that they would look for evidence of the working of God amongst them and through them. Jesus' words about waiting for the Spirit (v. 4) and the later verse (v. 8) about receiving the power of the Spirit must not be built into a set pattern for Christian experience as if the baptism and the filling of the Spirit were things to be waited for in exactly the same way as here. We are dealing with the story of the outcome of the death and resurrection of Christ which took place once-for-all at a specific point in history. Everything that had gone before in terms of God's promises was sealed by these saving events, and all that was to come in terms of salvation and life would stem from them. But only when Christ's work was completed by his ascending to the Father could the indwelling Spirit be given.

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1:6-8

The disciples were confused because their thinking was far too centred on themselves, and on this world. Their idea of success was far too statistical. To be leaders in a recognizable 'kingdom' always appeals to the human heart (Luke 22:24-27; Mark 10:35-40). That is why some prefer to be 'big' in a small group rather than 'ordinary' in a congregation. Jesus' answer in verse 6 was both comforting and challenging. He told them there were things it was best they should not know. Some matters are outside our remit and we must not be distracted by them from the work we are supposed to be doing. Our business is work. Too many are just theorizers, *thinking* about the work of the kingdom but never really rolling up their sleeves (humanly and spiritually) and getting down to the work of serving others. The power of the Holy Spirit is given for service, beginning right where we are at home in our immediate area (Jerusalem). Then we go to different and despised areas (Samaria), which can be neglected by evangelists. Then, at the call of God, we go even to the ends of the earth. Whenever the church or the individual believer loses essential missionary (outgoing) interest there has been a departure from Christ's basic commission. Witness and service are not options that the Christian may or may not take up. They are commanded by him who said, 'Go and make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always' (Matt. 28:19-20). He does not promise his presence and blessing to those who sit still in disobedience.

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1:8

Some refer to our present time as 'The Age of the Spirit', emphasizing the various manifestations of the work of the Holy Spirit. But ever since creation it has been the age of the Spirit. The Spirit must never be thought of as separate from or independent of the Father and the Son, nor must the activity of the Spirit be separated from the work of Christ on the cross. The coming of the Spirit, sent by the Father through the Son (John 15:26), is to apply to the hearts of believers what Christ has done for them. It is by the Spirit we are born again and baptized into Christ (John 3:5; 1 Cor. 12:12-13). This is what it means to be a Christian. If we have believed unto salvation then we have the Holy Spirit. If we do not have the Spirit we do not belong to Christ. If we are Christ's we have the Spirit (Rom. 8:9-11). This is basic doctrine. The Spirit is not an independent agent and his work is to witness to Christ and to make Christ the centre of everything. The Spirit does not draw attention to himself but to the Son. In like manner the power of the Holy Spirit is not given for personal pleasure and enjoyment, as if he were a 'bonus' or a 'badge' signifying a first-class Christian. The Spirit is given in terms of power to those who are weak and helpless in themselves so that they may serve. Part of this service is witness, whereby our tongues are loosened and enlivened so that with winsome grace we can speak of Jesus right where we are among those who know

us best. Many who speak and claim much about the Holy Spirit seem to focus on 'organized' occasions. But it is those who prove themselves 'at home' who are ready for service in other places.

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1:9-11

The preaching of the gospel is not complete without the affirmation of the personal return in glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. This same Jesus who walked the earth in the glory of his perfect manhood, true Son of God and Son of Man, will return from heaven. These verses affirm the reality of the unseen world and all we mean by heaven because that is where Jesus now is. The man who was raised physically from the dead with a glorified yet totally recognizable body has entered heaven and appears in the presence of God on our behalf (Heb. 9:24). Jesus did not suddenly disappear, as he had done during the forty days. However difficult we find it to think of this 'departure' in physical, materialistic terms we must accept the testimony of the witnesses and grasp the symbolism of what they were given to see. That he was 'taken up' signified to the disciples that there was another world of existence every bit as real as their own (more real in fact). He was received into a shining cloud reminiscent of the Shekinah glory that hovered over the tabernacle in the Old Testament (Exod. 40:34-35). This spoke of his being received into the presence of God himself. Three of the disciples had seen a hint of this on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:5). Jesus ascended into heaven and sits now at the right hand of God the Father Almighty (Heb. 1:3). He is unseen but no less real. We can never tell how near or far away he is. If a day and a thousand years are similar (2 Peter 3:8), then an inch and a thousand miles are similar. He is never far away. That is why his coming again can be in a moment (Matt. 24:30, 42-44; 1 Thess. 4:16). He is nearer than we think.

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1:9-11

We find it hard to grasp the realities of the unseen world. That is why we are quick to dwell on the difficulties of our situations, thinking them impossible as, for example, Zechariah, Sarah, and Elisha's servant did (Luke 1:18-20; Gen. 18:11-15; 2 Kings 6:15-17). But the doctrine of the ascension assures us that since Christ is at God's right hand (Heb. 1:3; 10:12), his work is complete. There are therefore no unforeseen difficulties (Eph. 1:11). In apostolic preaching, Christ's death, resurrection and ascension are spoken of as one continuous movement of triumph and exaltation. The apostles did not think of a spell of even forty days when Jesus was not exalted. Where was he in the intervals between his resurrection appearances? He was not in some intermediate, earthbound limbo. When he visited his disciples he came from the exalted and eternal world of glory to which he rightly belonged (John 17:5). This was the world to which the disciples now belonged in Christ, and for which they were destined (1 Peter 1:3-5). From this world of heaven, so near and so real, they were to look for the appearance of Christ at the consummation of history (Phil. 3:20,21; Titus 2:11-13). This was to be their confidence, expectation and joy. When we really believe this there will be a new confidence in all our Christian witness. But we shall still be as totally human as the disciples were. The sight of Jesus ascending into heaven was so marvellous that they stood, possibly with mouths wide open, gazing upwards and had to be prodded into action by the angels.

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1:12-14

After the event on the Mount of Olives the disciples, still bewildered but having a sense of something momentous about to happen, did as they were told and returned to Jerusalem. Whatever was to happen next involved them. This is what they had been prepared for during their three years with Jesus. The apparent success of the powers of evil at the cross was about to be exposed. There was a stirring of expectation. But that is the very time when there is a temptation to run on ahead of God, to be presumptuous and overconfident. By the constraint of the Spirit of God they made their way to the upper room and along with the others constituted a prayer meeting. Prayer is the way to cope with uncertainty and crisis. This is how to be ready for God. There were still ten days of waiting time before the mighty events of Pentecost. The coming days were going to call for great spiritual balance, integrity and capacity, and some individuals, notably Peter, were going to have to carry a mighty spiritual load. The next passage makes it clear they were by no means free from Satan's temptation to unwise action. The city was full of powerful men who hated Jesus and his cause. The disciples could scarcely assess the immediate situation,

let alone the long-term implications of what God was doing. Everything called them to prayer. The mark of the early church was the priority given to prayer and preaching (Acts 2:42; 6:4). It was when the church was at prayer that missionaries were called and sent (Acts 13:1-3). It was when the crisis of persecution came that the church gave itself to prayer (Acts 12:1-5). Lord, teach us to pray.

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1:15-26

It is thrilling to see such a large company of people gathered together for prayer, with such a sense of being caught up into the will and working of God. What a contrast to the picture immediately after the cross. Then the disciples were gathered in fear, unbelief and disappointment, and felt demoralized (John 20:19). On the other hand more than five hundred saw the risen Christ at one time (1 Cor. 15:6). Perhaps many more heard of the events of the resurrection appearances and yet only one hundred and twenty were gathered for prayer. Some were probably absent by necessity, some by choice. Peter, never very good at being patient, took the lead. All the twelve, apart from Judas, were there. Even doubting Thomas was back in his rightful place. All of them had failed and all were restored. There was a spirit of harmony and fellowship (v. 14) and when Peter spoke there seems to have been a willingness to be led. Peter was a natural leader and, as they waited and prayed, with nothing happening, he decided something should be done. The same kind of impulsive action involving others is recorded in John 21:1-3ff, but Peter seems to have forgotten this. We do not doubt his sincerity nor the sincerity of the rest of the company but we may rightly question whether this whole scheme should ever have been carried out. Matthias is never mentioned by name again. The narrative could go on unbroken from 1:14 to 2:1. We can see that these men and women, who were God's servants, were not perfect. Even a praying fellowship is not infallible. There is an enemy who causes confusion, and we may not notice at the time (Matt. 13:24-30).

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1:15-26

There is no record of Jesus having told the disciples to make up the number to twelve, a number traditionally honoured as the number of the tribes of Israel. It seemed good to Peter to keep to the pattern of the past. That can be a good thing, but here it involved people taking on the business of appointing apostles. That is the sole prerogative of the Lord of the church. The qualifications spoken of in verses 21-22 are right and proper, but there was a man, not yet converted, who was destined to take his place as 'the least of the apostles' and his name was Paul (1 Cor. 15:9). At this stage Peter knew little about Saul of Tarsus, save that he was a potential hazard to the cause of Christ. On the basis of Old Testament procedure they went about the mechanics of guidance in a reverent and orderly way, appealing to Scripture, considering the personal experience of the candidates put forward, praying about it and trusting that the Lord would overrule in the spirit of Proverbs 16:33. But were they just perpetuating a way of spiritual thinking and practice that belonged to the honoured past but was no longer required? Just days before Pentecost, does it not seem that it would have been best to wait for the coming of the Spirit, even though they may not have known quite what that meant? Two lessons remain. A sense of being guided may be wrong, even when there is an appeal to Scripture, when it is made a matter of prayer, and believed to be by the prompting of the Spirit. The second lesson is that this 'mistake' does not seem to have hindered in any way the progress of the work. What a comfort!

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2:1-4

This is the factual account of what happened to a certain group of people at a certain time. The whole incident was manifestly the work of God, not engineered by men. The timing was in God's control, since he alone could give the Spirit. To understand the situation and the atmosphere remember that all those in Jerusalem at that time would have been involved in the celebration of the Feast of the Passover. The pattern of feasts from Old Testament times led on to the First fruits and then, after fifty days, the Harvest. The disciples now would have been aware that in the crucifixion there was the death of the true Passover Lamb; in the resurrection the First fruits; and in Pentecost the beginning of the harvest of salvation. By the Spirit of God the minds of all those taught in the Scriptures would be aware of God and his activity at such a time. If the disciples were still in the upstairs room then the miraculous phenomena were seen and

heard only by the faithful. There was something *like* a gale of wind, startling rather than soothing, which would have made some think at once of the Spirit of God (Ezek. 37:1-14; cf. John 3:8). Then there appeared what *seemed* to be tongues of fire, not uncontrolled nor scorching, but resting on each one of them (men and women, old and young) in token of the fact that no one was excluded. Fire that did not destroy would remind Jewish people of the burning bush (Exod. 3:2-6) and would symbolize the presence of God in respect of his mighty work about to be done for the salvation of the people. To be made aware of God was the necessary prelude to the amazing things about to happen.

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2:1-4

The disciples were all filled with the Holy Spirit as Jesus had promised and as John the Baptist had prophesied (Luke 3:16). This was what Jesus referred to as baptism (1:4-5) and we must recognize that what is recorded here is something unique and unrepeatable. The Spirit was given, and he, being a person not merely an influence, in his indivisible fulness indwelt every believer. This is the initial baptism of the Spirit whereby we are regenerate, born again, raised from the deadness of sin to newness of life and incorporated into the body of Christ, which is his church (1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 1:22-23). This is the sovereign work of God which can be carried out by the Spirit as a gentle breath or a fierce gale. The one thing we must not do is to insist that every believer should have exactly the same experience. As the continuing story of Acts makes plain, we are foolish indeed if we look for tongues of fire and mighty winds to validate every conversion. In like manner we must not insist that 'speaking in tongues' (and there are many interpretations of what that really means) is a necessary accompaniment of the baptism or filling of the Holy Spirit. We are told what happened on the Day of Pentecost. They all spoke in other tongues, but we must not assume that these 'tongues' were necessarily the same as Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 14. The fact that there are such widely divergent views held by believing people whose work and witness are honoured by God requires us to hold back from being dogmatic. It seems clear that this miraculous gift was given here in the interest of the proclamation of the gospel.

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2:5-13

In verses 6 and 8 the word 'language' is literally 'dialect', and in verse 11 the word 'tongues', which seems to indicate languages, is the same Greek word as 'tongues' in verse 4. We must be careful before we assume that all 'speaking in tongues' is necessarily an ecstatic gift of the Holy Spirit, for it may refer to a God-given facility in language, the 'gift of languages'. Remember also that on occasions 'speaking in tongues' can be an evidence of demon possession as 1 Corinthians 12:3 seems to suggest had happened. The immediate sequel to the miraculous manifestations of wind, fire and tongues was the gathering of a huge crowd of people who were at that stage totally perplexed. Obviously something significant was happening but what it was they did not know. Now they heard these Galileans speaking with tremendous enthusiasm about the wonderful things God had done. These wonderful things were *not* the wind, fire and tongues, but the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The situation was miraculous. That is obvious when we consider the list of different peoples listening and hearing. Of course, the majority of them would have been Jewish pilgrims or Gentile proselytes from various lands and they would understand both Greek and Aramaic. But the amazement of the people indicates that the language barrier had been breached in a significant way. The language and the message were immediately recognized without the services of an interpreter and this again suggests we are dealing with a different phenomenon from that in the church at Corinth where the exercise of the gift of tongues needed interpretation (1 Cor. 14:13).

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2:5-13

Link the phrase 'fully come' (v.1, AV) with the list of all the peoples present and see something of God's perfect timing. Three thousand souls were saved that one day (2:41). And since they were all due to return soon to their own lands this was the beginning of the first (non-organized) missionary outreach of the church. These new converts, on fire for Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, would carry the message to their own people. Did Peter and his colleagues have any idea of the significance of that one sermon, backed up as it was by the united prayers of the people of God (1:14)? Never forget the significance of

prayer. The developing story makes plain that the Jerusalem church did not remain a 'big' church, for soon it was persecuted and reduced to poverty (8:1; 11:19). As men and women were brought in and built up in their faith so they were sent out by various means (persecution, change of jobs, government edicts) to be Christ's ambassadors. We tend to underestimate the scale of God's working and his forward planning. The quickening of interest among the people was the result of the mighty working of the Spirit of God, miraculous but without astonishing signs. Some were made open and interested and were ready to be taught. Others reacted with mockery. The opportunity for preaching had been created by God and it was taken by Peter, prepared by God for the privilege of being trusted with the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit. An evangelist of a past generation whose ministry no longer carried the unction of the Holy Spirit said sadly, 'There are few men God can trust with power' (cf. 1 Cor. 9:27).

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2:14-21

So far the miraculous manifestations had aroused perplexity, interest, openness and criticism but not conviction, repentance or salvation. That called for the preaching of biblical truth carrying with it the unction and power of God. The truth of God's word was presented to people's minds and consciences (2 Cor. 4:2). By the power of the Holy Spirit the problem of communication was overcome. The technique was as natural as it was simple. Peter referred to the events that were uppermost in their minds, and at once dispelled the prejudiced accusation that they were all drunk. He anchored his sermon in the Scriptures of the Old Testament, and in so doing established common ground with his hearers who, in theory at least, knew and accepted the Scriptures as God-given revelation. This is not the case in our generation, even inside churches. Techniques of evangelism are not the answer to this problem of ignorance. We must bring the Word of God to the people in language they understand and in this way we bring people to God through his Word. This is the pattern we see right through Acts. The preachers reasoned from the Scriptures and in so doing were aware that for some it was a word of life and for others a word of judgement because of their unbelief (2 Cor. 2:14-17). The need of our day is a recovery of confidence in the actual preaching of the gospel, and that is what Paul, the great preacher, later asked prayer for: for free utterance (Eph. 6:19), and an open door for the Word (Col. 4:3-4) so that it would run free (2 Thess. 3:1). Pray for the preaching of the Word. Preachers cannot do it all on their own.

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2:14-21

This whole passage is a gospel sermon preached before the New Testament was written. Peter affirmed that what had happened was the fulfilment of what the prophet Joel had declared. It concerned the activity of God in fulfilment of his promises to send Messiah to be the Saviour of men. It emphasized that the last days had come upon the world with the coming of Christ (Heb. 1:1-3). People no longer needed to wait for God to act. He had done so decisively in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The glorious message of God's salvation and the power of the Spirit to apply it were now for all people, and all who called on the name of the Lord would be saved. The day of grace and salvation had come. It is clear that Peter was preaching to people who knew the Scriptures and who regarded themselves as religious. Not all of these were Jewish by birth; some had been attracted to Jewish religion and had become, as far as they had light, God-fearers. There are still many people like that in formal congregations. Even in the darkest areas untouched by preaching there is some measure of light (Rom. 1:19-20). But that light has to be focused by the Word of God which alone is the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17). It is by the Word of God that order comes from chaos (Gen. 1:1-3). It is by the Word that people are born of God (1 Peter 1:23). It is by the Word that faith dawns (Rom. 10:17). It is by the Word preached that God is pleased to bring people to salvation (1 Cor. 1:21). God himself says that his Word will accomplish what it was sent to do (Isa. 55:10-11). We must learn to have confidence in the Scriptures.

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2:22-35

A sermon cannot be divided clinically into sections but its different emphases can be indicated. This was a well-thought-out sermon. Peter's two themes belong together: Scripture and Christ, and what God has joined together must not be put asunder. There is not an Old Testament God and then a New Testament

'improved' God and gospel. They are one and speak with one voice. What Scripture promised in the Old Testament God fulfilled in Christ at a given point in history. Peter declared facts concerning Jesus the Man, authenticated in word and work by God's power attending him. Then he told of the corrupt trial which led to his death on the cross, followed by the indisputable fact of his resurrection. In declaring the facts Peter interpreted them theologically in terms of the activity of God. There was no question of wicked men stealing a march on God; no suggestion of the cross being a sad tragedy; no thought that evil had in any way at all won a victory over God. The whole terrible but glorious drama had been the fulfilment of God's eternal plan of salvation, announced so magnificently by John the Baptist when he said of Jesus, 'Look, the Lamb of God' (John 1:29): the Lamb foreshadowed in all the worship and prophecy of the Old Testament. Peter's hearers would be able to follow him closely perhaps thinking of such passages as Isaiah 53:6 and of how the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all. Following the cross there was the resurrection. It is not a dead Jesus we proclaim but one who is alive for evermore. People were gripped, gradually persuaded of the truth and convicted of their need.

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2:22-35

The suffering of Messiah and his resurrection were both ordained by God. The sentence of death passed on Jesus by the wicked rulers of Jewish religion had been overruled by a higher court. God had raised Jesus from the dead. Peter declared that it was impossible for Jesus to have been held by death. Death is spoken of not only as the wages of sin (Rom. 6:23) but as an evil power and mighty enemy. But death had no claim on Jesus, for he had no sin. There was no *need* for him to die. The death he died was for sinners. He chose to die (John 10:17-18; 19:10-11), and in doing so he carried the battle into enemy territory and triumphed gloriously. Death was baffled. Its whole kingdom was assailed and overthrown by the Man who was raised triumphantly from the grave on the third day. Peter backed up his argument with further quotation from the Old Testament. Using Psalm 16:8-11, he declared that the words could not refer to King David, for his grave testified to his death. It must refer to one greater than David, whom David himself spoke of in Psalm 110:1; cf. Matthew 22:41-46. The Christ, the Son of David, had come, had suffered and died, as Jesus had taught he would (Matt. 16:21; 17:22-23), and had risen on the third day as he had said he would. Where is he now, this rejected and crucified Son of God? He is alive, risen and exalted at the right hand of God. He has sent forth the Holy Spirit from the Father (John 15:26). He has been given the name above every name at which every knee must bow (Phil. 2:8-11). The first gospel sermon of the apostolic church ended with the declaration that Jesus Christ is Lord in every possible sense.

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2:36-37

In one glorious sentence Peter applied the whole sermon (v. 36). There was no doubt as to the facts. They had refused God's Man, God's eternal Son, God's final word (Heb. 1:1-3). He is *the way, the truth and the life* and no one comes to God except through him (John 14:6). He is the only Saviour and Mediator (1 Tim. 2:5-6) and he had been rejected. The people stood in the place of judgement. Little wonder they cried out, 'What shall we do?' The Holy Spirit had done his appointed work of convicting of sin, righteousness and judgement (John 16:8-11). These people knew and *felt* that they were guilty before God and were without excuse (Rom. 3:9-20). The preaching which had dealt faithfully with God's truth had reached the consciences of sinners with awakening and convicting power. Only God by his Spirit through his Word can do this. We must pray and look to God to do it. We must not seek by mere human methods to produce response, which so often reaches no further than the emotions. Note that it was only when conviction was manifest and hearts were moved to seek salvation that Peter spoke words of grace, forgiveness and salvation. This was no 'come to Jesus and be happy' gospel. Nor was it an offer of human fulfilment, nor a prescription for psychological integration, although all these things can follow upon saving faith. Peter's preaching was a heralding of what God had done and, in consequence, when sinners felt their need and their danger, they were called to repentance and pointed to Christ with the sure promise of pardon and the power of the Holy Spirit unto life that is eternal. Conversion is a resurrection from the deadness of sin.

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2:38-41

We must recognize the working of the Holy Spirit in the whole business of preaching and believing. We pray truly when we sing the hymn, 'Speak with the voice that wakes the dead, and make Thy people hear' (Albert Midlane, 1825-1909). People dead in transgressions and sins (Eph. 2:1-3) hear, are convicted, moved to response and call out for help in finding peace with God. How we long to see this in our day! Only God can do it. 'Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he persuades and enables us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the Gospel' (*Shorter Catechism*). In the context of the proclamation of salvation accomplished by a crucified and risen Christ, people were called to repentance and faith. It was a moral challenge, not an emotional one. They were called to repent in relation to their dealings with Christ. It was an urgent issue (v. 40), pressed home with earnest counsel and teaching. The preacher knew he was dealing with people who were convicted by God of their need for salvation. It was a time for plain speaking. People must be told that there is something from which they must be saved: sin, its judgement and a lost eternity. The hearers had received and assented to the truth of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Now, if they were to turn to him, they had to make a clear public confession of it in baptism. Peter assured them of the promise of forgiveness of sins and of the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit, by whose power they would experience all the benefits of salvation from and victory over sin.

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2:38-41

These verses could be expounded into a detailed statement of the gospel but the story hurries on. The marvellous scope and promise of the gospel are stated in verse 39. The gates of salvation were wide open to those who heard, and to their children, and to those who came after them, and to an extent far wider than just the Jewish nation. Not all who merely heard would be saved, but all those whom the Lord called to himself. It was not an automatic salvation, but these Jews, familiar with the idea of God's covenant of grace which included their children (Gen. 17:9-13), would not be surprised that what God was now doing was not to be narrower in its scope than the old covenant. How this should encourage us in prayer regarding the salvation of our children and indeed the other members of our families. The fact that God's grace has touched our personal lives signifies that his grace has invaded the family unit and hope should stir us deeply. In our day we have lost the significance of this because of the deep-rooted individualism that marks both society and the church. This one preaching of the Word resulted in three thousand conversions. It is clear that God was at work on a scale greater than had been seen in the ministry of Jesus. This is exactly what Jesus had foretold in John 14:12. We must assume there was some examination of the converts before their baptism. That there were false converts will soon become evident. There must be evidences of saving faith and we can well imagine all the praying company of chapter 1:12-14 being involved in counselling. We must see to it that in the day of God's power we will be ready.

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2:42-47

The scriptural account speaks not in terms of conversions or decisions but of men and women being added to the church. Conversion is a once-for-all personal experience, but it is the beginning not the terminus of Christian life. These converts were at once incorporated into the organized company of believers under God, and willingly submitted themselves to the instruction and discipline of the Word of God as well as entering into the privileges and blessings of the fellowship of faith. There is no evidence here or elsewhere in Scripture of converts 'doing their own thing'. They came in faith to Christ. They made a clear public confession of that faith. They became disciples. Continuance was the evidence of saving grace in their hearts. These new converts submitted themselves to the spiritual authority of the apostles' teaching. There was no 'free for all' attitude to the matters of faith and behaviour. The phrase 'the apostles' teaching' points us forward to that teaching as it is recorded in the Spirit-given Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Think of the emphasis on Scripture as the supreme rule of faith and life right through the New Testament. Think of Peter's letter in which he urged believers to desire the pure milk of the Word in

order to grow spiritually (1 Peter 2:1-3). All the epistles of the New Testament make plain the kind of teaching given to new converts right from the start. We tend to expect too little from those who confess Christ, and the life and witness of the church is weak as a result. Think of the radical standard set by Jesus (Matt. 16:24-25; Luke 9:23-26; John 14:15). There are no half measures.

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2:42-47

If a Christian congregation is not also a fellowship and a family with a sense of belonging together it falls short of the New Testament pattern. The mark of the early church was not only apostolic teaching but apostolic fellowship, sharing in the one common life of the believing church. They belonged together and knew it to be so. They ate together, and in our de-personalized generation we need to learn that in the sharing of a meal there is a true means of grace to all involved. The phrase 'they broke bread' indicates that there was more to it than just eating together. They remembered the Lord's death as he had commanded and instituted (Luke 22:14-20). They also prayed together. This was the life of the church, not simply individual Christians in their homes. When we speak of the church as a family it does not mean that age differences and needs should be ignored, but that being together we learn and benefit from each other. Children must not be made to act like adults nor must adults remain children (1 Cor. 13:11; 14:20). But each one, rich or poor, talented or ordinary, academic, tradesman, housewife, unemployed, persecuted or accepted, has a part to play in the building up of the body of Christ. Such a church is a witness (v. 43) and within such a church there is an awareness of being in the presence of God, dealing with him and being dealt with by him. Such a church is a working church, tasting the joy of the Lord (v. 46). It is likely to be an increasing church (v. 47), though not necessarily so in every locality. It will be a church conscious of the fact that it is the Lord alone who gives the increase (1 Cor. 3:5-7).

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3:1-10

Luke now gives one specific example of the kind of thing that was happening in the early church. In 2:43 he had referred to signs and wonders, and this story tells of a miracle of healing, which later gave rise to persecution. For our own day there is much here for instruction, encouragement and caution. In this time of Pentecostal revival, the community and the dead system of religion in the temple went on as if nothing had happened. The beggar still sat and begged near the temple. The religious still went through their ritual. The apostles had not seceded from nor had they attacked the establishment of religion. The lame man seems to have had no interest in actually going into the temple, nor had the religion of the temple any interest in going out to the man. Religion in the eyes of both worshippers and beggars seemed to be just a 'little help' to make life manageable. What a condemnation of empty religion! The temple seemed to have everything: silver and gold; impressive buildings; ritual that could stir the emotions and perhaps bring a sense of awe; the God-given Old Testament Scriptures, revered but largely ignored and not understood; sacrifices and services, crowds of people, enthusiasm and strict rules. But it was powerless and indifferent to the real needs of people. It was also irrelevant. It did not have Christ, the wisdom and the power of God (1 Cor. 1:24). It had its reputation, but that was all it had (Rev. 3:1). Can you blame the lame beggar for being content to sit outside? Is this how people regard organized religion in our day? Has the church really got a message it believes is relevant to the hunger and need of an increasingly frightening world?

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3:1-10

We can see in the lame man a picture of every man in his true spiritual need. He was lame from birth and could do nothing to help himself (John 5:1-8; Rom. 5:6-8). He was *outside* all that the temple stood for and his life had been reduced to a mere begging for existence. All he expected from religion was a handout of some material help to make his miserable life somewhat more bearable. He had no real expectation, no hope. Imagine his immediate disappointment, perhaps even bitterness and cynicism, when Peter, having stopped and taken notice of him, then declared he had neither silver nor gold to give. The man knew no other language, no other source of help. Then, to his astonishment, Peter spoke of power in the name of Jesus, put out his hand, helped him to his feet and commanded him to walk. The lame man tried out his legs and, to his amazement, began to walk. It was total miracle. Whatever had been the cause

of the paralysis of a lifetime he was healed in a moment. He was aware of new life and power, exactly where natural and permanent powerlessness had been. His exultation knew no bounds. More than a physical miracle had been performed. There had been a spiritual miracle for he at once made his way into the House of God, giving praise to God (v. 8). All the people were astonished by such a manifestation of God's saving power. We must not conclude that God will always work like this. All sickness is not healed, and some who are healed have no further interest in God. For some there is no meeting with God such as this man had. But God's power has not changed, because Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever (Heb. 13:8). There is no limit to what he can still do.

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3:11-16

As the story proceeds two things must be noted. The temple had plenty of silver and gold but nothing of the power of God, whereas the apostles were manifestly poor yet the power of God rested on them. There is a question here for church and believer alike. Do prosperity and success diminish the blessing of God in our lives? It need not be so, but success has to be guarded. The second thing is that the actual miracle, which touched only one among many beggars, was soon put into the background to allow the proclamation of God's grace to proceed. The immediate problem was that the attention of the people was unduly focused on the two evangelists and on the physical miracle. Peter dealt with this at once by turning their thoughts to the unchanging God of their fathers who, throughout the history of Israel, had constantly done mighty works by his own sovereign power. Peter challenged them as to whether or not they had a living or a dead God. Certainly *their* religion was dead because they did not expect anything to happen. They did not look for life-changing miracles to take place in the ongoing worship of God's house. Apply this. In our church services do we expect people to be converted? Are there not people around us whose lives need salvation: healing in mind, body and emotions; deliverance from the guilt and power of sin to set them right with God? Is not Jesus, crucified, risen and glorified, the same Jesus, mighty to save? Why then do we seem to have so little expectation? On the basis of Old Testament Scripture Peter pointed the people to God's Servant, whose name is Jesus. That servant and his experience is portrayed vividly in Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12, a passage the Jews would know well.

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3:11-16

In his sermon Peter confronted the people with their deliberate rejection of Jesus, described as God's Servant, the Holy and Righteous One, and the Author of life. God had come to them in perfect manifestation in Jesus and they had disowned him publicly in the presence of Pilate (John 19:1-16). They had made deliberate choice of a murderer (John 18:40). Their guilt, perversity and unbelief were manifest. They had taken their stand over against God, rejecting the one who had been sent, and God had sealed their guilt and confounded their wickedness by raising Jesus from the dead. A spirit of conviction came upon the hearers through this fearless preaching and they knew they were in the wrong with God. Peter then declared the power of the name of Jesus: not in the sense of the 'name' being like a magical incantation to be used to get results (Acts 19:13-16). The name signifies the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the source of the power of salvation, and faith is the means whereby that power touches people's lives. There is no indication that the paralysed man had faith before he was healed. He looked for nothing but a few coins in his begging bowl. It was the faith of Peter and John that was the operative factor in this miracle. There is an important lesson here. All our preaching and praying must be done in faith, and with faith on behalf of others who as yet have not believed. Read Mark 2:5 and note that it was when Jesus saw *their* faith, the faith of the believing friends, that he spoke the words of forgiveness and life to the man. We cannot tell when or by what means the life-giving Spirit of God begins to work in a helpless sinner's heart. Our part is to proclaim the name of Jesus and to pray.

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3:17-26

This was a truly evangelistic sermon. It declared the fact of salvation in Jesus Christ; it called the people to repentance; it held forth the promise of forgiveness and restoration; and it set the whole issue of life into the comprehensive plan and purpose of God. Of course, Peter was preaching to people grounded in

and conditioned by the Old Testament Scriptures. But later in Acts, in the stories of the missionary journeys of Paul, the same pattern of biblical proclamation and teaching the scriptures was followed (Acts 17:2-3). In our generation we cannot assume that people know their Bibles, and that means our preaching must first be proclamation and teaching facts rather than exhortations to respond. Some evangelists call on people to 'make decisions' on the basis of a minimum of knowledge or understanding. Peter declared a message full of assurance concerning something God had done, something God promised he would do, and something to which Moses and all the prophets bore witness. This was not something new or unexpected. It was God's decisive action to set right the wrong of sin that had disordered the world and had brought distortion and bondage to human lives. The intention of God is declared clearly in verse 26, in language that indicates that in the call to repentance there is also enabling grace. Think back to the miracle that introduced the sermon. The one thing the man could not do himself was to rise and walk (vv. 2, 6-7). But the word of command and the outstretched hand carried enabling power. So it is in the declaration of the gospel of the saving power of God in Jesus Christ. It is a word with power, and the miracle happens when a sinner believes. Read John 5:25 and 1 Corinthians 1:21.

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3:17-26

Two other elements in this passage have to be noted. Along with the confident proclamation of the gospel and the call to repentance the facts remain that all will not believe and unbelief cuts a person off from a place among the redeemed people of God (v. 23). Every preaching and hearing of the gospel is a crisis occasion regarding the issues of perishing or entering into life eternal (John 3:16-19; Heb. 3:7 - 4:2). There is an urgency about being saved, and both time and opportunity are short (Isa. 55:6-7; 2 Cor. 6:2). The second thing is how Peter sets his whole concept of the gospel into the context of the full sweep of the purposes of God. In verses 19-21 the 'times of refreshing', which the Jews believed would come with the Messiah, *had* come to them in the coming of Jesus Christ. That Jesus, crucified and risen, is now in the presence of God in heaven and will remain there until the establishing or restoration of all things when he will return in glory. Peter was not expecting the second coming of the Lord soon after Pentecost because the apostles already had the commission to go and evangelize the world and that takes time (Acts 1:8; Matt. 28:19). However we understand the terms, we must see that Peter was persuaded that the issue was not in doubt, and that what was going on then with such glorious urgency was part of a work that spanned history and would move forwards irresistibly to its perfect, God-ordained climax. Since this is all in the context of preaching the gospel, we can see how the ongoing work of evangelism is at the heart of all we mean by the coming of Christ's kingdom. But we still face the mystery of unbelief. Preaching the gospel has two results: it brings both salvation and judgement (2 Cor. 2:14-16).

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4:1-4

The first official reaction to the gospel message by the religious establishment was resentment and persecution. The apostles could scarcely have been surprised, because Jesus had warned them it would be so (John 16:1-3). Here the representatives of the Temple, far from being pleased that the power of God had been made manifest among them, resented it deeply. The facts of the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection power of the gospel made so publicly manifest were conclusive proof (to the people, if not the leaders) that God was with the apostles in a way he was not with the official preachers. This must have been galling to the Jewish leaders, but their reaction exposed the fact that they preferred a dead church in which *they* had power and leadership to a living church in which others were manifestly ordained and anointed by God. It is a fact of experience that the bitterest opposition to a living biblical and Christ-centred ministry can come from people whose religion is formal, and also from 'evangelicals' who have gone back from public confession of the gospel on which they rest their own salvation. This religious opposition is still with us to this day when a gospel ministry is begun in dead congregations. People who say they believe in God and who should be thrilled by the transformation of their congregational life are the very ones who dig in their heels and resist the gospel. Of course, the gospel declares that even religious people are sinners who need to be saved and who cannot save themselves by

religious good works. But be clear, as these verses make plain, mere men cannot stop the work of God (v. 4).

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4:1-4

For the encouragement of those who are in hard and difficult situations, we continue to study this theme of trouble wherever the gospel is preached. Difficulties are to be expected (Matt. 10:16-25). Opposition is not just a temporary aspect of the beginning of a work. We read in Acts 28:22 that, after thirty years of revival preaching and amazing missionary outreach in terms of church-planting, the way of Christ was still spoken against by the secular world and religious establishment alike. Even among those regarded as committed to the evangelical message the basic truth of the gospel had to be fought for and defended (Gal. 1:6-9). The church had to be warned against the intrusion of false teachers who would corrupt its doctrine and life (Acts 20:28-30; Jude 3-4). At times some accused Paul of wrong motives (1 Cor. 9:12-15; 2 Cor. 2:17; 7:2) and branded him as not being sound (2 Cor. 10:7-17). But people said Jesus was devil-possessed (John 7:20; 8:48) so what can *we* expect? Note that it was in the context of opposition and persecution that the work went on and increased. The Word of God is not chained by circumstances (2 Tim. 2:8-9), nor is the Holy Spirit hemmed in by the intrigues of unbelieving people. God's word and work go on, even when men of totally different convictions band together in opposition. That happened here. The Sadducees, the dominant party in the Sanhedrin, did not believe in any resurrection, whereas the Pharisees did. Yet they joined to oppose the gospel. But the great issue is whether or not this Jesus is alive. If he is dead then everything is pointless. If he is alive for evermore then, whether we believe it or not, he is present and active.

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4:5-7

The Sanhedrin was the supreme court of the Jews, consisting of the High Priest, who was president, and seventy other elders, including some notably good men such as Nicodemus (John 3:1; 7:50), Joseph of Arimathea (Luke 23:50-51) and Gamaliel (Acts 5:33-39). The Pharisee minority was quite strong and included most of the scribes but the Sadducee party was very powerful with a strong family solidarity (v. 6) whose votes could be counted on for reasons that had nothing to do with religion or morals but rather with power. Annas, senior ex-High Priest, and Caiaphas, present holder of the office, had recently played the significant part in getting rid of Jesus (John 18:12-14,19-23). They had had, and continued to have, a stranglehold of control over the Sanhedrin for years. They considered themselves the only holders of power in relation to the things of God and were in no mood to allow a 'Jesus movement' to change the situation. Indeed, they were determined that no religious movement with an element of the supernatural should be allowed to operate. They were the rationalists of their day, insisting on morals (not too strict) without religion (except in small doses of ritual). Their religion that was totally related to this world and not the world to come. All that they were now hearing about ordinary people claiming a personal knowledge and experience of the power of God through Jesus Christ (about whom they had only bad opinions based on prejudice, not evidence) was simply not acceptable. There was contempt in their question in verse 7 as they addressed the apostles and asked by whose authority *they* had dared to preach. This is the usual attitude of those who have a poor case (John 7:45-52).

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4:8-12

This situation could not have been easy for Peter because by nature he had not been good at coping with crisis on earlier occasions (John 18:10-11, 25-27). But there was the clear promise of Jesus in Matthew 10:16-20; Luke 21:14-15, and when the time came Peter *was* filled with the Holy Spirit. He was anointed and equipped for the particular situation, not by some new effusion or outpouring of the Spirit (with attendant signs as on the Day of Pentecost) but from within, for the Holy Spirit in his indivisible fullness dwelt within him, as he does in every believer. Note very carefully the wisdom Peter showed here by the inspiration of the Spirit, who is the Spirit of Jesus who was always sure but never strident (Isa. 42:1-4). Our attitude to people and our manner of addressing them can be as important as the substance of what we are saying. We are foolish indeed, and contrary to the Scripture pattern if, when we are being dealt with

by those in authority, we fail to show due courtesy and respect for the *office* if not for the person holding it (Matt. 23:1-3; Acts 23:1-5). Peter's wise attitude stemmed from the fact that his concern was not to denounce the Sanhedrin nor to protest against his own unjust arrest but to speak well of Christ and the gospel. His objective was to win some of these men for Christ or at least to gain freedom for the new believers to worship and witness. No doubt he hoped to encourage any of the good and godly men on the Sanhedrin by making it easier for them to speak up for Jesus. It is sad at times in official circles to be in agreement with your fellow evangelicals and yet to be so disturbed by their unworthy and cantankerous presentation that you are reluctant to support them publicly.

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4:8-12

Peter's good manners in no way caused him to qualify the truth of what he had preached or where he stood in terms of the gospel. It seems the healed cripple had been locked up with the apostles (vv. 10,14) and now stood with them in the Sanhedrin. The court simply could not deny the facts of the case. But they challenged the right of the apostles to preach, because they were not appointed by the religious authorities. We do not criticize church rules. Order and discipline are necessary and biblical and must be accepted by those who are in a particular church. The problem arises when rules and procedure take precedence over truth and God. The Sanhedrin had already made up its mind that what had happened could not possibly be from God. But Peter left the issue in no doubt. He declared that it was by the saving name of Jesus that the man had been healed. And Peter did not let it rest there. He identified Jesus as the man of Nazareth whom they had crucified (which they knew to be true) and whom God had raised from the dead (which they refused to believe). Simply by stating the truth, backing it up with Scripture from Psalm 118:22, Peter put his judges on trial. His reference to the psalm may well have reminded these men of Jesus' use of the same words in Mark 12:10-11. Peter ended with a statement of the absolute uniqueness of Jesus and a declaration that he was the only Mediator between God and man (John 14:6; 1 Tim. 2:5). This is not something on which people can agree to differ. There are not many different ways to God and to salvation. Jesus said he was *the* way, the only way. He asserted that all who were of God would come to him (John 6:45). There is no other way.

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4:13-17

In our defence of the faith remember that the gospel speaks for itself by its fruit in believers' lives. The Sanhedrin could not deny certain obvious facts. The apostles were not trained scholars; they were not academics; nor were they professionals in the business of religion and its administration. But they seemed to be men who knew God, believed God, and were able to preach the things of God with scriptural competence and personal conviction. They were clearly recognizable as men who kept company with Jesus. They may have been fishermen, perhaps lacking formal education and belonging to the working class, but obviously they lacked neither intelligence nor culture and their bearing and integrity were impressive. The leaders of the Jewish church were astonished. These apostolic preachers were 'nobodies' in the eyes of the religious and secular establishments and yet God was obviously with them. Paul's later comment on God's choice of men and women for service is as accurate as it is searching (1 Cor. 1:26-31). Despite themselves the Sanhedrin saw that the quality of these men was directly related to their close discipleship to Jesus. The other fact that silenced the Sanhedrin was the man who had been healed (vv. 14,16, 22). But the presenting of incontrovertible evidence as to the power of Christ to heal and save does not necessarily lead to faith and acceptance. Unbelief married to prejudice is a powerful barrier. The one thing the Jewish church authorities were clear about was that they would not accept this new movement (vv. 15-17). Twenty centuries later we still see across the whole religious spectrum the same prejudice against the biblical and evangelical cause.

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4:18-22

The Sanhedrin, who had condemned Jesus to death without evidence and by a corrupt trial, would not have hesitated to do the same here to the apostles had public opinion been different. This time they had not had opportunity to manipulate the people (Matt. 27:20) and they were afraid to do what they wanted

(v. 21). Their frustration guaranteed continuing persecution and the whole of Acts bears testimony to this (9:1-2; 13:45; 14:2, 19; 17:5 etc). But the apostles were not deterred and they made their position clear in verses 19-20. These verses have often been made the excuse for all kinds of civil disobedience in the name of God and of Christian principles. But the Bible makes it plain that human authorities must be respected (Rom. 13:1-7) whether they be secular or religious (Matt. 23:1-3). However, when there is a clear clash between God's revealed will and human demands then we must obey God. Of course we must be sure that the clash is one of truth versus error and not merely one of prejudice and preference. Recognize also that obedience to God does not necessarily involve open and verbal rebellion. Sometimes doing the will of God requires total silence in the face of critical movements and developments so that in due time it might be demonstrated that God was not in them. Think of Elisha's consent to the young prophets in 2 Kings 2:15-18, bowing to their insistent enthusiasm but refusing to go with them. Think also of Paul's long silence in Acts 27:21 after his reasoned and reasonable advice had been ignored. There is a time to speak and a time to keep silent (Eccles. 3:7). But at the same time, necessity is laid upon us to be faithful, and when the time comes we must speak up, but wisely (Ps. 106:32-33).

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4:23-31

The reaction of the apostles and their believing friends is a wonderful lesson. There was no bitterness, no protest march, no extravagant language or action, no fear or self-pity and certainly no thought of giving up. The 'front-line' men shared the whole issue with the 'back-room' men and women. They took it to God in prayer (v. 24). Apart from verse 29 they did not say much by way of specific request. Even then it was not in terms of asking God to deal with their opponents but rather that they should be kept faithful in their charge to proclaim the word of the Lord. They knew that the issues of life were in God's hand alone (Ps. 68:20, AV) and, like Paul after them, in the business of spiritual warfare their concern was that the Word should go forth unhindered and with clarity (Eph. 6:19; Col. 4:3; 2 Thess. 3:1). In verses 29-30 two clear levels of activity are seen but they are not separate from each other. Man's business is to proclaim the truth of the gospel as it is in Jesus Christ; but it is God alone who gives the increase (1 Cor. 3:5-7). These persecuted apostles looked to God as men under orders must always look to their Captain (Heb. 12:1-2; Ps. 123:1-2). They knew that in themselves they had no capacity to cope with the situation, because they were facing devilish opposition, not mere men. But their eyes were on God (2 Chron. 20:12). Their hearts were fixed on God. They went right to God, and did so with one accord. They took it to the Lord in prayer and their prayer was answered with a mighty token of God's reassuring grace. Just exactly what the manifestation was, and what 'shaken' means we cannot say. Certainly they were not distracted by the 'sign' or the 'experience' but simply got on with the business of preaching.

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4:23-31

Paralysing fear had marked the disciples' experience after the cross (John 20:19). But now, praying this prayer, which has more of worship and praise in it than petition, these servants of God were delivered from their fear. What a change! They must have been very aware of the presence and power of evil, and their minds must have raced ahead speculating on what might happen next. The corrective to this devilish stratagem is to focus on the glorious doctrines of the sovereignty of God and his perfect providence. With one accord they spoke to the great Creator God who by his own word of power called the world into being. They knew that no creature's power (and the devil is a created angel) could ever defeat the one who had created. The world is not a Frankenstein monster that has got out of God's control, although there is plenty evidence it is out of *human* control. The Creator is also the ruling and ordering power of all history and he is never under pressure. Indeed he laughs at the petty pretensions of men and nations alike as Psalm 2, quoted in the prayer, makes plain. It is no new thing that evil men should band themselves against God, and it will be so until the end of the age. But all they can ultimately do is to be servants of God in carrying out his purpose (Rev. 17:15-17). This was manifest in the recent events of the cross (vv. 27-28; cf. 2:23-24). But the sovereign overruling of all things by God neither makes God the author of evil nor does it excuse the wickedness of men. Scripture makes that perfectly plain. In the doctrine of the

sovereignty of God there is inexpressible comfort to the believer. The eyes of the Lord see everything and the face of the Lord is against those who do evil (Ps. 34:16).

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4:32-37

In the context of persecution, prayer and faithful commitment to Jesus and the gospel, there came into being a wonderful fellowship. The believers belonged together and they knew it. They shared a common life and a common purpose. They needed each other and they ministered to each other in practical as well as spiritual things. This is the spirit that should still mark our congregations. The men to whom the preaching was committed did so with great power and there was a spirit of grace upon them all. It reminds us of Jesus who was full of grace and truth (John 1:14). This is important because boldness for God and the gospel can sometimes become brashness and bluster of the kind that repels rather than attracts. The way some young preachers harangue and lash an audience, especially a religious one, reveals only the gracelessness of their own hearts. They forget that the man who said, 'Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel' (1 Cor. 9:16) also spoke of being less than the least of all God's people, to whom the mighty privilege of preaching had been given (Eph. 3:7-8). Without grace, truth will not win men and women for Christ. There is an attractive power in grace, and it can be seen in the individual believer, a Christian home, or a worshipping congregation that has become a family and a fellowship. The grace spoken of here was immensely practical. They saw each other's needs and they shared, so that no one lacked. The spirit of self-interest had been slain and a spirit of practical care took its place. All they had was reckoned to belong to the Lord. Their dedication and enthusiasm are wonderful to see. But this was only the beginning. A long-term work takes more than enthusiasm.

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4:32-37

In order to understand the story in the next chapter look again at this passage. At that time the Christians had everything in common but this is not recorded as a pattern necessarily to be followed. The possibility of their situation ever being different had not been considered, but by 11:27-30 and from then on the Jerusalem church seems to have been in a state of permanent poverty. In 4:34-35 there is indication that the finance of the church was overseen by the apostles and in 6:2-6 we are told of the practical arrangements made so that, free from administration, the apostles were able to concentrate on preaching. It is interesting that later in the story Paul refused to handle church money and insisted that appointed men should have charge of it so that slanderous accusations of personal appropriation of church money should be silenced (2 Cor. 8:18-22). In the early days some who owned houses and lands sold them, but it seems that Barnabas' action was something significant, perhaps because of the size of the donation or because of the publicity and praise that accrued to the giver. If this was so, then there is a great deal to be said for anonymous giving, the whole transaction being between the giver and God, so far as that is practical. It seems that the action of Barnabas, done without thought of praise or reward, triggered off a reaction of spiritual rivalry and ambition on the part of Ananias and his wife. Do you see what is happening? The devil, having failed to deter the work by external pressure, now sought to corrupt it from within. Remember Jesus' words about the danger of 'showing off' what we regard as our spirituality and commitment. Read and be serious about Matthew 6:1-8,16-18. The story that follows is about being honest with God.

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5:1-11

This story needs careful study. Ananias and Sapphira seem to have wanted to be considered two of the front-line supporters of the work but without the cost of true dedication and they put on a show of holiness to impress the church. The deliberate deceit was carefully planned and carried out without a tremor of conscience. The context was the work and witness of the church but the public would hear about it. The news item would be leaked. The donation was brought as a specific act of total dedication to God. They were quite entitled to keep back whatever they decided because there was no compulsory giving. The sin was the deliberate deception. It becomes clear that in a revival situation all that appears to be spiritual is not necessarily so. When crowds are being brought into the church it is to be expected that

there will be some who are not genuine, weeds among the wheat (Matt. 13:24-30), and it is *God's* business to make the difference clear. After all, the work is his and he requires it to be pure and holy as he is holy. The dishonesty (and immorality) of the world's way of life must not become accepted in God's church or else its life will be corrupted and its witness devalued, destroyed and made a matter of derision among unbelievers. How Peter discerned the lie we cannot tell save that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth and Jesus himself said that secret things would be made plain (Luke 12:1-3). Remember that all things are open to the eyes of God with whom we are constantly dealing (Heb. 4:13). Peter's words in verse 3 reveal the heart of the matter. This was a work of the devil, an attack on the living church from inside its own membership.

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5:1-11

We have no means of knowing whether or not this husband and wife were truly converted. If they were not, then we see that there were hypocrites in the church from the beginning. If they were true believers then we see the shallowness of their faith, for they were beguiled by the devil who appealed to their pride. For them it was more important to be *thought* spiritual than to *be* spiritual. They lied to God. Even the gracious and powerful presence and influence of the Holy Spirit within the church failed to restrain them. They refused the appeal for confession and repentance. When the wife came in, possibly having arranged to meet her husband, she showed no apprehension, not even when questioned by Peter. The enormity of their sin is stated in verse 9. They had tested the Spirit of God to see how far they could go in presuming upon God's grace. In the Old Testament satanically-inspired schemes are spoken of as testing the Lord (Exod. 17:2; Deut. 6:16). Ananias and Sapphira would know these references, and also the story of Achan's sin and its judgement (Joshua 7:1,6-15). His sin had affected all the people, and exposed them to the working of the enemy and to the anger of God. Here in Acts there is no saying where this intrusion of sin would have led the church, had it not been dealt with there and then. Peter described it to Ananias in terms of Satan rushing in to fill his heart. Think carefully before saying that Peter was different from Jesus in dealing with sinners. The solemn judgement was the action of God not Peter. Peter may have remembered the time when he did the devil's work and heard words of solemn rebuke and seeming rejection from the lips of Jesus (Matt. 16:21-23).

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5:12-16

This is a significant passage in the context of revival. As a direct result of the previous incident a holy fear came upon the church and the community (v. 11). This is totally healthy in both spiritual and moral terms. In such an atmosphere people are aware that they are dealing with God whose eyes are too pure to look on evil (Hab. 1:13). He will not condone evil and we can be sure that in due time our sins will find *us* out even if *they* are not found out (Num. 32:23). But note that the solemn event of judgement did not in any way quench the life-giving power of God in the ongoing work of the gospel. The same power that judged the deliberate sinners healed, blessed and saved the multitudes. This is how it always is. In the preaching of the gospel we are at one and the same time a token of life and salvation to some and to others a sign and instrument of judgement (2 Cor. 2:14-16). That is why we must see to it that we are right with God and do right (2 Cor. 4:1-4). To be otherwise is to be a resistance to rather than a conductor of the gospel. The fact that God was pleased to continue to bless the apostles in their ministry confirms that there had been no wrong in their stern attitude to sin in the wrongdoers. No doubt some disapproved of the 'hard line' taken, thinking of it as man's action rather than God's. No doubt Peter and his colleagues were somewhat unpopular in the eyes of some in the church. But God was with them and it seems that the shadow of Peter was as effective as Jesus' clothes seem to have been in Mark 5:24-34, and as Paul's handkerchiefs were later (Acts 19:11-12). God reserves the right to work when and how he will. But we are not allowed to make any one incident into a pattern, rule or doctrine.

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5:12-16

In this time of revival, when feelings were running high for and against the gospel, one of the significant results of God's intervention in judgement was a real reluctance to 'join the church' on the part of people

who did not believe, who were uncertain or who had reservations. This is a good thing because when a 'mixed multitude' joins in with a major movement of God's work it produces complications and discontent which have the power to infect the main body of believers. This is how it was at the Exodus (Exod. 12:38, AV; Num. 11:1-6). It could have been so here, and this is how it has been in many movements of mass evangelism and even in authentic revival. There will always be those who are stirred, moved, drawn and impressed, but this does not necessarily signify saving faith. A God-given restraint on religious enthusiasm can be a healthy thing. But in the context of the 'fear of the Lord' we must make sure that we note carefully and gladly the statement of verse 14. In the realism of God's presence and power and the awesome sense of his holiness there were many who saw nothing to fear, but rather the glorious fact of the fellowship of faith marked by joy, gladness, care and holy dedication. They were drawn by the very love of Christ as they saw it manifest in their fellow men and women. It was a repetition of what is recorded in the Gospels to the effect that there gathered to Jesus all who were burdened and broken and he healed them (Matt. 4:24). The self-righteous religious people did not crowd to Jesus. There are instructive contrasts in this brief passage. The gospel draws, exposes and divides. We should always examine our reactions. Examining ourselves is healthier than examining other people.

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5:17-26

It must have been galling for the Sadducees, with all their religious authority, to have their ruling and actions completely countermanded and their dignity left in tatters by the angelic release of the apostles. The prisoners were not even allowed to spend the night in jail as they had had to do on the previous occasion (4:5). There is something gloriously funny in the picture of the apostles preaching while the Sanhedrin, in all ignorance, sat in solemn assembly trying to decide what to do. God has a sense of humour and has little time for the pompous and self-important of the world, especially the religious world. Did the Sadducees realize that their whole theological position was being made to look ridiculous? Their stated conviction as religious rationalists was that there was no such thing as supernatural intervention in the affairs of this world. But God had secretly released his men and then the report of the officers of the guard confirmed that the release could not have been by human agency (vv. 21-23). The anger of the Sadducees when news came of the continuing evangelism is easy to imagine but it is also interesting to note the caution with which the officers acted in verse 26. It seems clear that the rulers of the Jews were not nearly so popular with their constituency as they imagined and no doubt many ordinary people were glad to see the tables turned on these autocrats. The passage makes satisfying reading, but do not overlook how it began. Every step forward in the work of the gospel was contested bitterly by the powers of antichrist. It is always so. Jesus warned about this. We must not be taken aback when it happens to us. Put on the whole armour of God and be ready to stand (Eph. 6:10-20).

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5:27-32

he men of the Sanhedrin simply would not consider the possibility that they could be wrong. Gathered as an official court they were their old stubborn selves, apparently having forgotten about God and what he had so recently done. But even in their rage they had to bear testimony to the success of the apostles, because Jerusalem was filled with their doctrine and a real sense of guilt and need was being brought home to the hearts of ordinary people. The Sanhedrin had no cause to complain about the death of Jesus being charged against them. They had agreed that it should be so when they screamed their hatred in the presence of Pilate saying, 'Let his blood be on us and on our children!' (Matt. 27:25). Peter and the apostles declared that they had a simple choice before them, either to obey God or to obey the Sanhedrin. There was in fact no choice. Peter made plain that their business was not to speak primarily in terms of their guilt in the killing of Jesus. The blood of the Lamb of God was shed as an atonement in order to cleanse sinners from their sin and to reconcile them to God. This Jesus was no mere victim of men. He was the mighty Saviour exalted to the right hand of God to give repentance to the people. Note the emphasis that repentance is a gift. It is the work of the Spirit in the hearts of men and women through the hearing of the Word. No one can come to God without being drawn and enabled. This means we must consciously look for God's sovereign work in evangelism. Repentance unto salvation is not a work of

human effort. Note also how Peter speaks of the Holy Spirit being given to those who obey. This is the obedience of faith, and emphasizes that a true conversion is a turning to a new obedience to God.

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5:33-34

It is frightening to see how the truth of God, spoken in the power of the Holy Spirit, can arouse hatred in the hearts of religious people. Part of their fury was because their authority and orders had been flouted publicly. Religious totalitarianism cannot afford to let anyone step out of line. Any rebel rocking the boat had to be dealt with swiftly, and this court of the Jews wanted there and then to pass sentence of death. Unfortunately for the High Priest (but happily for the disciples) he had taken the trouble to call a full meeting of the court (v. 21b), and the strong Sadducean party could not get the necessary vote without the support of the Pharisees who, though a small party, were held in high regard. This is another example of the overruling of God who outwitted these men and left them in an impossible position. Even though the Bible speaks of the well-laid stratagems of the devil (Eph. 6:11), there is a blind spot in the devil's knowledge. When we speak of blind hatred we are being more accurate than we realize. The Bible speaks of evil men digging a pit and falling into it themselves (Ps. 7:15). At the point of crisis Gamaliel spoke up. God has his advocates ready at the right time. The man was wise and balanced and must immediately have commended his case by insisting that the accused disciples be put outside. There was to be no loss of face before them. Perhaps Gamaliel was apprehensive lest the apostles intervened in the discussion but perhaps, since true godliness and kindness go together, he wanted to spare the apostles as much strain and anxiety as possible. Do you think Peter may possibly have been thinking of the stories of Daniel in the lions' den (Dan. 6:16-23)

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5:35-39

Gamaliel, teacher of Saul of Tarsus (22:3), gave no indication of where he stood personally in relation to this new movement of spiritual power. We cannot even tell how much first-hand knowledge he had about what was happening. We do know that his star pupil was intensely against Jesus and the gospel that was being preached (9:1-2). But Gamaliel was not prepared to take part in a stand against the disciples of Jesus when it was obvious that there was so much prejudice involved. Recognize that some people who may not necessarily stand with us in our theological position may nevertheless, under God, serve our cause. We must be careful before we 'write off' people, especially if they are public figures such as Gamaliel. It is not always necessary to state the gospel case in its most radical terms. Jesus spoke of those not against us as being for us, just as he spoke of those who are not for us being against us (Matt. 12:30; Luke 9:50). He also rebuked his disciples for being too quick to pronounce judgement and to regard people as not belonging to God's cause (Luke 9:51-55). It is important to commend our cause and this is done often by wise words and a gracious attitude. It would be easy to criticize Gamaliel for his wait-and-see attitude, and not preventing the flogging of the apostles, when there was so much evidence that God was working in Jerusalem. But would a radical stand here by Gamaliel have simply polarized attitudes? Gamaliel spoke up at the right time, in the right place, with the right words. He was reasonable, he did not rant or denounce. We too must be wise in the defence of the gospel. And we must speak up when facing the enemy, and not just in the company of those who agree with us.

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5:40-42

Whatever our assessment of this situation, we must thrill to and be challenged by the attitude of the apostles. The Sanhedrin was within its rights to administer the thirty-nine lashes (cf. 2 Cor. 11:24) in respect of orthodox Jews who had deliberately disobeyed the religious authority. The court then repeated the charge not to speak in the name of Jesus. The disciples' attitude as they left — cut, bleeding and sore as their bodies must have been — was one of rejoicing in the privilege of suffering for Jesus' sake. Peter spoke of this later in his epistle (1 Peter 1:3-9; 4:12-14). Paul takes up the same theme later (Phil. 1:29-30; 1 Thess. 3:1-4; 2 Tim. 1:8-12). The inspiration and challenge of these early believers for us is in their attitude even more than their actions. They were quite persuaded that what happened to *them* was a secondary issue. Their reputation, acceptance or personal well-being faded into insignificance even

though the experience was painful and costly, in order that Christ might be served and proclaimed. They could do this because they believed that the Lord was with them and that everything concerning them was in the sure hand of God. Paul later spoke of all things working out for the furtherance of the gospel, even if at the time it seemed otherwise (Phil. 1:12; Rom. 8:28). So it was with Peter and his colleagues. They were content to be nothing in order that Christ might be everything. These were great days, but not without problems and mistakes. We must not think of mere men as infallible. By nature Peter was a dynamo and he may have been too fond of confrontation. Perhaps not. But it is significant that soon, by the Holy Spirit, Paul would be counselling the believers to walk wisely (Eph. 5:15-17).

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6:1-4

There is great honesty in the Scriptures' portrayal of the early church. It was a believing community, living and working in the power of the Holy Spirit in a way that was beginning to transform society. It was a community prepared to suffer costly persecution but it was not a perfect church, its members being very human with all the frailties, limitations and reactions that we know in our day. It is not surprising that at this critical stage there emerged a spirit of friction and jealousy that could have divided the fellowship. The devil saw his opportunity and took it. There seems to have been a real element of injustice in the provision of practical support for those in need, and feelings were intensified because of the different social, educational and cultural backgrounds of the two main groups in the church. Think of the potential tensions there can be in congregations where there are distinct groups: wealthy and poor; families who have 'always' belonged and feel now taken for granted and new arrivals who seem to get a lot of attention; and those from different racial backgrounds. In this case it was between Hebrew-speaking natives of Palestine and Greek-speaking Jews from the various parts of the Roman Empire. (At this stage there is no mention of Gentiles in the church.) The apostles saw the situation had to be dealt with. But so that the priorities of prayer and preaching should not be hindered, arrangements were made to delegate this practical, time-consuming work to others. If the problem had not been tackled a simple and reasonable cause of complaint could have accomplished what the Sanhedrin and persecution had failed to do. It could have choked the life of the church and clouded its witness.

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6:1-4

In the will of God, some are called to preach and to lead in the prayer life of the church. This does not give them special importance but it does bring greater responsibility (James 3:1). The apostles' clear focus on the priorities reminds us that those called to preach must see to it that nothing hinders them from doing it well. Preparation hurried through at the last minute with the dregs of mental and spiritual energy, because the week has been filled with other things, is sinful, even if these things have been good in themselves. The same is true for all of us as we order our week so that we give priority to the time when the church gathers for prayer. We must also guard the time for our personal devotional life. For too many Christians prayer is something to be 'fitted in' if we can manage it. Of course, there must be no neglect of the practical duties involved in the running of a church as if these were not spiritual and of less value. The work is God's, and everything about it is holy and important, and calls for spiritual dedication. Here in Acts those entrusted with the 'waiting on tables' would be involved in cleaning, carting bags of rubbish, counting money, organizing queues, collecting the old and infirm, and helping in other activities. For this work they had to be full of the Holy Spirit, regarded by the fellowship as men of faith and wisdom, and in good standing with the community. What a standard! What a church that could produce such people at a moment's notice! The challenge to every congregation is: are we producing people of calibre ready for service as the need becomes apparent? The personal challenge is: am I growing up in Christ and becoming a worker? Or am I remaining a spiritual babe who has to be carried?

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6:5-7

This chapter is a new development in the work of the early church. In verse 1 the believers, followers of Jesus, are called disciples. Soon they would get a new name, 'Christians' (11:26). But beyond the Acts of the Apostles they are called 'brothers' or 'saints' and this change seems to have come about as the church

reached out to include Gentiles as well as Jews. In verse 1 we were told of the increase in numbers and verse 7 records that this continued rapidly and that many of the Jewish priests became believers. We have already seen that increase in numbers brings dangers which can be coped with only if there is clear emphasis on spiritual priorities and if there are people of faith and capacity to take responsibility. The men appointed 'deacons' (although that word is not actually used) all had Greek names but they were chosen *not* because they belonged to the complaining party (v. 1) *but* because of their manifest faith and grace (v. 8). The objective of the apostles in dealing with the situation was achieved. Luke adds the significant comment, 'so the word of God spread'. The situation that had started with a crafty attack by the devil had been faced and dealt with in the right way. The result was a new wave of blessing and outreach; and the work increased significantly (v. 7). The priests referred to were not from the politically motivated Sanhedrin but were the ordinary 'ministers' running the services and, being by and large humble of heart like Zechariah in the Christmas story (Luke 1:5-10), would be open to being persuaded of the truth of the gospel. The phrase 'obedient to the faith' may indicate that already there was the beginning of the formulation of the body of truth that was the basic doctrine of the church.

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6:8-10

We tend to forget God's forward planning and we must learn to see how he works in all things for good (Rom. 8:28). God is never the source of evil nor is he party to it (James 1:13). Sin is always man's doing. Disagreements are not necessary to the ongoing of God's work, for God is not the author of disorder or tension (1 Cor. 14:33). But he uses and overrules all things to serve his purpose and this is evident here. Stephen seems to have been a born leader and both before and after his 'ordination' (vv. 5-6, 8) he was used significantly by God. God worked wonders and signs through him, but this is mentioned in just one verse. Far more emphasis is given to his preaching as almost the whole of the next chapter is taken up with his sermon. What he was shone out. He was full of God's grace and power; he spoke with spiritual wisdom; and his face was like that of an angel (v. 15). There was something Christlike about this man, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). He seems to have attended one of the synagogues frequented by Jews from the lands of their dispersion. Since Tarsus was a city of Cilicia, Saul of Tarsus may have attended this synagogue, and the ministry, as well as the death, of Stephen may have played a part in his conversion. Had Stephen any idea of the importance of this particular debate on the Scriptures? The eruption of devilish reaction (vv. 11-14) seems to indicate it was a truly significant occasion. We must remember this when, after faithful and gracious witness, all hell seems to be let loose against us. The truth of God's word and its effective working cannot be stopped by the arguments and criticisms of unbelievers no matter how fierce and bitter they may be. God's word works (Isa. 55:8-11).

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6:11-15

It is solemn yet comforting to see the fury and the unprincipled dishonesty of religious people who resent and refuse the truth as it is in Christ. Their attitude can become murderous. It was so in the case of Jesus and it would yet be so in the case of Paul. Read such passages as Mark 11:15-18; John 5:16-18; 15:18-21; 16:1-4. The list of references could go on and on. It is always the same. Religion, which idolizes its own system, will always hate, resist and persecute the proclamation of God's truth in its fulness. Individual Jewish synagogues valued their own liberty and resisted officialdom but quickly enlisted the aid of the Sanhedrin, the highest court, to beat down the apostles of the gospel whose reasoning they could not overthrow. The Pharisees and Sadducees could sink their differences about resurrection, and Pilate and Herod could end their political enmity, in common resistance to Jesus. If lies and slander could help, these devilish unbelievers did not hesitate (v. 11). They stirred up public opinion and procured false witnesses willing to commit perjury (v. 13). The falseness of their case will be made manifest in the very words they use. For them, Moses was more important than God (v. 11). For them the temple and its ritual were more important than the Word of God as Jesus had made plain in Mark 7:5-9. The customs of the temple were the sacred things which must not be touched, no matter how corrupt these rituals had become. Was the assembled company recalling that the Jesus about whom Stephen and the apostles spoke had cleansed the

temple and prophesied its downfall (Matt. 24:1-2)? They distorted Stephen's words as they had Jesus' words in John 2:19-21. Unbelief is ruthless.

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7:1-16

It would be good to read the whole of Stephen's speech in order to grasp the sweep of his historical argument and the devastating nature of his exposure of Jewish unbelief. All through their story the Jews had refused God and resisted his will. We will take the chapter section by section but cannot possibly carry out what would be an exposition of the entire Old Testament. The charges had been stated in the previous chapter (6:11-14) and Stephen was required to reply. In 3:1-8 it is clear that the apostles themselves had continued to attend the temple and they, and the other believers, were no doubt considered loyal Jews in spite of their adherence to Jesus. But Jesus himself had spoken of being greater than the temple (Matt. 12:6). Stephen had grasped (in a way that even Peter was slow to grasp, cf. 10:9-17; Gal. 2:11-16) that the sacrificial and ceremonial system of the Law and the temple had been brought to its fulfilled end in Christ. If the 'system' remained in its prime totalitarian position then it would be a mighty barrier to the advance of Christ and his salvation. Neither Stephen, nor Paul after him, denigrated or devalued the Law, the Promises or any of the privileges of the covenant people. Read Romans 3:1-2; 9:1-5 and be very careful before allowing shallow evangelistic enthusiasm to dismiss the established church situations contemptuously. Many of us who grew up in dead churches learned Scripture and acquired a spirit of reverence for holy things to a degree unknown in some contemporary evangelistic circles. But at the same time let no 'system' or 'set-up', however biblical, become more important than Christ. This was the error of the Jews.

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7:1-16

How gloriously Stephen traced the story of God's saving purposes. He started not with man, not even with the mighty man of faith Abraham, but with the God of glory who made himself known and spoke so clearly. Everything begins with the sovereignty of God. And what God begins he completes (Phil. 1:6; Gen. 28:13-15), watching over it in dynamic providence (Jer. 1:12; Eph.1:11). Go through the passage and see how constantly the emphasis is on the activity of God and his sure purposes, as the generations succeeded each other. Stephen stated both historical and spiritual facts, emphasizing the faithful covenant of God (v. 8) which, of course, was given and believed long before the rite of circumcision, which was the sign and seal of that covenant (Rom. 4:9-12). The failures of even God's chosen men (for example, the pride of Joseph and the blindness of the self-centred sons of Jacob) are portrayed in the context of God's mysterious overruling (Gen. 50:20). The Jewish council was being forced to face the facts of their own history in the story of their ancestor Jacob. The descendants of this man, who was renamed 'Israel', ended up slaves in the land of Egypt, under subjection to alien rule, just as they were in Stephen's time under the resented yoke of Rome. The Jews liked to look back and remember the glorious days, just as we do, but through this sermon they were forced to face their failures, which were at heart spiritual. How many congregations and ministers look back and remember better days when God's blessing was on them, but simply do not recall their own failures caused by disobedience? When the glory has departed there is usually a reason (1 Sam. 4:21-22; Judges 16:20).

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7:17-29

The story sweeps through the centuries and four hundred years pass, often dark and seemingly hopeless. But there was God's promise and God's time (v. 17). God's plans are time-tabled and he is never late nor early (Gal. 4:4; Rev. 12:14; Dan. 9:2). On the one hand the Israelites grew in number in Egypt, but on the other hand the Egyptians became more bitter against them (Exod. 1:7-12). Did the powers of evil have some sense of the significance of the approaching time? We cannot tell. But the initiative was with God and his methods were so very simple. A child was born, a child destined for significant action in the plan of salvation. That child, providentially spared as a baby, was trained in administration and diplomacy in the court of Egypt, not only to be the instrument to overthrow Egypt but to be the servant of God and the leader of his people. But this man Moses, whom Stephen's accusers idolized, was far from perfect. His

awakening sense of destiny was mingled with a hasty and precipitate temper and he had to flee the country to escape the consequences of murder. Stephen emphasized that all that Israel was, everything they had, and the whole story of their history were the work of God's grace alone. But the Jews had taken their eyes off God. They idolized their land; but God had begun in Ur of the Chaldees. They idolized the rite of circumcision and all its attendant ceremonies; but faith in the promise came first. They idolized Moses; but when God first sent him to their ancestors they did not recognize him as anointed by God and they pushed him aside. On the human level they set back the work of God forty years even though God used that time to prepare his servant. What a story! What a God!

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7:30-43

By reasoning from Scripture, Stephen was probing the dull consciences of the rulers of the Jews. He forced them to see that what their forefathers had done to Moses, God's appointed deliverer, *they* had done to Jesus whom they had failed to recognize. Note how similar the language of verse 35 is to that in 2:22-24. This would not have escaped the notice of the Sanhedrin, but they did not interrupt the flow of Stephen's address. How could they? It was simply Old Testament history, which they accepted. They knew God had done signs and wonders by the hand of Moses. They knew the people had refused his leadership, snarling against him with their worldly complaints. They knew God had had to discipline their unbelief and disobedience by turning them back from the promised land, because they were not fit to enter it, or administer it in the interest of God's kingdom. They knew also that this Jesus had spoken against them publicly, declaring that the kingdom would be taken from them and would be given to a people who would bring forth fruit to the praise of God (Matt. 21:42-46). It was this rejected Moses to whom God spoke the words of the Law at Sinai. It was this Moses who cast down the tables of the Law and broke them to bring home the conviction of sin to the hearts of the people (Exod. 32:15-20). These men, so proud of their religion and so sure that *they*, above all people, were pleasing to God, had it thrown in their faces that from the wilderness wanderings right through to the Babylonian captivity they had been a people contrary to God. Who were they to stand in judgement over Jesus of Nazareth? Such was the case against them that they found no opportunity to interrupt.

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7:30-43

Stephen was thoroughly steeped in Scripture. He not only knew his Bible accurately and comprehensively, he had allowed his whole pattern of thought to be moulded by Scripture so that he viewed history and interpreted it in the light of God's activity, not just man's. This is one of the defects of our modern attitudes. We think too much as the world thinks, placing man at the centre and assessing all things in terms of how they affect us and our fulfilment. In history we are dealing with God and God is dealing with us. The ongoing story of the world cannot be understood in terms of politics, economics, philosophies and ideologies. It is God who rules in the kingdoms of men and no rising or falling of power is without his involvement (Dan. 4:17, 25, 32). One great emphasis in Stephen's speech is that his hearers, and we ourselves, should learn the lessons of history. No doubt, as they listened, the Sanhedrin would be made to think of Psalms 78 and 106, and when Stephen quoted from Amos 5:25-27 (v. 43) they would think of the immediately preceding words of the prophet which had such a solemn emphasis (Amos 5:18-24). The case Stephen was building up was that the worship Israel offered in these past days was very often not given to God but to false idols, and this led to their deportation into captivity in Babylon. It seems as if Stephen was well aware that the same terrible fate awaited Jerusalem again because of the blind rejection of Jesus, their God-sent Messiah (Matt. 23:37-39). Man-centred religion is blind. It distorts the image of God and brings judgement from God. When people reject what God has said about himself, their ideas about God are progressively distorted (Rom. 1:19-25).

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7:44-53

The Jews had idolized the temple and in so doing tended to anchor God to Jerusalem. Stephen pointed out that God met with his people in times past as they wandered from place to place. They had the tabernacle,

the moveable tent of meeting instituted by God, before they had the temple. Neither structure was essential for the ongoing worship and work of God. It is not locality or buildings that matter but the obedience of faith. How easily we all become tied down to buildings and to forms of service. Both are needed and must be worthy but they are only instruments of service. When a church building closes some people stop going to church at all. When a hymn-book or a piece of church furniture is changed some people protest as if something sacred had been desecrated. This is idolatry. Stephen was challenging people who cared more for the temple than the God of the temple, and set far more store by man-made rules and traditions than the living Word of God (Matt. 15:1-9). Right through this sermon Stephen stayed firmly on unassailable Scripture truth. He simply stated fact upon fact and left it to the working power of the Holy Spirit to apply the truth to the minds and hearts of his hearers. Both the tabernacle and temple had been built by the command and inspiration of God but they were never intended to be ends in themselves. God's revelation of his person and purposes did not and could not end with buildings, moveable or permanent. Stephen quoted Isaiah 66:1-2 and no doubt was thinking also of Isaiah 57:15; Jeremiah 7:1-7; and 26:1-15. This was powerful preaching indeed. Biblical preaching, by preachers who themselves are right with God, carries its own authority.

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7:44-53

In verse 51 Stephen, being a wise preacher and possibly sensing that his audience would listen to no more, summed up his sermon. He declared that the Jews, as a people, had consistently refused God whenever he had drawn near to speak to them. Their sin was the sin of unbelief. That sin had come to its climax in their deliberate refusal of Jesus the Righteous One. The whole Old Testament pointed forward to Jesus (Luke 24:27,44). It was not Stephen but the Sanhedrin who had gone against the testimony of Moses. The language used in verse 51 was not likely to endear the preacher to his hearers but it was the very language God used in Exodus 33:5. The charge against them, that their circumcision was formal and ritual rather than real, must also have cut them to the heart. Think of the reaction of people when challenged that their baptism (by whatever method) had no real significance. What Moses had said about their fathers was equally true of them. Their disobedience was manifest and inexcusable (Lev. 26:40-43; Deut. 10:12-22; Jer. 9:23-26). Their fathers had persecuted the prophets who spoke of the coming Righteous One, and they had gone further by killing him when he came. No doubt the Sanhedrin would reject the charge, as they had done earlier in speaking to Jesus himself. The whole of Matthew chapter 23 is a devastating exposure of the falseness of Pharisaic religion, and verses 29-38 are of particular application to the end of Stephen's sermon. It was a sermon on judgement. It brought people face to face with God through his Word and it challenged them in respect of their rejection of Jesus. The atmosphere of hatred must have been terrible. It was hellish. The preacher knew it was going to cost him his life.

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7:54-60

The hellish fury and murderous intent of the Sanhedrin echo the happenings surrounding the death of Jesus. But just as God countermanded the evil of men by raising Jesus from the dead, so God here 'turned the tables' on wicked men who thought that the death of Stephen would put an end to this Jesus movement with all its danger to their religious monopoly. It was quite the opposite. The young Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus (v. 58), was in these very events being 'worked on' by God's Spirit to bring him ultimately to Christ and to make him the significant apostle to the Gentiles. Of course, to begin with, Saul's intense hatred of all Christ stood for grew stronger (9:1-2). Who would have thought that such good could come out of such evil? God is greater than men or devils, and we need to remember this when things are hard and when the work of the gospel seems fruitless. We know so little of what is actually happening at any given time. Our part is so often the struggle, the suffering and the contradiction. But then, as Paul says later, 'death is at work in us, but life is at work in you' (2 Cor. 4:7-12). We see in Stephen a man conformed to the death of Christ (Phil. 3:10), sharing the scorn and suffering heaped on his Master, going outside the camp bearing the disgrace of Christ (Heb. 13:13). But that was only part of the cost in this saintly man's life. There must have been already a deep inward 'dying to sin and self', and a yielding to and a glad acceptance of the will of God. We do not become willing martyrs suddenly. The fruit of such

costly consecration is wonderful to behold. Think of the quiet serenity of Stephen in the midst of the screaming fury of his enemies.

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7:54-60

No one can read the story of Stephen without being aware that he was a truly Christ-like man. When we take 6:15 and 7:55-56 together we are caused to think of the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-2), and of the Man Christ Jesus who also was put to death outside the city wall but who prayed for his murderers. The truth about Stephen is not simply that he was a man grounded in and committed to the Scriptures, he was a man who lived close to God. In his whole life he shared in the sufferings of Christ, although not always in so obvious a way as on this particular occasion. His walk with God was the source of the conviction and power that rested on his ministry (cf. Phil. 3:8-10; 2 Cor. 12:7-10). It seems that the young man Saul was profoundly impressed by this incident and that may be one reason why later he spoke so much about the connection between suffering and glory. Stephen's martyrdom was in public and Peter may likewise have been deeply impressed by what happened, for he later spoke of the Spirit of glory and of God resting on those who suffer fiery trial (1 Peter 4:12-14). Peter may well have been amazed that it was Stephen and not himself who was being put to death because, after all, Peter was very much in the forefront of the apostolic church. Later in the story there is the same mysterious sparing of Peter when James was executed (Acts 12:1-10). Our experiences may differ greatly but our attitude must be the same as Stephen's. He looked steadfastly into heaven. He looked to Jesus (Heb. 12:1-3). And he saw Jesus, not sitting at the right hand of God but standing, as if to signify his immediate nearness to, concern and welcome for his faithful servant.

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8:1-3

There is ground for believing that after his conversion to Christ Saul, an eyewitness of this execution, recounted the details of the story of Stephen's trial to Luke, with whom he had a long association in the work of the gospel. At this time the Sanhedrin looked upon the young man Saul as the best person to deal with this heretical Jesus movement. In 7:58 we had the first indication of Saul's part in Stephen's death. In today's verses we are told of his continued attitude and persecuting activity. Having listened carefully to Stephen, and having been well taught in the Scriptures by the famous teacher Gamaliel (22:3), Saul saw that there could be no compromise between what the Christian apostles were preaching and the old order of Judaism. One of them had to go. His bitter enmity and determination were not short-lived and were part of the general outburst of persecution (9:1-2). Later in life he never forgot the part he played and it was an element of his personal testimony (1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13-14). Something of the intensity of his enmity is seen in Acts 26:9-11. It was a source of constant wonder and worship in Paul's heart that a man such as he had been should be called to be a servant of Christ. Read 1 Timothy 1:12-17. We can understand why the early church was slow at first to believe that this man had been converted (Acts 9:26-30). In a sense the whole story of Saul, who became Paul, is a rebuke to our unbelief. Do we expect such opponents of the gospel to be saved? God is able. Their first reactions may be fierce resentment and bitter refusal. Of course, God can also work salvation in quiet uncomplicated ways. Religious Nicodemus took a long time to think it all through (John 3:1-21). With the Ethiopian eunuch it was like the rising of the sun (8:26-40).

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8:1-3

This significant chapter begins with a funeral and a wave of bitter persecution against the church, but it ends with the gospel on its way to far-off Ethiopia. Did any realize what a turning point in the work of the church this was? It is suggested that the Sanhedrin deliberately stirred up a riot among the Jews following on the trial in the temple court. Pilate, possibly still the governor, was insecure in his position with Rome and no doubt thought it impolitic to interfere. Popular opinion was running high against the Christians and, of course, there is a devil who inspires and encourages such outbursts. The persecution was probably directed mostly against the Jews from a Greek background (the group to which Stephen belonged) and they were driven from Jerusalem. But it seems to have been an almost total purge of the believers, with

the exception of the apostles, who were either in hiding or were tolerated because they had become public and popular figures. Such a sweeping out of Christians seems staggering when you think of the many thousands who had been added to the church so recently. We who have not known persecution dare not criticize those who kept quiet in the situation described in verse 3. Some godly people let it be seen where they stood, giving Stephen a worthy burial. They would be marked men after that. Two well-known men, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, had done the same for Jesus (John 19:38-42). There was deep sorrow in the hearts of the believers. It was not just because of Stephen's death but because a blow had been struck against God's work and people. Saul was ravaging the church. How they must have prayed! Their prayers were in the process of being answered.

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8:4-8

The church was scattered. Imagine the feelings of many. What did this mean? Was this the *only* result of costly faithfulness? Was this the end of the revival? What would happen next? Would the persecution ever stop? Their leaders were still in Jerusalem. Were *they* safe only because they had compromised their position and had come to terms with the authorities? Saul, the leader of the opposition, a mighty intellectual with passionate drive, was travelling far and wide to root out and imprison any Jews who had professed faith in Christ. What did the scattered Christians do? Recognizing that time and opportunity were short they were eager and instant in their witness. Remember Jesus' words in 1:8. Their commission was worldwide but it took persecution to get them out of Jerusalem, where the gospel was in danger of being confined to a tiny area of the world and to the small nation of the Jews. But now, the apostles being settled in Jerusalem, God had his men ready for outreach. Philip, one of the deacons, perhaps earlier overshadowed by Stephen, went to Samaria. That in itself is astonishing for Samaria was a place of bigotry and opposition to everything Jewish (John 4:9). Indeed the Jews regarded the Samaritans as 'religious half-breeds' and the boldness of Philip in going there suggests that he was guided and indeed constrained by God to do so. If it seems amazing, think back to John 4:39-42; cf. Matthew 9:36-38. A spiritual work of salvation had been done there by Jesus. But no one since then had gone to minister to them, to build them up in their faith. Had it all fallen to the ground? After many days a God-sent man came to a God-prepared place and there was a glorious response.

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8:9-13

Corinth was another place prepared in the providence of God for the coming of the herald of the gospel (Acts 18:9-10). The story of Cornelius (Acts 10:1-8) is another example of how the grace of God goes before us preparing the way for ministry. But sometimes, as in Samaria, it almost seems too late. The city was under the power of evil, dominated by a man called Simon, who must have had some 'charisma' for the people regarded him as god-like. He seems to have been able to work astonishing signs and wonders over a long period (v. 11). In early Christian literature (not in Scripture) there are many stories about Simon, including one that he had a woman assistant whom he declared to be an incarnation of the 'divine mind'. It all sounds very contemporary with our generation's preoccupation with horoscopes, the occult and mysticism. We must see how total falsehood can present itself in a very religious and even spiritual guise (2 Cor. 11:14). The influence of the devil is seen here in a very different form from the story of the wild man of Gadara (Mark 5:1-20) but the outcome was similar. With the arrival of the evangelist in Samaria the gospel of Jesus Christ broke into the situation with saving power and many were brought to faith. They were brought from the power of Satan to God (Acts 26:18) and we can imagine something of the relief in their hearts as the fear allied to darkness gave place to the peace and light of Christ. They were drawn by the hope and promise of the gospel which had spoken so directly to their need. We should be more aware of and have more compassion for people held in the grip of evil. Their only hope is in the gospel. Simon also made a *profession* of faith. But what did it signify?

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8:14-17

These verses make clear that gathered companies of believers in various places were not independent units but part of the whole church and under the necessary supervision, discipline and guidance of the

apostles. Peter and John were the obvious men to send, although in the past they had shown traditional prejudice against the Samaritans (Luke 9:52-56). On reaching Samaria they realized that there was a degree of misunderstanding in the faith of the Samaritans. They had been baptized but apparently had not been taught of the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit. There followed prayer, the laying on of hands and the receiving of the Holy Spirit. We must be very careful not to build a doctrine of the Spirit on a passage of narrative which simply tells what happened to a limited group of people on one occasion. The story in Acts goes on to make plain that God worked in a variety of ways, sometimes with astonishing signs and sometimes not. We must not think that then or now the laying on of hands by any official is the way the Holy Spirit is communicated. *We* do not control the Spirit. These Samaritans, so aware of being regarded as rejects by the Jews, may have needed this special sign to reassure them. After all, God is kind. He makes allowances for our limitations. Even the apostles may have needed this sovereign sign to confirm that this work of salvation was authentic. The New Testament teaches that it is by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit that people are enabled to hear and believe the gospel (Eph. 2:1-2). That Holy Spirit indwells every believer (Rom. 5:5; 8:9-11). The working of the Spirit is sovereign and free and is neither directed nor controlled by men (John 3:5-8).

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8:18-24

What was the true nature of Simon's belief (v. 13)? He could not deny the signs and wonders that accompanied the gospel. Here was power greater than his own (cf. Exod. 7:8-13). His followers were turning away from him and he was in danger of becoming a nobody. That may have been why he decided to 'go along with' the Christian movement. Perhaps he thought with his previous reputation in evil things he might soon become a star attraction in the world of evangelism. His confession of faith and baptism would have been a talking point in Samaria, especially among the new converts who may have almost instinctively looked to Simon for spiritual leadership. Are we to think of Simon as a deliberate deceiver or do we credit him with a degree of sincerity? Sooner rather than later a chance remark by Simon in verses 18-19 suggested that his heart had not been touched by God's grace. He was interested in power and in the working of signs and he certainly wanted to be in on this new movement which was proving popular. But his seeming spiritual commitment was self-centred and for his own ends. This kind of thing happens again and again when people are attracted to certain forms of Christian activity for which they feel they have a flair or an interest. But this does not mean they have been truly converted, not even if they go as far as being baptized and joining the church, as Simon did. The only proofs of conversion are obedience, continuance and growth in grace. Jesus' words in Luke 11:24-26 counsel us to be wise and careful in dealing with new converts because a superficial response to the gospel can prove to be dangerous. The last state of that person can prove to be worse than the first.

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8:25-26

The situation was changing. The preachers left Samaria. The apostles returned to Jerusalem preaching in various Samaritan villages as they went, but we are given no further details. Philip was sent on his way to his next assignment, far away from crowds, as recorded in the next verses. There is no *mention of setting a church in order in Samaria; no appointing of elders; no systematic teaching* of the new converts. Evangelism was surging out in all directions, and lack of teaching may be one reason why so soon there were many heresies, false teachings, false prophets and false moral standards affecting, infecting and afflicting the early church (1 Tim. 1:18-20; 2 Tim. 4:3-4; Jude 3,4). We have already read of Ananias and Sapphira and now Simon likewise was doing the devil's work inside the church. Of course, God was already in the process of preparing a teacher to spell out the doctrinal foundation of the gospel on which the church must stand. Paul's conversion is in the next chapter. The church was to stand on objective God-given truth, not on subjective personal experience. The story goes on and Luke is not concerned to tell us every single thing that happened but he does show us the working of God by his Holy Spirit. There are the stirring public occasions when it seems a mighty work of salvation is being done (together with false conversions). There are also the simple one-to-one encounters in which a believer speaks to another person and discovers a heart well and truly prepared by God to receive the gospel. Do we expect God to

use us to speak to others? Do we want to be used like this? Are we ready? Are we willing to turn aside from friends and go to the desert to find a lost sheep? A good shepherd would.

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8:26-40

The Ethiopian was a high-ranking civil servant, a well-educated intellectual, travelling in the equivalent of a Rolls Royce and certainly not alone. He was a God-fearing Gentile who had been to Jerusalem as a worshipper and on his homeward journey was reading Isaiah 53, aloud as was the custom. What contact he had had or what knowledge he had of the stirring events of Pentecost we cannot tell. There is no doubt he had a seeking heart and if he had perhaps read on to Isaiah 56:3-8 there would have been a kindling of hope along with a questioning as to how this blessing from God could come to a man like him. He had been in Jerusalem during a time of revival but spiritually he was still in the dark. He had been at the temple (a dead church) and now he was reading his Bible and longing for someone to explain it to him, just like many 'church' people who have never heard about conversion. Formal religion had failed to help him to find God. Now the Scriptures, opened up by a man of faith under the guidance of the Spirit, brought the Ethiopian to Christ. It seems to have been ignorance rather than unwillingness that had hindered him, because as soon as he saw and understood he wanted to take his stand as a believer. Being baptized he confessed his faith publicly before all those who accompanied him. Note that it was his understanding that was first engaged. Then his heart was moved by the gospel of the innocent one who suffered for the salvation of the guilty. The glory of the Saviour's substitutionary death gripped him and brought him to the place where his will was yielded to God. This is conversion. It was the work of the Holy Spirit, through the Scriptures, even though the Spirit is not mentioned.

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8:26-40

There is a final lesson to learn here about witness, service and evangelism. The story is couched in miraculous terms (vv. 26,39) and this is not to be wondered at because it is God who controls situations and creates openings. The simplicity of the contact and the willingness of the Ethiopian to talk about personal issues of faith mark it all out as the work of God. Philip was obviously someone who walked with God, available for God, and the outcome of the occasion proves it was no mere impulse of his own human spirit that sent him off to the desert. We have no reason to believe the evangelist was anything other than an ordinary man (if a Christian can ever be said to be ordinary). As far as we know he was neither an intellectual nor a philosopher, nor a graduate of a university. But he was well versed in the Scriptures and as such he was fully qualified to counsel someone who was his intellectual and social superior. This does not mean we despise the education of those who have the capacity and have had the opportunity. Nor do we denigrate the great benefit of cultural influences and training. But we do affirm that educational, social, financial and professional achievement themselves do not make a Christian man spiritual, nor do they qualify him to be a leader in the affairs of the church. Love and loyalty to Christ and a life of obedience in the lesser things of church life (Philip was a deacon, not even an elder) are what mark people out as usable. Sometimes it is those of equal social status and shared interests who minister to each other. But it is by no means always so. The man from the court of Ethiopia was willing to be ministered to by Philip whom he had met for the first time. Grace was already at work.

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9:1-2

While all the wonderful things of the previous chapter were going on in one area there was terrible persecution and harassment in another. We hope the two areas of the church remembered to pray for each other. It is a device of the devil to use news of success in one place to demoralize the workers in another place where, perhaps for a long spell, there has been little sign of blessing. The intense fury of Saul the persecutor must have been extremely frightening to believers everywhere. Many times since then a work of God has seemingly been in danger of extinction because of one prominent person of capacity who was a virulent unbeliever. You can imagine Christians praying for Saul to be restrained, frustrated or even removed from the scene. But were there any who prayed for Saul's conversion? Could their faith rise to that seeming impossibility? God is able. We will read the story of the persecutor's conversion. But first

think of this man who so much needed to be converted. He was a Jew who was proud of the heritage and privileges he had grown up in (Rom. 9:1-5). He was a religious man of the best kind of Pharisee who stood for spiritual values over against the rationalistic Sadducees. He stood for the kind of religion that was expressed in moral righteousness and obedience to God. He was earnest and zealous, serving his religion with all his powers, and that is more than can be said of many Christians. He was a man with a tremendous range of intellect and education who could express himself far better in writing than in the spoken word (2 Cor. 10:10). He was not much to look at. But he was God's chosen man for the service of the gospel, although that was not yet obvious.

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9:3-9

Read Philippians 3:3-14 and see just how radical a religious and spiritual transformation this conversion was. There is no evidence that Saul had previously met Jesus personally. He knew the story of his birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension. He knew about the events of Pentecost and the preaching that declared this Jesus to be the Christ. He knew the effect this risen Jesus had had on the lives of men and women and how they were willing to suffer and die rather than deny him. He knew that these disciples professed to have found love, life and lasting joy in this Jesus and that their whole attitude to him was grounded in the Scriptures of the Old Testament, from which they reasoned persuasively in defence of their faith. Paul knew all that, but he was not prepared to open his mind to it nor to yield his will to it. This 'new gospel' which insisted that only in and through Jesus could he be right with God and acceptable to God was contrary to all his tradition and upbringing and he would not have it. In Romans 10:1-4, especially verse 3 we see Paul's own description of his earlier attitude to salvation. He was going to do it himself. It was salvation by works. Read Romans 3:9-20 and see how Paul came to recognize his own wrongness. Read Romans 7:7-11 and see how Paul had come under conviction by God's law. He came to realize that the raging spirit of persecution had been in measure at least the result of conviction of sin by the Spirit of God. We are not told his reaction to Stephen's exposition of Jewish history, but it may have been the same resentment and fury as the rest of the Sanhedrin (7:54-58). Perhaps Stephen had died feeling his sermon was a failure. If he did, little did he realize its outcome!

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9:3-9

It is only by a detailed study of Paul's epistles that we discover what this conversion experience really meant to him. Without being aware of it he was under conviction by God. He was in the process of being brought to Christ. But such was the unique drive of his personality that he had to be stopped in his tracks. God's time had come. These particular outbursts of evil had to stop for the sake of the church. This man, destined to serve God in the gospel, was summarily brought to a halt. He knew instantly that he was dealing with God (vv. 4-5). It does not actually say here that Paul saw the risen Christ, as he had heard Stephen say he saw him, but later verses (17, 27; 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8) make it plain that he did see Jesus. To begin with he did not recognize who was speaking and Jesus identified himself and asked the crucial question (v. 4). Saul was convicted that, in persecuting the Christians, he was fighting against God. His companions saw an extraordinary light and heard sounds they did not understand. But to Saul it was inward illumination and verbal explanation. In simplest of terms, he saw the light, and in that moment he believed (2 Cor. 4:6). Saul's companions did not know what to make of it. Unbelievers seldom understand spiritual things. They must have been surprised by the subsequent change of plans, but there was no opposition from them and they led their blind leader to Damascus. It was truly an astonishing conversion. It was unique. The one thing we must not do is to require everyone to have this kind of 'Damascus Road' experience. God deals with people as they need to be dealt with. The variety in Jesus' methods in the Gospels makes that plain and clear.

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9:10-19

Everything about Saul's conversion was a total miracle of the grace of God. Every detail signifies the clear and specific action of God. His work of preparation of, and communication to, Saul is paralleled by a similar work in the case of Ananias. Both men, one in his home in Damascus and one on the open road,

were spoken to by means of a vision. Both were the kind of men to whom God could communicate his will. Both were bewildered and uncertain (9:5,13). We can understand the reaction of Ananias who, being totally human, began to give God information about the arch-persecutor. But he was behind schedule, because Saul was not a persecutor any more. He was a believing brother who needed the ministry of encouragement, and it is wonderful how promptly Ananias obeyed. The gentle hands of fellowship and acceptance were laid on the blind and shattered Saul and he could see again. What thoughts must have raced through the mind and heart of the converted Pharisee? God had told him he was a chosen instrument; to carry the gospel to the Gentile world (whom Saul as a Jew would regard as Gentile dogs). He would be God's spokesman to kings and to the people of Israel and would suffer many things for the sake of the name of Jesus. It seems clear from verse 9 that Paul was in a state of shock. Life was going to be totally different. He was a public figure in Jewish society, one of a significant family who would no doubt ostracize him. Something of Paul's family status with Jews and Romans alike is seen in Acts 23:16-22. God's comprehensive preparation and provision for the future of the work of the gospel is clear. The fact of Paul being a Roman citizen proved to be very significant.

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9:20-25

After Saul had regained some strength (v. 19), he immediately showed evidence of a change of heart. He confronted the Jews on their own ground of Old Testament Scripture and proved that these Scriptures were fulfilled in Christ. The Jews, who had expected this man to be their strong ally in hounding the Christians, were confounded, and their surprised resentment soon expressed itself in specific opposition. It is amazing how these intensely religious men seemed to turn so easily to murder as the best solution to their problems. From 2 Corinthians 11:32-33 it is clear that the secular authorities were also enraged by Saul's activities. But in spite of the atmosphere of criticism, resentment and jealousy Saul's preaching grew in power and influence. Everyone was astonished at the change in the man. Some of the believers may still have felt suspicious of him, just as we tend to be when some notorious opponent of the gospel or some public figure claims conversion in unusual circumstances and then becomes a preacher. The Jewish leaders Saul had originally come to support in their anti-Jesus hatred were now plotting to murder him. He needed help. The disciples in Damascus were converted Jews, men Saul had come to persecute, but now they were prepared to take a risk to be his rescuers. 'By coincidence' (actually God's providence) one of them had a house on the city wall and so escape was possible through an upstairs window. Paul was prepared to look ridiculous. After all, a public figure being lowered in a basket is scarcely dignified. But Paul's dignity was just one of the things he was happy to give up to serve his Master. Perhaps he smiled at the situation. He was no longer proud. We too have to be prepared for anything!

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9:20-25

It is not easy to be sure of the exact timetable of events following Saul's conversion. It is suggested that there was an extended period of time between verses 21 and 22, and in Galatians 1:17-2:1 Paul speaks of a spell of fourteen years which elapsed before he was launched on his life's work as missionary to the Gentiles. Scholars are divided as to when these periods of time began and ended but our interest is not so much historical curiosity as grasping the spiritual lessons to be learned from the facts. One of the first of these is the danger of precipitate action in the cause of Christ. Saul's initial witness in Damascus was necessary to reassure the believers who had been waiting fearfully for the persecutor's arrival. That witness was a source of blessing to many, but there was more at stake. Never forget that this man was called to be the instrument of worldwide evangelization *and* to be the writer of a great part of the New Testament. For him to settle for anything less than this would have been to fall short of the will of God for his life. By his preaching he could have turned Damascus and Jerusalem upside down in no time at all and polarized opinion in both religious and secular camps. But that would not necessarily have advanced the gospel. *Activity* in the name of the gospel is not necessarily *service*, because activity can be concerned only with the immediate situation and may have little or no long-term significance. In Arabia Paul was being prepared, not in the midst of activity, but away from the terrible danger of public popularity and

confrontation. Learn well that unprepared men and women can be a danger to the church, however enthusiastic, talented and well meaning they may be.

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9:26-31

It is comforting to realize just how hard a start Saul (soon to be called Paul) had to his Christian service. When he went to Jerusalem after his escape from Damascus his one-time Jewish colleagues regarded him as a traitor and the Christians, with some justification, had deep suspicions about the reality of his conversion. But just as God had prepared Ananias as a friend and advocate in Damascus, so in Jerusalem Barnabas was in position to testify to the genuineness of the man and the spiritual validity of his conversion. We cannot tell what previous contact Barnabas had had with Paul but he saw something of his significance. In our congregations we too should be looking for God to raise up and single out men and women for specific service, and we should be able to recognize them. Note carefully that Saul made it his business to take up the work of Stephen who had been martyred, and he engaged in disputation with the Greek-speaking Jews (cf. 6:8-10). Their reaction was predictable and they turned with fury against this man who had been one of them but had become a 'turncoat'. But it was not the opposition or danger that caused Paul to depart and this is made plain later. The man of God was not in any sense infallible and in Acts 22:17-21 he argued with God as to the viability and potential of the work he was doing. No doubt it was a useful piece of evangelism but it was getting in the way of his major life's work. His task was different. He was to go to the Gentiles, and his written ministry was to be far more significant than his preaching. In spite of all the difficulties it is manifestly clear that God was controlling and directing the course and progress of this man's life and ministry.

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9:26-31

Saul was in no way a 'one man band' and in his epistles he often mentions those to whom he owed a great debt. Without partnership in the gospel he might not have survived, as this incident and others make plain (Phil. 1:3-5; Acts 19:28-31; Rom. 16:1-4ff; 2 Cor. 7:5-7). There is something almost humorous in Luke's picture of a strong-willed character such as Paul being 'sent' to Tarsus by his friends. Just how long he stayed there we cannot say with certainty but it could be as long as ten years. It was after this that he became God's instrument in the world-wide missionary movement to the Gentiles and in the writing of most of the epistles in the New Testament. Paul says of this time that he went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia (Gal. 1:21) and we can assume that he exercised ministry in that whole area. He remained there until Barnabas sought him out and brought him to Antioch (11:25-26). In a sense Paul was out of the public eye for a considerable spell but he was by no means irrelevant. The very fact that he, the arch-persecutor, had been brought to faith in Christ gave the churches a spell of peace, free from persecution, and they had time and opportunity to build themselves up in their faith. But be clear, it was the fact of his conversion and not his being sent out of the limelight that gave the church peace. This relative quietness was a necessary spell for the Christians after the great upheaval of revival and the strain of persecution. There had been so much going on that the life of the church was in a state of constant flux. But at the same time persecution had made the business of confessing Christ a costly thing, and this is all to the good. It means you have Christians who are in earnest.

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9:32-35

Having summarized the story of Paul, Luke now reminds his readers that while God had been working in and with Paul in one or two areas, he had also been at work in other places, in and through other men. This is a reminder we all need when we get preoccupied with our own little corner. It may be one reason why God ordains for us quiet spells with little to show in order to turn our eyes to what he is doing elsewhere. Peter, last referred to in 8:25, had been preaching in various places in Judea. Philip (8:40) had also been preaching in that general area. Now we are told there were 'saints' at Lydda, men and women set apart for God in Christ through faith in the gospel. But no one person or group ever does a complete work of salvation. Remember Jesus' words to his disciples in John 4:38: 'Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labour'. We are not told who evangelized Lydda but it is no

reflection on their ministry that this man had remained paralysed. There is no indication that he was already a believer, although he may have been. We are not told the cause of his paralysis. It could have been the result of illness, or of one wild act of folly or of a gradual sliding into a sinful life that left him debilitated and pathetic. He was certainly a picture of a sinner, broken, helpless and hopeless until the good news of Jesus Christ was declared to him in the power of the Holy Spirit. It was a simple statement of fact: Jesus Christ heals you. And it was heard in faith. The statement in verse 35 is staggering. It may signify that a whole community was brought to faith. It certainly signifies that God was at work. We are often surprised to discover what God has been doing without our knowing it.

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9:36-43

The previous miracle led to a fresh gathering in of believers in an area that was partly Gentile. Was this an indication of or a bridge over to the time when the gospel would go freely and fully to the Gentiles? If the physical miracle was also a sign of Christ's power to deliver from the bondage of sin, then it tells of life from the dead. Every conversion is, of course, a total resurrection from the deadness of trespasses and sin (Eph. 2:1-3; Rom. 6:4; 1 Peter 1:3). The story is full of instruction. Think first of Dorcas. She was a woman whose Christianity was real. It was not just a personal religious experience nor a spiritual hope of heaven. It affected her way of life (James 2:14-18). She worked for others and served them for Jesus' sake. How many of us would be described by those who know us well in terms of verse 36? Little wonder that the Christians mourned when she died. We are not told who had brought the gospel to this community. God is always at work. Note that such a saintly woman was not spared the common afflictions of sickness and death. But remember also that the great need Peter was summoned to help in was not primarily the healing of Dorcas. To die is to be with Christ which is far better (Phil. 1:23). But the people needed her and she was called back from the dead, just as Lazarus had been recalled from the grave by Jesus (John 11:38-44). We are taught by Scripture that, for believers, being absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:6-8). Was Dorcas sorry to be called back from the happy presence of Jesus to this world with all its hurts and defects? If it was for service to Jesus and to people in need, Dorcas would be glad and willing.

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9:36-43

We ended the previous note with a question which we did not really answer. It was designed to make us think of the reality of the heavenly world in which Dorcas had certainly not been dead, since she died believing in him who is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25-26). It is perhaps also a parable of how our Lord came from the heavenly glory down to such a world as this. Dorcas came back from where there are no tears (Rev. 7:17) to a room full of weeping mourners. You can be sure her first reaction was to care for those she had loved and served. She would have no desire to be the focus of attention. Her joy was to be a servant of others. There would be no resentment at having to leave heaven for a while. Note now Peter's attitude as well as his action. The whole scene was charged with emotion, always a dangerous situation. Their human distress was natural in the face of death and loss, and Christians should not deny their sadness, because grief expressed is part of the healing process. But here it is possible their distress was becoming hysterical. There was absolutely no showmanship with Peter even though he had already been used by God to work miracles. He put everyone out. The sight of a miracle at that point would have focused attention on Peter. Peter needed quietness to seek and to know the mind of God. He must have been given the assurance of faith that the woman was to be raised because, after all, the decision and the power both belonged to God alone, not to Peter. We are always in great danger if we think *we* have power. Apart from Jesus we can do nothing at all (John 15:4-5). We are told of Peter humbly bowed in prayer in the presence of God. That is where a man is useful and usable.

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10:1-8

The story of the church continues and develops. It always does, because it is God's story, and he is always at work in any situation before the preacher arrives. His grace goes before his workers. Of course, even men of faith are not always aware of the situation developing under the gracious guidance, sovereign power and sure plan of God although they believe in these doctrines. The end of the previous chapter told of Peter staying at Joppa, and the significant information is given that he stayed, not in a five-star hotel, but with Simon the tanner. Strict Jews held that tanning was an unclean trade because it involved handling dead animals. The fact that Peter stayed there indicates that already some of his deep Jewish prejudices were fading, although he may still have been slightly uncomfortable about what he was doing. The story will make that plain when we see his reaction to the vision. But we do see in this simple fact of where he stayed an indication of the preparatory work of God in the mind and emotions of the man who was to be used so significantly, so soon, in opening the door of the gospel to Gentiles. We underestimate God. He is always far ahead of us in his planning and preparation and we need to be reminded of the quiet and silent working of his providence. It was of immense significance in many ways when the risen Christ said that he would go before his disciples (Matt. 28:7) and that he prepared a place for them (John 14:2). We have to learn that in the operation of God's gracious purposes there may be unexpected situations for us, but they are never unprepared. God works at both ends of a situation and just as he was preparing Peter, so we will see his preparation of Cornelius.

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10:1-8

Cornelius' attitude and manner of life are a rebuke to many Christians who are too aware of their own spirituality. In his personal and family life there were reverence, godliness and prayerfulness. He ministered to the poor and even his household servants were won over by his godliness (vv. 7-8, 22). This man's story warns us never to underestimate what is going on in the hearts of religious people even when they seem far from understanding the gospel. Cornelius was an earnest and thoughtful man who had seen and been attracted to the basic integrity and morality of Judaism as taught in the Old Testament, over against the debased and indulgent religions that were fashionable in his day. Luke may have been recalling the stories of two other centurions (see Luke 7:1-10; 23:47) and we marvel when we see these professional soldiers having such reverent constraint upon their lives. If we take Romans 3:11 as a radical statement of the indifference of unbelief, then we must see that the Holy Spirit in his regenerating work was already active in Cornelius' soul, even though he may not have been aware of it. Here was a man we would not describe as a Christian believer, but he prayed and his prayers were heard and answered. We are not told what his prayers actually were but it is clear he was responsive to what light he had concerning God, and when fuller light came through Peter he responded. He neither looked for nor expected angelic visitation and he was alarmed both by the vision and by the angel's use of his personal name. But, like the great Pharisee Saul, he was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, and the whole story moves forward. That was to be expected, because God was in it.

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10:9-23

Here is the account of Peter's preparation for a specific act of service and we must note that this man, already used mightily by God in Pentecostal power, still needed to be in the school of discipleship. It is a great temptation, when we know that God has used us in the salvation of others, to assume that we have 'arrived' and that our spiritual understanding is complete. It seems from verse 9 that God was leaving little margin of time, for Cornelius' messengers were nearly at the city. It was noon, one of the Jewish set times for prayer. Peter was alone and we are not told what he was praying about. Perhaps he was concerned about all that was going on in the church. He was in the house of a man with a non-approved job. Did that compromise his own dedication to God's law? Elsewhere many Samaritans had believed (8:14-17), and, if this influx of 'outsiders' continued, the whole nature of the church (still predominantly Jewish) would be changed. Could people with 'background' and 'pedigree' really be united in the fellowship of faith with those who 'knew nothing' and would have to be instructed from first principles? Peter grew sleepy as he prayed. He was human like the rest of us. He was possibly lying under a canvas canopy and the idea of a sheet coming down from heaven almost naturally became the form of the dream or trance. This does not make it any less a miraculous communication from God,

and Peter's conscious hunger made it natural that the form of the revelation was that of clean and unclean foods. This was what was in his mind. What was right with God and what was not? He was searching his heart because he wanted to be right with God. That is the necessary attitude underlying all Christian service.

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10:9-23

God spoke to Peter in this pictorial form. It was a God-given vision. It was not specifically sought by Peter nor can it be taken as an indication of Peter's spirituality. It was necessary for him because of, and as a concession to, his spiritual uncertainty, hesitation and limitation. To recognize this is a great corrective to the tendency to assume that extraordinary experiences are a sign of spiritual advancement. It may be the opposite. Peter recognized that he was being spoken to by God. The issue was the spiritual one of obedience and, not for the first time, he contradicted God (Matt. 16:21-23). Three times over God spoke to his servant making it plain that the ceremonial barriers of food-laws were abolished in the gospel and were not to be allowed to keep men from Christ and his kingdom. It seems amazing that a man of Peter's stature, used so significantly by God, should remain so perplexed as to what it was all about. We cannot criticize, for we can be equally slow to recognize what God is saying. God's timing was, as always, perfect. At the very moment it was needed, the confirmation and enlightenment came. The servants of Cornelius arrived, the Spirit spoke the information, instruction and reassurance, and Peter's own spirit seems to have been quietened. These separate strands of divine guidance came together and the way ahead was made quite plain. Granted there were angels and visions, which are the exception rather than the rule. Faith is not necessarily strengthened by visions and indeed, a condition of 'addiction' may result, so that we refuse to act unless a 'sign' is given. Jesus had strong words about signs in John 4:48; Matthew 12:38-39. We must not be distracted by them.

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10:23-33

Quiet assurance now marks the story and we can only imagine what Peter's thoughts were on the journey. He knew now that God was at work, but just what could he expect? Faith is prepared to wait and see. Faith does not need to hurry or to be vexed and strained because God is in charge. Faith, when appropriate, also anticipates and it seems that Cornelius had no doubt as to the willingness of Peter to come and he had a house full of friends all waiting to meet God's messenger. Peter's faith had made a great advance and this is seen in his dignified treatment of the Gentile centurion. God's servant had no intention of talking down to these people to whom he had been sent. Would that all ministers regarded, valued and honoured their congregations like this! It would lower many barriers of resistance to the gospel. Peter recognized they were different from himself but he refused to sound 'superior'. He was a servant under orders. Having made plain that he believed God was in all this, he asked Cornelius the reason for the pressing invitation, realizing it was necessary for Cornelius to put into words his own spiritual searching. The words in verse 33 must have been sweet music in the ears of the preacher. In 11:14 Luke gives a fuller statement of Cornelius' words, making plain that his heart hunger was for salvation which he knew he did not have in spite of his prayers and alms. Are we surprised at such openness to the gospel before any Christian preaching had taken place? This failure to recognize the working of the 'prevenient' grace of God leads to so much worldly effort in evangelism. It is only God who can work (1 Cor. 3:5-7). We must be willing to be led to the people in whose hearts the Spirit is already at work.

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10:34-43

Peter's opening words demolished publicly centuries of prejudice by the Jews who had shut out from God all but themselves. They were the chosen people — that cannot be denied. But they were not chosen because of their superiority (Deut. 7:6-8) nor to be a superior people. They were chosen to be the light of the nations and the instrument of God to bring in the nations. Peter's words, whereby he opened the gates of the gospel to the Gentiles, were echoed later by Paul in Romans 3:1-4,9,19-26. Addressing the household of Cornelius, Peter did not suggest salvation by works in verse 35. He may have had in mind the words of Micah (Micah 6:8) which would be familiar to his hearers who were 'God-seekers', wanting to be right with God. Peter then addressed himself to the questions of how a man can come to God, be right with God, have assurance of acceptance with God, share in the life and kingdom of God and know the blessing of God. The answer is in Jesus Christ who is

Lord of all. Peter's sermon shows us the essence of apostolic preaching. He declared first the historical facts about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is where it all must begin. It is not fiction. The one who is Lord of all was born among men and he is the full and final word of God to the world, as Hebrews 1:1-3 declares so gloriously. But it is not the mere *story* of Jesus that constitutes the gospel; it is the *message* of the story: the affirmation of what God has done in his Son, Jesus Christ. He has worked salvation in and through the atoning death of the Saviour, and God sets this Saviour before all people to be accepted by faith (Rom. 3:21-30). That is the good news of the gospel.

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10:34-43

Peter's message was comprehensive, beginning with John the Baptist, then telling of Jesus' ministry, death and physical resurrection (v. 41). He emphasized the commission to preach the gospel to the whole world, and to do so against the background of final judgement (v. 42). He declared that the whole of the Old Testament, which Cornelius knew and respected, bears witness to this Jesus. Right from the start Peter preached on the clear basis that sinful men and women need to find peace with God and that without salvation there is no peace. If sinners remain alienated from God and guilty before him (Rom. 3:19, AV), the thought of the day of judgement is solemn indeed. Then to his hearers, concerned about their soul's salvation, convicted of their sin and need, Peter declared the glorious gospel of justification by faith alone (v. 43). These words are echoed throughout the New Testament. Read Romans 5:1-2; 8:1; 10:8-13; Ephesians 2:13-14,16-19; Colossians 1:19-22. Can you imagine the thrill in the heart of Cornelius as he heard about the full, free and final forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ? Peter's hearers heard gospel truth in language they could grasp and in facts they knew. This is important in all preaching and we must be aware in our generation that most people know neither the facts nor the language of the Bible. Cornelius' household was familiar with the Old Testament. They would recognize references to the Anointed One in Isaiah 61:1 and Isaiah 53. Would they think of Isaiah 9:2,6,7? As they listened to Peter they all realized that a finished work of salvation had been done in Jesus Christ, and even as they listened faith dawned and they put their trust in him. This was God at work.

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10:44-48

Some describe this incident as the Gentile Pentecost and, perhaps to mark it out as being similar to the Jewish Pentecost in Acts 2, God gave extraordinary signs, although there were no tongues of fire nor rushing wind. Why are many distracted by the mere phenomena of tongues and ecstatic praise? When Paul was converted there was brilliant light and sudden blindness but we do not require all conversions to have that kind of thing. The truly thrilling aspect of the work of the Holy Spirit here is exactly what Jesus promised it would be (John 16:7-11). In the context of the preaching of the truth about salvation in Christ, the Spirit of God enlightened their minds, gripped their hearts, constrained their wills and led their eager spirits to faith centred on Christ. Peter preached the Word and while he did so the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard. Had it happened without any obvious signs, Peter's Jewish companions might not have believed that the conversion of the Gentiles was authentic. We must learn to be careful how we speak of the coming of the Spirit, the indwelling of the Spirit, and the fulness of the Spirit lest we end up laying down a timetable and a pattern for every conversion and spiritual experience. Note that the giving of the Spirit was followed by baptism, not dependent on it. The Holy Spirit is a person, not a power, nor an influence, and cannot be divided up. If we have the Spirit we have all of him the moment we believe. It may take a lifetime to realize all that this means and there will be many discovery experiences. But it is vital to grasp the truth. The moment we take Jesus as Saviour we are born of the Spirit and the Spirit, in all his enabling potential, is in our hearts. Read Romans 8:9-11 carefully.

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11:1-3

The church at Jerusalem heard of the remarkable reception of the Word of God by the Gentiles (v. 1), just as they had already heard of the equally amazing gathering in of the Samaritans (8:14). They should not have been surprised by the new development because it was clear that God was at work far and wide in ways they had not known before. But at the same time we must allow for human limitation and hesitation. It is easy to rebuke people for unbelief and slowness to accept change, but genuine re-appraisal is often a costly thing. Some have

quicksilver minds and emotions and can change direction swiftly, adjusting imbalances as the new situation develops. Others, by temperament, need longer to think before making decisions, and changes are coped with more slowly. Both types of people have limitations and difficulties and we must be careful not to judge one another's spirituality too quickly. Yet this is exactly what happened in verse 2. News had reached Jerusalem and some of the Jewish Christians who still held very strict views about adherence to the Law of Moses were deeply disturbed and they challenged Peter. They may have been concerned that his action in fraternizing with the Gentiles and accepting them as equals would stir up resentment in Jerusalem where the Christians had to be very careful not to anger the Jewish and Roman authorities. Their worry may have been about unwise actions that might be a barrier to the gospel. They knew Peter's impetuosity. They had doubts. At the same time it is sad that their concern about the traditional way of doing things took precedence in their thinking over what God was doing in the salvation of sinners. Jesus spoke about this (Matt. 15:1-2, 6).

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11:4-18

Try to understand why and how this situation arose. In both Jerusalem and Caesarea there was an authentic work of the Spirit and both sections of the church felt they were acting in the best interest of the gospel. In Jerusalem the converts had come almost entirely from the background of a lifetime in strict Judaism. Their minds and emotions needed to be taught and moulded to accept this new thing God was doing among the outsiders. In Caesarea the converts came bounding in with relief and hope from the dark bondage of heathenism. They had different traditions and attitudes, not least regarding sexual immorality. This caused problems in the church later, as Paul's letters to the Corinthians make plain (1 Cor. 5:1-5; 6:9-11). Peter showed great wisdom. He did not argue. He simply repeated the facts as they had occurred. In 11:8 Peter's words are similar to those in Ezekiel 4:14, a passage his hearers would certainly recall. In verse 16 Peter adds the comment that when it was all happening at Caesarea he recalled the words of Jesus regarding the work of the Holy Spirit and the spread of the gospel far beyond Jerusalem (Acts 1:5-8). What could the Christians at Jerusalem do but accept that this was an authentic work of God? In verse 18 we have a statement of immense significance for it pointed the way to the evangelizing of the Gentiles. Note that it was after hearing the *facts* that they came to a different conclusion from the one at the beginning of the chapter. We must be careful. Our first reaction to a person or a situation can often be emotional rather than rational and spiritual. Always take time to think, to pray and to refer things to God for guidance.

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11:19-21

The outward spread of the gospel, which resulted from the adverse circumstances of persecution, was not confined to the work and witness of the 'big' men. Luke refers again to the general scattering of believers (v. 19, cf. 8:1,4). Their lives and families had been disrupted but they did not lapse into self-pity. Instead, wherever they went they witnessed to the gospel, some speaking mainly to fellow Jews and others speaking to Gentiles also. The word translated 'telling' in verse 19 applies to personal witness or even to 'gossiping the gospel'. In the next verse the word 'speak' again indicates ordinary conversation. But the words 'telling the good news' refer to evangelizing and it is clear these early Christians were aware of the fact that they were called to bring a message of salvation. They were not silent supporters of the cause. Luke does not mention in detail places far and wide where the Christians reached. He focuses on Antioch, at that time the third great city of the world, a magnificent place with appalling morals that were sanctioned and made respectable by the religious rites of idolatry. Right there the Christians felt that the good news of salvation and life was needed by the Greek population also. They preached the glad tidings, declaring the Lord, whose name is Jesus. This was a message that made sense to a city whose people were held in bondage to multitudes of 'gods' which had to be placated but which gave no assurance of salvation or life. It made sense to a generation aware of many 'spirits' and 'powers' usually operating against them. It made sense to a people groping in dark uncertainty. It still makes sense in our confused and uncertain generation.

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11:22-26

The phrase in verse 21 ‘the Lord’s hand was with them’ is a vivid indication of the significance of witnessing and preaching. These are not verbal academic exercises, nor a debate, and certainly not a mere airing of views. It is the arena of God’s working in the proclamation of his Word whereby men and women are brought to salvation (1 Cor. 1:20-24). If we grasped the truth of this there would be a greater sense of expectancy in our worship, witnessing and preaching. We would also pray far more about all these activities. Do we pray with earnestness for the free preaching of the Word (Eph. 6:19; Col. 4:2-4; 2 Thess. 3:1-2), as Paul asked his prayer partners to do? We should also pray more than we do for the Word after it had been preached, watering it with our prayers until the fruit is brought forth. An older generation often prayed, ‘Follow with Thy blessing the preaching of Thy Word’. Do we really believe that God’s Word does not fail in its working (Isa. 55:10-11)? Do we know that God watches over his Word to perform it (Jer. 1:12, AV)? What an encouragement to preachers! When the leaders of the church in Jerusalem heard of events in Antioch they sent Barnabas to minister to them. When he arrived he saw at once that a true work of grace had taken place in the lives of these new believers. Real salvation cannot be hidden. But it was not easy to be a believer in Antioch. People referred to them as ‘Christians’, which means Christ’s ones. It was originally a term of scorn and contempt. They were different and the change in their lives was resented. But the name Christian was accurate. They were men and women taken up with Christ. He was their life, love and loyalty.

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11:27-30

We have been told that Barnabas’ ministry in Antioch was greatly blessed and many people were converted (v. 24). He then went to Tarsus with the specific objective of finding Paul and bringing him to Antioch. Already Paul was known for his clear, comprehensive teaching of the doctrines of the faith and Barnabas knew that this teaching was what these new converts needed. It is a good sign when a preacher recognizes that another man is better qualified than himself. It is not surprising that these two men became partners in the work. The believers in Antioch had found salvation, their way of life marked them out as different from others, and they were glad to be committed to Christ and the gospel. They had been mocked for Jesus’ sake. They were not spared any of the rigours of life. But now there was to be another element in their experience. In the midst of their new-found joy they had to face the grim spectre of famine. The amazing thing was their reaction. It was not self-pity, as if to say, ‘Why should this happen to us?’ It was an instant desire to share what they had with others less fortunate. This is evidence of real grace in the heart. There was no theoretical Christianity. They were concerned with sound doctrine, with evangelism, with growth in grace and with the building of the church. They were Christians who gave glorious priority to prayer. And they were down-to-earth and practical in their response to the Spirit-given information regarding the famine. They had a care for others even when it was obvious that they themselves would be under pressure when the famine really hit. They did not think of themselves as an isolated or independent congregation but as part of the whole church.

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11:27-30

These Christians had been under instruction for only a year (v. 26). We must assume that part of what they were taught, right from the start, was the Christian stewardship of time, talents *and* money. Our money is not our own, but held in trust for God and the gospel. Think how this subject is dealt with immediately after the great chapter on the doctrine of the resurrection (1 Cor. 16:1-4). In Antioch it seems likely that the believers had in fact laid aside money to be available for any emergency arising and this is how it should be. There should be no need for hurried appeals. Things done in too much of a rush are often suspect because it suggests that God is late in his guidance. The action of the Antioch Christians must have had a profound influence on the largely Jewish church in Jerusalem. But remember at the same time that we all find it hard to accept help. Paul taught later that Jesus said it was more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35), and as we are able we tend to be glad to give help in cash, or care, or friendship. But it takes real grace to *accept* help and to accept it graciously, warmly, humbly and thankfully, as from God. In these verses some will concentrate on the prophetic ‘gift’ being exercised, but there may well have been signs that poor harvests were inevitable and that famine was on its way. The spiritual gift to be emphasized here is that of generosity — spontaneous, practical and unanimous. There was also wisdom, because the money was handled by the elders and not by the ministers. In this whole

subject of money read the whole of 2 Corinthians chapters 8 and 9, which reminded a church, proud of its charismatic gifts, of the spiritual grace of practical generosity.

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12:1-5

Luke, an accurate historian, is showing the broad development of the spiritual situation. Wonderful things were beginning to happen among the Gentiles and no doubt many of the 'powers that be' were wondering just how far it would go and what its exact significance was. Communications throughout the Roman Empire were good and there was a real sensitivity to the possible political repercussions of religious developments. The church in Jerusalem, small since the scattering spoken of in 8:1, was still a significant factor. Herod would have been aware of the increasing intensity of the opposition shown to the Christians by the leaders of the Jews, who were a powerful and influential group. Part of the Jewish opposition stemmed from what was now being reported about the spread of the gospel among the Gentiles. This new 'Way' (Acts 22:4), whose leaders were being wise in conforming as far as possible to Jewish law, was becoming a missionary movement, reaching areas never influenced before. These new believers, now called Christians, were clearly recognized because of the new pattern and standards of their lives. They walked in the way of Jesus' example. The leaders of the Jews were worried and may well have brought pressure to bear on Herod. On the other hand Herod may have sensed in the situation an opportunity to further his own power. Whatever the source, there came on the church, still in its infancy, persecution as well as the famine already foretold. But the church met it in faith. There was no organized protest nor did they appoint a committee! They prayed. When the church is persecuted, it prays. When the church is popular because its message is watered down, it does not pray.

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12:1-5

There is a mystery in the providence of God. He allowed the martyrdom of James as he had allowed the murder of Stephen by the religious authorities. But Peter was spared. Why did Herod delay in the killing of Peter? It was to please the Jews who did not want this kind of trouble during their Passover celebrations. The devil and his servants are unwise and inconsistent and Herod must have regretted his hesitation later when Peter escaped. What we have to grasp is the fact that God was in complete control of the situation. He is sovereign over the kingdoms of men (Dan. 4:17,25,32) as well as over the church, and his ways are always superior to ours (Isa. 55:8-9), even when they are beyond our understanding (Rom. 11:33). We may be tempted to ask why God allowed Peter to be imprisoned at all when it was so easy to accomplish his release. Of course Peter and the whole church learned from this experience. Peter was in prison a whole week, the days of unleavened bread prior to the Passover (Exod. 12:18-20). Perhaps, in the providence of God, that was the safest place for him when Jewish feelings were running high. In an earlier generation prison was the safest place for Joseph when a wicked woman was after him (Gen. 39:6-23). Prison was also the right place for Paul when a certain piece of outreach evangelism was needed (Phil. 1:12-13). But it is one thing to recognize this in theory regarding others; it calls for real faith when it happens to ourselves. That kind of faith has to be learned; it does not come easily; and it must have as its focus the God who has the sovereign and free ordering and disposing of all the affairs of men (Prov. 16:9; 19:21).

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12:6-11

There are two miracles in these verses. The first is a miracle of God's grace, for we find Peter, basically a tempestuous and emotional character, sound asleep. His peace on the eve of what was to be his execution day did not stem from an assurance that he was to be released. That is evident from verse 9 where Peter (who must have told the story to Mark or Luke) admits that he thought at first it was all a dream or a vision. Where did Peter's peace come from? He knew that James had been martyred. There was a real possibility he would be executed. He knew what God *could* do, but he did not know what he *would* do. Of course Peter, unlike so many in churches today, was well taught in the Scriptures of the Old Testament. We can imagine him pondering, for example, the stories in Daniel about the fiery furnace and the lions' den (Dan. 3:16-18; 6:16-23). He would not have had a copy of the Scriptures with him, the jailers would have confiscated it, but he had God's word stored up in his heart. This is one reason why we must learn the Scriptures. We never know when we may have to do

without our Bibles. Peter would recall Jesus' words, 'Do not let your hearts be troubled' (John 14:1-3), and also his warning that his disciples would be persecuted (John 16:1-3). Would Peter recall Jesus sleeping in the boat during the storm at sea (Mark 4:35-41)? Romans 15:1-13 speaks wonderfully about the encouragement and hope of the Scriptures, and Ephesians 6:17 speaks of how the Spirit of God uses the Word of God. Like a 'Divine Librarian' the Holy Spirit brings to mind the appropriate Word at the very time it is needed. We should not be surprised at this. Jesus promised it would be so (John 14:26).

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12:6-11

Peter was not in a state of nervous tension, wondering what might happen. He was not using the night hours to 'agonize' in prayer, perhaps because he knew he would need all his physical and mental strength to cope with what lay ahead of him. His composure was no doubt part of the answer to the prayers of the church (v. 5), bringing to his heart amazing, indeed supernatural, peace. The believers certainly prayed for Peter, but the story goes on to indicate that their faith was mixed with doubt and uncertainty. On one level, a prayer meeting seems a very weak answer to the manifest might of Herod's sword, but these few verses show exactly where the power lies. It never crossed Herod's mind that anyone could resist him, let alone countermand his actions. But he was wrong, as the second and more obvious miracle shows. It is a dramatic story, well told and needs little comment. Chains are broken loose. A sleepy Christian is roused and told to dress, complete with shoes. He is even told that it is cold outside and a coat is needed. What a practical God we have! The miracle reminds us of what we constantly forget: the reality and the activities of God's ministering angels who know nothing of the physical limitations of mere humans. Read Hebrews 1:14 and never again despise the thought of guardian angels just waiting to help (Matt. 26:53). In the Old Testament story of crisis and danger in 2 Kings 6:8-17, Elisha was confident in the hosts of God who encamp around the dwellings of the just (Ps. 34:1-7). We must grasp these truths lest we feel that our lives are governed by people and circumstances rather than by the sure working of God's good providence. When did you last read Deuteronomy 33:27?

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12:12-17

This marvellously human story is full of spiritual instruction. As soon as the miraculous element was no longer needed Peter was left alone. When it dawned on him what had happened he went straight to where the prayer meeting was held. This is the right thing to do whether our experience is joy or sorrow. We should all be part of the praying fellowship of the church. However, Peter found it difficult to get in. Rhoda was so excited at recognizing Peter's voice that she left him standing at the locked door and ran to tell the prayer meeting that their prayers had been answered. She was rebuked for disturbing the meeting and accused of being hysterical. When she stuck to her story the men explained it away by saying it was Peter's guardian angel or Peter's ghost. They seemed to think he was already dead, even though they were still praying for his release. The last thing to occur to them was that God had in fact answered their prayers and that Peter had been released. Our faith, at its best, is mixed with unbelief but we must learn to look to God not only for answers to prayer but also for the spiritual eyesight to recognize the answers when they come. Peter kept up his insistent knocking because he was very aware of the urgency of the situation. The moment it was discovered he was missing from prison there would be a search. This particular house would be high on the list for searching. Peter's concern was not for himself but for the whole church in its work and witness. Great leader as he was and mightily used by God since Pentecost, he knew that he was not indispensable to the work and that at this stage his presence would be a possible danger to others. He withdrew from the scene. That is a mark of his greatness.

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12:18-23

In verse 17 Luke phased Peter out of the story without any suggestion that he had no further ministry. We are not told where he went but later, in Acts 15:6-7, he is in Jerusalem and in due time he wrote his two epistles. Today's verses are solemn yet reassuring because they make plain that God is not mocked and that evil can come to its judgement swiftly and surely. This Herod was a grandson of the Herod who slew the children at the birth of Christ and a nephew of the Herod who murdered John the Baptist. There seems to have been evil in the bloodstream of that family. There are many references in the Old Testament about characteristics and influences

in a family being passed down from generation to generation. That is a solemn thought and challenge to parents and grandparents. There is something gruesome about the detail of his death, but death is ugly. Herod was also ugly in character and activity. The soldiers were put to death, possibly because the king decided the escape had been an 'inside job' even though there was no evidence to support this. His search parties had failed to find Peter and the death sentence on the soldiers, which was not obligatory, seems to have been an expression of his fury and hurt pride because he had been publicly frustrated. It seems he had no real grounds to proceed against the Christians or perhaps he was afraid that further persecution might have an adverse effect on his position. Very soon Herod went away for a while, but it was a proud and angry man who went down to Caesarea. He wanted to forget. His pride needed to be salved. God was not in all his thoughts. It is always dangerous when mere men think they have undisputed power.

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12:18-23

The people of Tyre and Sidon were afraid of Herod. He knew it, and it pleased him. They made friends with Blastus (which possibly cost them a lot of money) and an occasion was arranged for a public reconciliation. Some historians tell us that Herod made his appearance on stage dressed in a robe of silver which shone brilliantly in the sun and made such an impression that the people (determined to get back into favour) shouted their adulation in language that gave Herod the position of a 'god'. The vain man accepted and gloried in this adoration, which really amounted to worship. But at the very moment that he accepted this 'divine status', he was smitten by God for his blasphemy and he died. This was the end of a man who was totally without principle and who would trample over even the most sacred of things in order to advance his own self-will and self-esteem. Psalm 2 reminds us that at all times it is God with whom we have to do. He is the righteous judge, and he weighed Herod in the balances and found him guilty without excuse and beyond any possible remedy (Dan. 5:26-28). Note that the angel of the Lord, who was to Peter the messenger and instrument of salvation (v. 7), was to Herod the bringer of judgement. This wicked man's end tells us most clearly that God cannot be mocked (Gal. 6:7). In the mystery of his will he often delays his judgements and as a result we are tempted to feel that evil has somehow escaped and gained the ascendancy. It is never so. It is God alone who fixes timetables (Acts 1:7; 2 Peter 3:7-9, AV). This is our comfort and assurance when we face alarming political situations. But it should drive us, and the church, to pray.

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12:24-25

These simple verses conclude the first main section of the Acts of the Apostles. We have learned from Herod's story that no weapon forged against the work of God can ultimately prevail (Isa. 54:17). Remember the counsel of Gamaliel in chapter 5:33-39. How careful we should be lest in presumption or unbelief we end up resisting God. The dominant note here is one of irresistible progress (v. 24) together with the equally important emphasis on God's servants faithfully carrying out the work entrusted to them. The stage was now set for the next development of the missionary outreach to the Gentile world. In concluding this section of the story Luke says the Word of God increased and spread. This does not necessarily mean that the number of converts continued to increase on the same statistical level as on the day of Pentecost. Counting heads is dangerous and can be a serious distraction. We do not suggest that small numbers are more spiritual than big numbers. To say that would be perverse. But we need to be delivered from the distraction of mere statistics. Big crowds, with a popularity draw, can so easily become a hiding place for unbelief and backsliding, and for the organizers a source of pride. Even in our land, when church attendance is declining steadily, the Word of God preached in its fulness still transforms and moulds the characters of men and women in the likeness of Christ. This is a powerful instrument operating far beyond all assessable standards. Let God be the focus of our attention. He alone works and gives the increase (1 Cor. 3:5-7). Read Isaiah 55:10-11 and see to it that we pray earnestly and unflinching for the preaching of the Word.

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13:1-3

The second section of Acts begins here and Paul rather than Peter is the leading figure. It is still the same story and if we trace it from the beginning, we can see that significant developments in the life of the church have a

history behind them. Antioch, after Rome and Alexandria, was the third great city of the world and all the varied influences of the Roman Empire contributed to the atmosphere of the city which had a reputation for lax morals. There was a large Jewish community which would automatically be opposed to the gospel and yet, by the grace of God, there was a church there. Believers scattered by persecution after Stephen's martyrdom reached Antioch (11:19-21) and Nicolas (6:5), one of the early deacons, may have returned to his home town to witness there. God is always at work setting his servants in their appointed places. Barnabas had been *sent* by the Jerusalem church to Antioch, he did not volunteer. Paul had been persuaded to join him in ministry there (11:22-26). God was preparing his team. The work in Antioch was going from strength to strength, with a settled ministry team of considerable calibre. Three leading men are named along with Paul and Barnabas as prophets and teachers. Simeon was a man of dark-coloured skin and may have been the Simon of Cyrene who carried Jesus' cross (Matt. 27:32). Lucius was possibly one of the men referred to in 11:20. Manaen (the Greek form of the Jewish Menahem, which means comforter) had been brought up with Herod's family and in spite of the atmosphere and indulgence of court life had been brought to faith. Led by such men this was a church that learned to worship and to wait upon God. They were ready for God.

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13:1-3

The church was gathered for worship in the normal way. They fasted, in the sense of setting apart special seasons for prayer, during which they denied themselves the usual routines of meals and rest. Keep in mind, of course, that denying the body food, sleep and rest does not *necessarily* lead to being more receptive to a knowledge of God's will. It can in fact lead to a tiredness of body, mind and emotions so that we become vulnerable to the subtle influences of the devil who is always eager to lead us astray. We must see here that it was in the ongoing life of the congregation, not in individual guidance, that God made known his will. How he spoke to the church we cannot tell. But we do know that it inspired the church to more prayer and the people came to the unanimous conclusion that the two most able men in the congregation were being called to significant service elsewhere. The various agencies who 'transmit' people into full-time service should seek the mind of the local church before decisions are made, and individual Christians should seek the mind of the congregation before committing themselves to a course of action. If this pattern was followed many mistakes and hurts would be avoided. The picture we have here is of a church alive to God and obedient to God. The calling of Saul and Barnabas could have had a disastrous effect on the congregation if these two men had made themselves indispensable, or if the Christians had become too dependent on them. On the other hand, this missionary call may have proved to be a significant step forward spiritually for the whole congregation if they rose to the responsibility of prayer and financial support on a long-term basis.

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13:4-5

These verses indicate some of the abiding principles of Christian life and service. There was no surprise in the church at Antioch when God spoke to them. Every time they gathered they expected to meet with God, to know and to do his will. There was no surprise on the part of Barnabas and Saul because they had already had experience of being guided and directed in their lives of service. In his epistles, Paul makes plain how much he was aware of being set apart for God. In Romans 1:1 he uses three significant words in the Greek: called, sent (apostled) and set apart. At the time of his conversion Paul was told clearly that he was a chosen instrument (Acts 26:15-18). But in due time he was able to look much further back and to recognize that the hand of God had been on him since before he was born, even though he had had no awareness of it (Gal. 1:11-17). Then, writing to the Ephesians, he went even further back to his being chosen in Christ before the worlds were made (Eph. 1:4). It was on the basis of this sovereign call and ordination that Paul and Barnabas went out on missionary service. Yet we need to note carefully the emphasis on the prayers of the church, not just in what we would call the Valedictory Service, but in continuing partnership in the ongoing work. A missionary on home assignment said to his own congregation, 'You have no right to send out missionaries unless you are prepared to pray for them.' There is a close connection between verses 3 and 4. One verse says the church sent them, the next verse says it was the Holy Spirit who sent them. There is no contradiction. The church as well as the individuals concerned knew they were led by God. They were working together with God (1 Cor. 3:9).

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13:6-12

We are not told why they went to Cyprus, Barnabas' home territory (4:36), but we assume it was a considered decision by the church. When they arrived they went to the synagogues where there would be knowledge of Old Testament Scripture, and where there would also be a company of God-fearing Gentiles. Paul always seems to have worked on the basis of 'to the Jews first' (Rom. 1:16). The missionaries preached the Word of God, and the word used refers to announcing with authority things about which there is no doubt or uncertainty. If this note is absent, it is not true preaching. We have no right whatever to air our doubts from the pulpit. Right through the story of Acts we will read about Paul, wherever he went, reasoning out of the Scriptures, setting forth in a systematic way the truths of the message of salvation in Jesus Christ. The preachers had with them John Mark, who later wrote the first record of the gospel, and some suggest he was in the team to supply first-hand information about the words and works of Jesus, particularly the details of the crucifixion. (In Mark 14:51-52 the young man is probably Mark.) The missionaries got on with their work, travelling systematically through the island, reaching Paphos, the seat of government, where they met the first significant opposition. The focus was a Jew, brought up in the tradition of God's covenant, but now a practitioner in magic who had taken the name which means 'Son of Jesus'. His attitudes and actions were deliberate, and in this man we see the bitterness and devilishness of those who have abandoned their earlier commitment to God. None are so contemptuous of evangelical ministry as those who have backslidden, especially ministers.

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13:6-12

We learn a lot about the devil from this passage. He had his man set in a significant place in the staff of the proconsul's household, where he could exercise influence. When the missionaries arrived Sergius Paulus, being an intelligent official, made it his business to enquire about their ministry and message. When Paul was summoned, he found himself an evangelist of the gospel in the central government office, no doubt with a considerable company of civil servants in attendance. What an opportunity (cf. Phil. 1:12-14)! But then we have the account of the true Jesus being opposed by Bar-Jesus, the sorcerer, a situation bound to confuse those whose religious and spiritual perception was limited. When the issue of God's truth and men's salvation was being imperilled, Saul (now called Paul) had no hesitation. The bluntness of his language may tend to alarm us who have an undue sensitivity at times to plain speaking about evil people and their influence. Of course, we must be careful. We are far from being infallible. What Paul said publicly to the man's face was, 'You are not a son of Jesus. You are a son of the devil and you are doing the devil's work. You are opposing God; God will judge you for it; and the judgement will be blindness for an unspecified time.' Paul must have been very sure of God's guidance, and we must be very sure indeed before we take it on ourselves to make such pronouncements of judgement. We must learn about the devil. But be very clear that there is no need to fear him. He is a defeated foe and has to be resisted (James 4:7). But be careful. Never tamper with evil. You may get a shock (Acts 19:13-16). The consul believed. Christ was triumphant.

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13:13-16

Having covered significant areas of Cyprus the missionaries crossed over to the south coast of Asia Minor, Paul's native territory. Why John Mark left the party we cannot tell but we know from Acts 15:36-38 that Paul regarded it as a serious defection which cast real doubt on his missionary calling. By now we are seeing the clear leadership of Paul. At first we read of Barnabas and Saul (v. 2), but now it is Paul and his companions. Some people suggest that Mark's departure may have been because his cousin Barnabas was being pushed into second place. But we have already seen that Barnabas was quite willing to recognize that Paul had gifts and capacities that he did not have (11:23-26). It takes a man of real character and spirituality to step aside (not step down) and let another take leadership for the good of the work of God. The missionaries went inland to Pisidian Antioch (not the Antioch they had come from), and there in the synagogue we see a picture of great wisdom, tact and humility. The missionaries, knowing full well that they were called of God and having had evidences of God's power resting on their ministry, simply took their seats as part of the normal congregation. In our language, this was not an evangelical or spiritual congregation, and obviously the people needed to hear the gospel. But Paul and Barnabas did not barge in, as some self-willed Christians might have done to 'give them the gospel'. They submitted to the order and discipline of the synagogue and waited on God for the opportunity

to speak. This was given. They grasped the opening, not that they had a sermon prepared but, knowing the Scriptures and having thought through where they stood, they were able to speak clearly.

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13:17-22

Because the missionaries had waited to be invited to speak the atmosphere was conducive to listening. There was no prejudice. Paul began from the basis of the readings for that day from the Law and the Prophets dealing with matters he knew his hearers would agree with. After all, there is no point in antagonizing your congregation in the first few sentences of a sermon by attacking things you know they hold dear. The people listening were of two main groups: Jews and Gentile God-fearers, both of whom had, as their official position, a respect for the Scriptures of the Old Testament. They also had a belief in the God of the Old Testament and in his saving activity in the history of the Jews. Being wise, Paul did not begin by telling them how wrong they were and how defective their understanding was of their own position. He really said, 'You are right, as far as you have gone, but don't stop there, because the follow-through of your own accepted belief is none other than Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.' This is the test of traditional religion. If it is real and of God, it will lead to acceptance of Jesus Christ as God's appointed Saviour. Paul never despised background, upbringing and religious influence even if it fell far short of true gospel understanding (Rom. 3:1-2; 9:1-5; 10:1-4).

Missionaries in pagan cultures and evangelists now in our own country know what it is to preach to people who have absolutely no knowledge at all of truth concerning God. In our witnessing we cannot assume that people know even the familiar stories of the Bible. We must be careful not to use 'holy language' so familiar to ourselves but strange to others. Often we have to start with the simple ABC of the gospel.

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13:23-31

The first half of the sermon (vv. 17-22) would have had the whole congregation nodding in agreement, aware that here was a man who knew what he was speaking about. What we must see in this brief summary, covering the years from the Exodus to King David, is the sure working of God down the ages of history. This should thrill and reassure us, because God has not changed and he is still working his perfect purposes of salvation in our generation. Paul's congregation knew that God had promised a Messiah who would be the descendant of David, and in verse 23 Paul identified the promised Christ as Jesus. He then referred to John the Baptist, whom the Jews recognized as a God-sent prophet (Matt. 21:23-27). He reminded the congregation of John's call to repentance, and of how John was the one who pointed to Jesus as the Lamb of God (John 1:27-36). Then (v. 26) Paul began to apply the sermon and to press the truth home to the hearts of his hearers in a way that called for personal response. There is emphasis on the message of salvation, which included life, hope and fulfilment as well as forgiveness. You can imagine the throb in Paul's voice as he spoke the words of historical, saving truth in verses 27-31. He did not rant against the Jews in Jerusalem because of their evil in crucifying their promised King, but rather he appealed to his hearers not to misunderstand, as these others had done. Paul was saying, 'My brothers, let your own Scriptures lead you to the truth.' It was powerful preaching and its climax was Jesus Christ and him crucified. This is an example of how to preach to an untaught but reverent congregation. We must explain to them the meaning of the biblical truths they already believe, and point them to Jesus.

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13:32-41

Compare Paul's sermon here with that of Peter on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2:14-36, particularly verses 22-36. Both preachers emphasized that God's promises of a Saviour, a Deliverer and King, had been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Both quoted Old Testament Scripture to demonstrate gospel truth. Both urged on their hearers the need to believe and to respond to the message they were hearing concerning the saving activity of God in Jesus Christ. Both emphasized the historical facts regarding the person of Christ, his sinless life, the reality of his death, the physical resurrection and his appearances to the disciples. They preached Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 1:23-24; 2:1-2) and declared that through this man the forgiveness of sins was proclaimed. Paul emphasized that what the Law of Moses could not do (v. 39), Christ could do. The Law could *show* the way to live a life pleasing to God but it could not give the enabling power. The Law could *show* men their failures before God and charge them with guilt, but it could not bring forgiveness, acceptance and

reconciliation. Jesus Christ can and does for all who believe (Rom. 1:16). It is a glorious message, but not one to be trifled with as verses 40-41 make plain. Paul quoted Scripture, reminding them how, when danger threatened Israel, the prophet Habakkuk issued a warning, calling the people to be alive to what was going on around them (Hab. 1:5). The Jews would remember a similar warning from Isaiah, and indeed from many of the prophets (Isa. 28:14,16-22). In Acts 2:37-41 the response was immediate and earnest. Here it was somewhat different, quieter, but nonetheless real, as we shall see.

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13:42-43

These are astonishing verses, describing the impact made by a sermon preached in a non-evangelical gathering (the synagogue), especially when the sermon would possibly not be regarded nowadays as a true preaching of the gospel. It was an exposition, or rather a summary, of biblical history interpreted in terms of God's activity in revelation and in his plan of redemption, which came to its climax and fulfilment in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If verses 16-41 give an outline of the sermon and not a verbatim account, then it may have been a fairly lengthy one. But not only did the congregation listen carefully and uncomplainingly, they asked for more and, before the service ended, a firm arrangement had been made for a further preaching of the same subject matter. Of course we must accept that this was not a work done in virgin territory. The people knew the Scriptures of the Old Testament and therefore there was a basis of operation for the working of the Holy Spirit. These people, who had until that time been religious, appear to have been seeking and hungering and, when the truth was preached in the power of the Holy Spirit, it found an echo in their hearts. Verse 43 shows that it was not a case of the preachers following up the converts but the other way round. There is a lesson here for us all. We can be too eager to bring people to the point of decision. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, who alone convicts, leads to Christ and does the gracious work of regeneration, without which there can be no human response (John 3:3,5-6; Eph. 2:1-5; 1 Peter 1:3,23). Every conversion is a miracle of God's grace. The spiritually dead hear the voice of the Son of God and they live (John 5:25).

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13:44

This one verse should grasp our attention and make us think of revival. The awakening of interest in verse 42 was the work of the Holy Spirit and this is what we should look for in faith when we gather for worship. Do we expect God to be at work saving sinners? Evangelism tends to be thought of in terms of some special event with preparation and advertising necessary to make it a success. We need a new evaluation of and a new expectation in the ordinary business of going to church. The enquirers in verse 43, some of whom were truly converted, were urged to continue in the grace of God. Some of them may not have realized that they had actually begun in the grace of God, and in future days would not have been able to say accurately just when they were converted. No doubt they would come to realize that, long before they were consciously aware of it, God had been working in their hearts. Salvation is by grace alone (Eph. 2:4-8), and it is wonderful to sing with real meaning,

‘While I passed my Saviour by, His love laid hold on me.’ (B. E.)

The impact on the city of one session of preaching was astonishing. Think how often the words must have been used in general conversation: ‘Were you in the synagogue last week?’ or ‘Why don’t you come with me and hear Paul preaching?’ Think how seldom we speak about what was preached, even among our Christian friends, let alone among our unbelieving associates. How long is it since we actually invited someone to come to church with us? Do we not have any non-Christian friends? Even when we are choosing our Christian activity, do we go deliberately to work with Christians rather than get to know the unconverted?

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13:45-52

Both Scripture and church history testify that when there is spiritual awakening, there is usually an awakening of resentment and opposition. Commentators suggest that at verses 41-42 the rulers of the synagogue brought the meeting to an early end because they felt it was getting out of hand; that is, out of *their* hands. The people were showing far too intense an interest in this visiting preacher whom they had politely invited to address the

congregation. This seems to be confirmed by verses 44-45. What was it that angered the Jewish leaders and caused them to contradict the preaching and revile the preacher? Was it just jealousy that the congregation was so much bigger than when they were leading and preaching? Was it anger because these men were interpreting the Scriptures in a richer and fuller way than they ever had? If they had listened and responded instead of criticizing they might have become great preachers themselves. Was the resentment mainly due to the fact that the congregation was largely composed of Gentile outsiders so that the Jews were outnumbered? Think of the icy looks (and sometimes words) you can get if, as a visitor, you sit in someone else's regular seat in church. When that happens it shows that people think it is *their* church and because they *belong* they are more important to God than the visitor. Note in verse 46 the word 'reject' ('thrust it aside', ESV). The reaction was not polite, but harsh and deliberate. Paul and Barnabas would never again be invited to preach in that synagogue, no matter how much public demand there was. The missionaries had a choice: bow to the rulers of the synagogue and keep silent, or be faithful to God's commission.

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13:45-52

It was not Paul who precipitated the crisis. He was willing to go to all lengths of personal humiliation and cost to serve Christ (1 Cor. 9:19-23). In verse 46 he put the blame for the parting of the ways firmly on the Jewish leaders. He made plain that it was right and necessary for the Jews to hear the gospel first. If they believed and received it, then they would be able to fulfil their calling as God's people to be light to the Gentiles and the instrument of bringing them to God (Gen. 12:1-3; Isa. 49:6). But in refusing the word of eternal life they showed where their hearts lay. They were not only refusing God's gracious salvation, they were being 'dog-in-the-manger' about it (Matt. 23:13-14). Perhaps Paul was remembering Jesus' words in Luke 9:5; 10:8-12. There is a time to stop reasoning with people and to leave them with their own decision. Note that the bitter opposition did not stop the work. The Gentiles were glad, not that the Jews were rejected, but that the gospel was coming clearly and gloriously to them. Here is further evidence that God prepares the ground by the working of his Spirit so that when the gospel is preached hearts are ready to receive it. Do not forget that some hearts were prepared through the ministry of the synagogue which now refused the gospel. Some are prepared by attending churches that are spiritually barren, dull and even dead. God is sovereign and works through a variety of channels, which may not be approved of by some evangelicals. The opposition of the synagogue was bitter and deliberate, as verse 50 makes plain. The work of God does not go forward without cost. Nor does the work stop when the preachers are chased out. God guards, continues and extends what has been begun (v. 49).

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14:1-7

Paul and Barnabas, being totally human, would feel deeply hurt by the scorn and rejection they met (13:50). But they were not deterred from their God-given commission. The memory of the converts' joy and the manifest unction of the Holy Spirit in the preaching of God's Word would reassure them. Perhaps they would recall Jesus' words about how every faithful disciple would meet persecution (John 15:18-20; Matt. 5:11-12). Keeping to their principle of 'the Jew first' and not adjusting their message or their methods because of earlier experiences, they went again to the synagogue. As before, they met slander and opposition. The community was divided, and *eventually* they were driven out. In this way, in the providence of God, the gospel was preached in an ever-widening area. Remember that the apostles were supported by their home church in Antioch who were committed to praying for them. As news filtered back the praying saints, hearing again and again of persecution, rejection and a new work suddenly being left without preachers, would pray all the more. Perhaps some may have had reservations about the preachers, wondering if they were being wise. It is easy to be critical and too quick to judge (1 Cor. 4:5). What we must see is that the praying, preaching, battling and continuing are all part of the one work, the Holy Spirit being ever-present and active, inspiring, overruling and directing. Note also that the difficulties had the direct result of constraining the preachers to stay a long time (cf. 1 Cor. 16:8-9). Only when the pressures had built up to a dangerous extent did they leave. There would have been exercise of heart and much prayer as the time for decision came.

14:1-7

In spite of difficulties and because of encouragements, the apostles persevered with this particular piece of work. Then, when a clear crisis came, they were ready for it and left. We may not at present have much opportunity to be guided by this kind of persecution but we must learn so to look to God that we will know when a piece of work has run its course, at least under *our* leadership. It is not honouring to God to continue an activity when it is time for it to be stopped, even if there remain some signs of benefit. Just because something has been begun in the will of God and has been blessed by God we must not assume it should go on indefinitely. There is a time to persist and there is a time to conclude. We need to stay close to God to know the difference. We also need to stay close to God to make sure that what we do and the way we do it is pleasing to him. If it is not, then our activities and attitudes, however eager and earnest, will be a hindrance not a help to the gospel. Consider the words 'spoke so effectively' in verse 1 and then read 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 and 1 Corinthians 1:17, where cleverness in methodology is shown to be dangerous. In like manner we see in 2 Corinthians 10:10 that Paul's effectiveness had nothing to do with the power of his personality or eloquence. Such things appeal to the merely human inclinations of the hearers. But in 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13 we see the mixture of hard work and tenderness that marked the apostle's person and ministry. In 2 Corinthians 4:1-2 we see a man who had renounced from his life all that was shady and underhand. Little wonder he was a clean channel of God's grace to others.

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14:8-12

The life of these two missionaries was never dull. They never knew what to expect next but they always seemed ready to cope. Their policy was to proclaim the gospel and to build churches by the Word of God. Their experience was preaching, persecution and persistence. Then at Lystra they met with popularity on a hitherto unknown scale. This proved to be a greater danger and distraction than all the hard things they had so far met. Read this story as far as verse 18 and see that crowds are dangerous, popularity is fickle, and even miracles are a mixed blessing, easy to be misunderstood and capable of being the source of major confusion and distraction. The miracle itself is a glorious story, similar to the healing of the lame man at the temple in Jerusalem (Acts 3:1-10). In the context of the preaching of the gospel, Paul became aware of one particular man, whose need was obvious to all, and who had faith to be made well. It is implied that he also had faith to be made whole spiritually and this, together with the dramatic healing, calls for careful consideration. Lystra was a pagan place, conditioned by generations of superstition. They had their legions of 'gods' and stories of gods coming down to earth (v. 11) but darkness, fear and uncertainty dominated the lives of all. The possibilities for confusion were immense. It was in such a situation and atmosphere that Paul preached, and by the power of God's Spirit a man was awakened to faith. Never underestimate God's working and always be aware of the possibility of conversions wherever and whenever the gospel is being preached. Never write off any place or any people. God's salvation is glorious and the gospel is his power (Rom. 1:16-17).

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14:13-18

Immediately after the public miracle the situation became totally confused and very frightening. In the end Paul may well have wished that he had waited to speak to the lame man privately when God's intention and power to heal would still have been the same. It is not necessary, let alone wise, to do good things with maximum publicity (cf. Mark 1:40-45). Look what happened. The man was healed and everyone saw the startling miracle. The people reacted by interpreting the event according to the pattern of their pagan superstitious thinking. Their minds were darkened and blinded and their thinking futile (Rom. 1:21-23,28). The god of this world had blinded them (2 Cor. 4:4) and while Paul and his companions saw the miracle as evidence of God's gracious power to save through Jesus Christ, the people of Lystra saw simply a manifestation of two of their own 'gods'. In the excitement the people reverted to their own language, not Greek which Paul spoke and preached in, and therefore in the tumult of verses 11-12 Paul and Barnabas would not know what was being said. They may have gone home feeling greatly encouraged by the result of their preaching because of the terrific interest being shown. But, in verse 14, they were shattered. What had started was not a revival but a tidal wave of blasphemy as the priest of Zeus prepared to offer sacrifices to two men whom they regarded as divine. You can imagine the apostles' reaction. In a sense, they too had been deceived by the devil, through the appearance of success. No

doubt when order had been restored Paul and Barnabas would talk and pray much about the need for discernment so that they would not again be taken unawares. There *is* a devil. Be on your guard.

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14:13-18

Consider how the apostles dealt with the confusion and misunderstanding (vv. 15-17) and take note how difficult it was to bring the people back from their error (v. 18). It is a fact of experience that when people have seen a miracle it is almost impossible thereafter to reason with them and they can be virtually resistant to pastoral counselling. The first thing Paul did (v. 15) was to declare his own total humanity. This is something congregations need to remember about their ministers, not so that they may be despised but rather be cared for. Paul then affirmed that he and Barnabas were messengers of God bringing good news of the living God who stood over against the vain things of their superstition and their mythological gods. Paul declared God to be the God of creation and providence, the God who even before the gospel age had spoken and made himself known in many understandable ways through both creation and human experience (Rom. 1:19-23). Although not stated, it is assumed that Paul at this point must have made plain that in Jesus Christ God had now spoken clearly, plainly and finally (Heb. 1:1-3). This must have been so because later in verses 21-22 reference is made to 'disciples' in Lystra and we are assured that, in and through the confusion of the whole situation, God worked his work of grace in this totally pagan community. Perhaps the final lesson to learn is to see that Paul spoke to these uninformed Gentiles on a level they could grasp, preaching to them on the nature and character of God and from there leading them to the Saviour God had sent. For those discouraged in their gospel work, remember that God never leaves himself without a witness (v. 17; 1 Kings 19:14,18). He is always there!

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14:19-20

The satanic outburst and confusion (vv. 11-18) had scarcely settled when yet another hellish attack came. The devil is persistent and, as the stories of Elijah and Jesus alike teach, we must be watchful after any significant spiritual victory (1 Kings 19:1-4; Luke 4:13). If they had not been restrained the people of Lystra would have taken the name of Jesus and made him part of their system of religion, and gospel truth would have been hidden. That is always the danger of mixing religions. The Jews from Antioch and Iconium knew the Old Testament Scriptures; they believed in the one true and living God but they would have nothing to do with Jesus Christ. Their rejection and opposition were clear, calculated, continuing and utterly devilish. How they managed to persuade the people against Paul we cannot say. The devil is clever and plausible. Their propaganda attack must have been a sore blow to the weary apostles just regaining their composure after their frightening experience. There was total uproar and brutal attack, which Paul later referred to in 2 Corinthians 11:25 and Galatians 6:17. The extent of Paul's suffering is made plain in verse 19, but we are not to assume he actually died. Luke, who was a doctor, states that the persecutors *assumed* Paul was dead, dragged him out of the city and dumped him. When the disciples (were they Paul's companions or new converts in Lystra?) gathered round Paul, possibly in the evening, he was well enough to accompany them back to the city, planning to continue his journey the next day. Do not let the thought of miraculous recovery hide the reality of pain and suffering. Paul spoke often about the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. It was and is something real.

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14:21-23

The missionaries went on to Derbe, the last of their planned visits, and announced the good news (the word is 'evangelized'). Then Paul and his companions returned to the very places where they had been so cruelly treated, and this indicates something of their courage and their faith. It speaks also of their true spirituality. Being aware that their ministry had resulted in new believers, and that these young Christians would also meet opposition and persecution, they felt they could not leave them without help. True servants of Christ always put their own personal safety and needs secondary to the needs of God's flock. The concern of the missionaries was to confirm the new converts in their faith, to encourage them to go on, and to urge them not to be deterred or distracted by the various trials they would certainly meet. Some of these young Christians were appointed as elders, to rule, guide, teach and to be an example to the others. Before the missionaries left they commended the young church (and it was a church with a body of belief, order and discipline and not just a loose group of

believers) to the God of their salvation. We are not told what was preached to them but from other places in Paul's letters we can imagine the kind of instruction and encouragement that would have been given. Consider Romans 5:1-11; 8:1,28-39; Ephesians 2:1-10; Philippians 4:4-9,19. Can you imagine these hungry new converts eager to be taught the truths of the great salvation that was theirs? Do we in our generation see to it that right from the start new converts are taught in the doctrines of the faith so that they will know what they believe and so be able to stand against the storms of adversity?

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14:24-28

The missionaries preached in various places on the way back to Antioch. The home congregation gathered to hear what God had done and there must have been great rejoicing. Their God was the God of resurrection power and he had worked salvation in unexpected places to an extent far above their expectations. In spite of the activity of the devil and the bitter opposition of men, the work was going on. This is the basis on which we live our Christian lives and carry out all our God-given work. We do not battle towards victory; we stand in the victory that was won for us in the death and resurrection of our glorious Saviour. He is the victor over sin, death and hell. He is the one who has been given the name to which every knee must bow (Phil. 2:9-11). He is the one who rules over all circumstances, having the keys of death and hell and having the power to open doors and shut them, no man being able to question his actions (Rev. 3:7-8). Paul and Barnabas did not take places of leadership automatically, for they knew that without the prayers and the provision of their home church they would not have accomplished anything. The church waited upon God for the next development of the work to be made known. There was to be no immediate launching out into another expedition as if success automatically required and guaranteed a repeat. Jesus counselled his disciples not to be carried away by enthusiasm (Luke 10:17-20). As the missionaries reported on what God had done the whole church would have been deeply aware that they were in fact partners in the work of the gospel. Preaching backed by praying is a powerful instrument in the hand of God.

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15:1-5

In the story of the church up to this point we have seen opposition to the missionary outreach of the gospel coming from unbelieving Jewish leaders, from secular authorities and from mob violence. Now we see something different. The danger is not from outside opposition but from something inside the church that would distort the gospel message. Some Pharisees had been converted (v. 5) and they were insisting that Gentile converts, as well as coming to saving faith in Christ, *needed* to be circumcized and were *required* to keep the law of Moses if they were to be regarded as real Christians. This was a contradiction of the gospel and a similar problem remains to this day. There are those who insist that unless we do this or that, or have this experience or that sign, or belong to this tradition or that succession, then we are not *true* Christians, or at least not spiritual or not fully sanctified. This is what was happening here, as verse 1 makes clear. People from Judea were coming into the congregation at Antioch and, with no authority other than their own opinions, creating dissension, controversy and confusion. Nowadays some radical Christians hear of a work of conversion in another denomination and at once try to infiltrate to draw away new believers to their particular speciality. This kind of 'sheep stealing' grieves God. In Antioch not only was the truth being distorted by adding requirements in order to be 'truly saved', there was also a breach of fellowship because the converted Jews would not sit at the Lord's Table with Gentile converts who had not been circumcized. There are still some who refuse fellowship to those who are not members of their particular tradition. Paul and Barnabas tackled the situation.

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15:1-5

Peter had been in Antioch when these men came down from Jerusalem. Until then he had happily sat in fellowship with Gentile believers but now he withdrew. Perhaps it was to keep the peace with his Jewish colleagues or even hopefully to help them to see the light. But his actions would have led to confusion and to compromise and even denial of the sufficiency of Christ. Even Barnabas was influenced (Gal. 2:11-13). But from today's passage (v. 2) it seems that Paul had won him round and they were sent to Jerusalem along with others so that the issue could be debated and decided. It was vitally important. The doctrine of salvation by faith

in Christ *alone* must not be allowed to be obscured. It is important to remember that our responsibility is not only to preach the gospel but to preserve it (1 Tim. 6:20) so that those who come after us will hear it clearly and safely. In our generation when so much emphasis is placed on 'experience' we must be totally convinced that doctrine matters and is absolutely basic. If we hold to the truth that Christ is everything and everything is in Christ (Col. 1:19; 2:8-10), then we will never lapse into the false practice of thinking of first-class and second-class Christians. The deputation travelled to Jerusalem and, during their visits to various places on the way, there was rejoicing at the conversion of the outsider Gentiles. Paul and Barnabas were received warmly at Jerusalem, but the issue still had to be debated. Paul was quite clear in his answer to the claim of verse 5. In his letter to the Galatians (5:1-3), which was already written and in circulation, he stated that to add anything to Christ is to deny Christ. We must remember this.

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15:6-11

If we look ahead to verses 12 and 22 we see that there was a general assembling of the whole church in Jerusalem. In that context Peter, who earlier had gone astray and had been challenged by Paul, stood up and added his reasoned testimony to the debate. He reminded them that nearly ten years previously, following his own report, they had decided that God had truly visited the Gentiles with salvation in Jesus Christ (Acts 11:1-18). At that time the Holy Spirit had come upon the Gentiles just as he had come to them on the Day of Pentecost. They could not now qualify what God had done by refusing to accept these Gentiles as true believers. Peter went on to challenge his Jewish brethren regarding their experience under the Law with all its requirements and burdens (v. 10). It had been a vexing, troubling and depressing life, and the stricter the rule of the Pharisees the worse it had been. No doubt he was *remembering* Jesus' words in Matthew 23:1-4 and comparing them with the Saviour's call and promise in Matthew 11:28-30. Of course, Peter was not denying the *moral* sanctions of God's Law. They remain. But we are not saved by keeping the Law (Rom. 3:19-20), nor are we helped in any way by the ceremonial law which so often becomes merely man-made tradition which supplants God's truth (Mark 7:6-9). Peter, addressing the council, summed up his argument by saying that Jews who had believed were not saved because of their circumcision and tradition but by the free grace of God in Jesus Christ. This is the gospel. Christ is salvation (1 Cor. 1:30). Christ is our life (Col. 3:4). Our pride and preferences must go, as Paul testified in Philippians 3:2-11.

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15:12-21

Following on Peter's clear reference to what God had in fact done among the Gentiles, both Barnabas and Paul added their arguments, emphasizing that the mind of God had been made perfectly clear. Then James, the brother of our Lord and a leader who carried the respect of all, spoke to summarize the mind of the assembly. With considerable wisdom and discretion he referred to Peter's statement but not to that of Barnabas and Saul. Peter had been the well-known leader of the church in Jerusalem in the earlier days after Pentecost. The other two men would not object to their persons being kept in the shadows because their real concern was for the good of the gospel. If Peter got the credit for swaying the assembly in support of the doctrines of the gospel, then well and good, so long as truth prevailed. This is what it means to be a *servant* of the gospel. Personal reputation does not matter. Christ made himself of no reputation (Phil. 2:7). If the gospel is furthered then we rejoice. Notice how James interpreted the conversion of the Gentiles in terms of the clear historical purpose of God (vv. 15-18). God's purpose in choosing and blessing his people (the Jews) was that through them all nations might be blessed. This is what God had said to Abraham at the beginning (Gen. 12:1-3). This is the interpretation James put on Amos 9:11-12. This was Paul's argument in Romans 15:8-12. The conclusion of James' summing up (vv. 19-21) was final. The terms of church membership were to be the same for Jew and Gentile: God's free grace in Jesus Christ received by faith. It was total acceptance only for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ. The clarity of the message of salvation had been preserved.

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15:22-29

The official letter, to be carried by wisely chosen men respected in Jerusalem, was warmly worded. It carried weight because it was signed by the apostles and elders. It began by disowning the legalistic Jewish converts,

who had given the impression that they had the approval of the church in Jerusalem for what they were teaching. These trouble-makers were actually doing Satan's work, disturbing the church. Only a few requirements (vv. 28-29) were laid on the Gentile converts. On one level they referred to scruples deeply held by Jews, whose whole life and culture was grounded in Old Testament teaching, which is found in Leviticus 17:10-14. The other clear standard was for moral purity. Think of the requirements in this way. When the Spirit of God awakens a community and works salvation, people from totally different backgrounds come into the church. Some long-time members may be shocked by the dress and behaviour of newcomers, feeling it is dishonouring to God. Those coming in may feel that the formality of dress and solemn behaviour denies the glorious freedom of the children of God (Rom. 8:21). The letter *required* the new believers to have respect for the scruples of others. Now apply the lesson. If something about us hinders another from concentrating on and following Jesus, then we must yield our rights. But outsiders coming to faith may well have come from a cultural background of sexual permissiveness. That attitude *has* to change. Our business is to please God, not ourselves. The official message was sent by letter. There was to be no misunderstanding. The reference to Barnabas and Paul, who had suffered so much, must have been a sweet encouragement.

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15:30-35

These verses give an insight into the life of the church at Antioch. The issue of the false teachers had disturbed their peace and caused great exercise of heart. No doubt they had feared the worst (the devil would see to that). They may have been preparing themselves for a severe split in the fellowship and a battle to contend for the faith against those inside the church who were corrupting it (Jude 3-4). But when the letter from Jerusalem was read they rejoiced. Their prayers had been answered. They would have noted carefully the words in verse 28 which 'emphasize the church's role as the vehicle of the Spirit. So conscious were they of being possessed and controlled by Him that he was given prior mention as the chief Author of their decision' (F. F. Bruce). What a comfort it is to be assured that God's eternal Spirit works through the whole life of the church and guides it sovereignly. These church leaders were not relying on their own considered opinions. They believed that God makes his will known to the church, and this is something we all need to remember when we are seeking guidance. What does the church fellowship to which we belong, and where we worship and pray, think we should be doing? On all levels of life there would be fewer mistakes made if we had the humility to seek shared guidance instead of being secretly and proudly individual. Note that the Jerusalem church did not impose its will on Antioch. It simply spoke the mind of the Lord and, by the same Holy Spirit, the Christians at Antioch recognized, received and responded to the message. The work went on, and it was a work of ministering the Word.

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15:36-41

Keep in mind that a significant spiritual battle had recently been fought and won. An attack by Satan on the ongoing work of the gospel had been thwarted. Two godly men had stood shoulder to shoulder, one of them accepting rebuke from the other (Gal. 2:13), and now the next stage of God's will and work was about to start. This is a time to watch out for the devil. He is always set to spoil things before they are properly started or after some significant success. Never forget the story of Elijah! It was after the great victory on Mount Carmel that he crashed to depression and a sense of defeat (1 Kings 19:1-4). Paul took the initiative and expressed a God-given desire to go on another missionary journey. Barnabas agreed at once, believing this was truly guidance from God. Then the trouble started. The facts are stated clearly but what lies behind them? We cannot be sure. Could it be that Barnabas spoke first, suggesting Mark as part of the team, because of his natural fondness for his nephew? Barnabas may have felt a bit sore at Paul for making public in the letter to the Galatians that he had gone astray somewhat weakly under Peter's influence. When Paul was being so categorical, was he forgetting how much he owed to Barnabas right at the beginning (Acts 9:26-27)? Perhaps Paul had this deep disagreement in mind when he wrote later in 1 Corinthians 13:5 that love is not easily angered and keeps no record of wrongs. Why is it that we can be so unwilling to concede a point or to admit the possibility that we might be wrong? You cannot read this story without being aware of the activity of Satan stirring anger and constraining both men to be unyielding.

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15:36-41

The sharp disagreement indicates a situation in which two godly friends were torn apart, and that cannot happen without deep hurt. Could there not have been a peaceable waiting on God and a recognizing that the time had come, in the will of God, for parting company in the interest of the developing work? Paul later wrote about the need to agree and to live at peace whenever possible (Phil. 4:2; Rom. 12:18). James taught the church that anger is not a useful thing (James 1:19-20) and that wisdom from above is peace-loving, considerate and open to reason (James 3:17). Convictions about guidance, just like convictions about doctrine, must be graciously held, and that does not signify weakness. Were Paul and Barnabas aware that the church could be divided as Christians took sides with the two great leaders? It happened later in the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 3:4-7). The devil was busy trying to do what he failed to do in the earlier part of the chapter. The church at Antioch was again in turmoil and uncertainty. Never forget that God's great men are men of like passions as we are, and they are liable to tensions, reactions, mistakes, hurts and fears, the same as the rest of us. This is why we must make it our business to pray for and to care for those whom God lays hold on for significant service in the gospel. No doubt these two men would very soon be pondering the rift between them. It was a sore wound that would take time to heal. What of Mark? Was he sore, perhaps even rebellious (he was young!) at the suggestion that one failure disqualified him for service? On the other hand was Paul aware that perhaps Mark was not yet ready for this kind of service? Not all who volunteer for Christian service are ready for it!

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15:36-41

Read also Romans 8:28,35-39 There is no mention in this incident of the mind of the church being sought. Does that mean that after his significant theological victory at Jerusalem Paul was becoming too independent? That is a question we cannot answer. There was an overruling by God. The devil was active but he is never supreme. Instead of one missionary journey being set in motion there were two. Barnabas took Mark and they went to Cyprus, and without doubt Mark's time with the 'son of encouragement' (Acts 4:36) prepared him for his future service with Paul (2 Tim. 4:11) and for the writing of the Gospel that bears his name. Paul took Silas, who was a Roman citizen, and this was to prove tremendously helpful in days to come in relation to the civil authorities. At this stage Paul's intention was to visit the places he had gone to on his earlier journey. But God had plans that were far more extensive and he was not prepared to allow the weaknesses of men to prevent these plans developing. Indeed, God worked through the sad breach of fellowship in order to set the course for his future work. This does not mean the quarrel was a good thing, but God can bring good out of all things. But could not the will of God have been discerned without this hurtful disagreement? It is not for us, whose fruitfulness in service is limited, to criticize men like Paul and Barnabas who had been so much used by God. But perhaps the partnership between these two men had become too close, too interdependent and too protective of each other so that their usefulness to God was being limited. Whatever the underlying reasons, the 'flare up' between them (and both felt it a matter of principle) was overruled by God to lead to wider and fuller service.

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16:1-5

The story in Acts now focuses on Paul. After the breach with Barnabas concerning Mark, Paul would be careful about whom he chose to join his team. Obviously he saw in Timothy a man with a future, even though the young man was timid and not very strong physically (1 Tim. 5:23; 2 Tim. 1:4-7). Of course, this is exactly how Barnabas had regarded John Mark. It is important to discern potential while recognizing that the person is not yet ready for or capable of handling responsibility. The story of both Mark and Timothy should encourage us. No matter how limited and inhibited we may feel we are at present, no matter how many mistakes we have made, God is immeasurably greater than we are and he is able to take us and make us his useful servants. But note that Paul's choice was not arbitrary nor was it that he was attracted to the young man's personality. Timothy was well spoken of by the congregations of Lystra and Iconium, neither of which cities was an easy place in which to be a consistent Christian. Had these congregations expressed reservations about Timothy Paul would have been wise to hesitate. We all need to learn, for the safety of the work of the gospel, to be unhurried in our choice of people for service and leadership. First impressions can be deceptive. We must look for men

and women who have proved themselves in the ordinary ongoing work which is the training ground for the future. Sooner than Timothy realized he was going to be left in charge of a congregation at Ephesus, where there were real problems. Read 1 Timothy 1:3-7,18-20; 6:11-14,20-21; 2 Timothy 1:13-14. All this and much more stemmed from the day Paul enlisted Timothy.

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16:1-5

There is one more lesson to learn from this passage. In spite of his earnest pleading in Jerusalem against those who said circumcision was necessary, Paul now had Timothy circumcised. Why did Paul do this? We are told that it was because of the Jews. We know from verse 1 that Timothy's mother was a Jew who had been converted to Christ, as had his grandmother (2 Tim. 1:5), but the boy had never been circumcised. No doubt this issue might have caused a family crisis with the father being a Gentile, and so the women gave ground and did not insist on something that they felt was right and which meant a lot to them. In the same way now, Paul seems to have given ground to the opinion of dogged Jews, and other Jews who had been converted, so that prejudice and suspicion would not act as a barrier to their preaching of the gospel. Sometimes open and radical confrontation is the way forward when the gospel is involved. Sometimes the right thing to do is to give way on issues which are not matters of basic doctrine and not likely to hinder our preaching. Consider Paul's attitude as expressed in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, especially verses 19-20, where he makes his position crystal clear. There is a challenge here regarding just how much we are prepared to put up with personally in order to win people for Christ. Of course we must remember that Paul's action in circumcising Timothy was remembered by his critics and held against him, as Galatians 5:11 may suggest. People will always remember your mistakes, real or imagined. That is the technique of the devil. Paul was accused of inconsistency and compromise. Jesus, who made no mistakes, was accused of being in league with the devil (John 7:20; 8:48).

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16:6-10

We are led to this fascinating passage by way of the breach with Barnabas and the difficult decision regarding Timothy. The missionary journey had begun with some degree of fruit and encouragement as verses 4-5 indicated, but then everything began to go wrong. At least it must have felt so to Paul and his companions because the Holy Spirit seemed to be blocking every decision they made. We are not told *how* they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach. Perhaps it was by inner constraint, or by circumstances in which they discerned the hand of God, or by a clear word from God communicated in some sovereign way. Their situation must have appeared very negative and the devil would certainly have tried to discourage them, reminding Paul about the quarrel with Barnabas, and suggesting that his failure there meant he was not in a condition to be useful. You can imagine the apostle and his colleagues becoming more and more troubled and feeling that something was very wrong. Yet in actual fact everything was exactly right and their lives were being channelled into the will of God for their future service, which was to be far more extensive and far more costly than they imagined. What a lesson they learned in and through this baffling experience! When they looked for confirmation all they got was a succession of contradictions, closed doors and a seemingly silent God. Faith requires that in such a situation of being hemmed in we should stand still, and wait upon God (Ps. 27:14; Isa. 40:31). This is exactly what Paul and his companions did. They did not panic. They prayed. It is amazing how it often takes a baffling situation or a crisis to make us pray earnestly.

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16:6-10

This passage is important for Christian life and service. The use of the word 'we' in verse 10 indicates that Doctor Luke had now joined the company, and some suggest that Paul's ill-health had been the means of God's guidance, first holding him back and then re-directing him. If ill-health can be a messenger of God for richer and fuller service, then Paul's thorn in the flesh (2 Cor. 12:7-10) is every bit as much a messenger of God as a messenger of Satan. Commentators suggest that Paul's original plan had been to visit the churches in Galatia and then go on to evangelize the eastern shore of the Aegean, possibly from a base in Ephesus. In the fulness of

time he did come to Ephesus and stayed for three years of ministry, but he came by a different route. The strategic plan of God was laid and it is a great comfort to know that the work of the gospel does not proceed in a haphazard fashion. God has a plan, and he makes it his business to lead his servants in that plan, overruling their own thinking and frustrating their ideas wherever necessary, in order that his will may be done. When the call came, Paul was ready and there was no hesitation. This was part of the result of the battles and struggles he had gone through. A piece of work that he had not thought about nor expected had been brought before him as God's clear call, and he went forward. The 'man of Macedonia' represented a society and culture of tremendous achievement, marked by Roman law, administration and justice, together with the great achievements of Greek culture. Yet it was a society with a hungry heart, crying to God's messengers, 'Come over and help us.' When will our society begin to cry to God?

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16:11-15

Paul soon discovered that the grace of God had gone before him, preparing both the way and the people. Luke gives details of the journey, emphasizing the bypassing of smaller places and showing that Paul, as was his general policy, headed for the significant administrative centres, in this case Philippi. The first few days were waiting days, perhaps touring the city to get the feel of it, and no doubt discovering that there was no Jewish synagogue. That meant there were fewer than ten Jewish men in the city and consequently it would be less religious and biblical in background than many other places Paul had visited. It was not a promising start. As Paul sought out the place of prayer by the riverside he found a small group of women gathered there. Perhaps the missionary team felt a bit deflated after the excitement of the Macedonian call and the expectant journey. But the great leading churchman began to speak with the praying group. Where there is prayer there is possibility and potential. The women were eager and willing to listen to the new preacher about whom they knew nothing, although he may have given them some evidence of identity. They would see at a glance that he was Jew. As Paul ministered God's word significant spiritual work was being done, because Lydia's heart, already prepared, was opened by the Spirit of God and she became the first convert in Europe. She was the 'firstfruit' of a great harvest that was yet to be gathered. When you live and work in the will of God there is just no saying what may happen, no matter how unpromising the start is. Sometimes God allows us to see the results of our witness. At other times we must go on in faith believing that God's Word, by the Holy Spirit, will do its appointed work.

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16:16-21

Paul's first convert in Philippi had been Lydia, the respectable, wealthy businesswoman whose lifestyle had included some religious involvement. Her conversion had been totally quiet and gentle with no publicity attached to it. The second person we hear of (although it is not specifically stated that she came to faith) was a young girl, well known in the city because of her association with the shrine of the 'god' Apollo at Delphi. She was able to speak under the power of some 'spirit'; her utterances were beyond her conscious control; and evil men had her 'under contract' so that her powers in fortune-telling could be used in a gullible and superstitious society to make them a lot of money. Think well of this picture and then consider the power of salvation that broke into the situation. In our contemporary society there is the same kind of superstition and manipulation, especially in the brain-washing of the younger generation. The music scene, the video scene, the drug scene, the paperback book trade and glossy magazines, in their preoccupation with the occult and obsession with sex, are but some of the areas of danger. The battle is on for the minds, emotions and spirits of the whole generation, regardless of age. No doubt the wicked masters of the girl would claim that the public demand justified what they were providing. We hear this plea constantly in defence of even the most crude and degenerate projects. But demand never makes a thing right. And, when evil things take on a 'religious' and 'spiritual' appearance, as they did in the girl's utterances (v. 17), which were factually true, the danger is even greater. Everything that speaks the name of Jesus with fervour is not necessarily of God.

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16:16-21

For a second study of this incident read also Luke 4:18-19; Acts 26:18, to see the radical nature of salvation. In verse 16 we see the ongoing work of the gospel in the city. Paul, his colleagues and converts kept on gathering at the place of prayer, even though Lydia's house was now available for them to meet as a church. The small group is not a long-term substitute for the church gathering. As the Christians came and went, this girl kept on accosting them and making public testimony to what they were and the message they brought. Some would think that this was marvellous free publicity, guaranteed to draw attention to the gospel. But Paul never overvalued commotion and never regarded it as necessary for the advance of the Kingdom of God. Publicity can attract wicked men and devils as well as possible converts, and it can stir up confusion as well as opportunity. If people in Philippi began to think that Paul and this girl (saying the same things about God and Christ) were really in partnership, then the gospel would be distorted and hindered. Paul was troubled, recognizing the danger to the work of the infant church in Philippi. He was also burdened for the girl, sensing in her words something of a cry for help. There was nothing precipitate in Paul's actions. He put up with this distraction for many days, and then he spoke with authority, and in the name of Jesus commanded the evil spirit to come out of the girl. This it did, instantly and without struggle. The girl was no longer in bondage to the evil spirit, nor to her human masters. There is a time to resist the devil in this way. There are also many times when wisdom requires us to refuse dramatic activities and involvements.

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16:22-24

See clearly the impact on society of a church that is alive in the power of God. With Lydia's family there was the quiet and simple ingathering of souls prepared by limited religious instruction. With the demon-possessed girl there was demonstration of the saving, delivering power of God, and, no doubt, the news of this spread like wildfire. But then the commercial interests of the city reacted and the political powers became involved. The magistrates, not wanting trouble that could be reported to Rome and, of course, having an eye to the next elections and not wanting to alienate a powerful business lobby, decided to take radical action. The protesters' statement in verses 20-21 was half truth and half lies. But by now the crowd (were they organized pickets paid to protect the trade?) were getting out of hand. In complete disregard of their own principles of justice, the magistrates had the missionaries cruelly beaten, publicly humiliated and jailed. It was all a violent outburst, but we must be prepared for this kind of reaction when in the name of Christ we challenge the devil's territory. A materialistic society will tolerate and even encourage the church when it 'keeps its place' and concentrates on religious observance. But when it criticizes and interferes in the established activities of society, especially with profits, there will be reaction. Note that these persecutors were not Jews (who had consistently opposed the gospel) but Gentiles. And though they had seen the power of God to save and deliver and change human life they were not moved or softened. They were like the people of Gadara (Mark 5:14-17). Pigs and profits were more important than people. Materialism can provoke a ruthlessness that is frightening.

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16:25-34

The next convert in Philippi was another total surprise: the jailer. The evangelists Paul and Silas were in a bad condition, humanly speaking. They had been represented as wandering Jewish troublemakers and, without trial, they had been stripped and severely flogged so that their backs were bleeding (v. 33). They had been thrown into jail and, seeing the magistrates' fury, the jailer took it on himself to be as strict and ruthless as possible so that the prisoners would suffer the maximum pain. The jailer was tough, probably a bit sadistic, with little time for God and even less for religion. It is doubtful if he ever thought whether or not he had a soul, let alone whether or not he needed salvation. A less likely convert is hard to imagine. But Saul of Tarsus had been an unlikely convert and he had been brought to Christ. That particular night in prison was to be significant in more ways than one. Of course, prisons feature quite a lot in the New Testament story. Peter discovered that God overruled in jail (Acts 5:17-20; 12:6-11) and Paul later found a new area of evangelism through being in prison (Phil. 1:12-14). Imagine the scene here. It was midnight, and physical pain and discomfort prevented sleep, so the two missionaries began to sing hymns and to pray together. Nothing like this had ever happened in that jail

before. The injured men were not moaning in pain, nor were they shouting and cursing the authorities, nor did they seem to be unduly cast down. Their singing rang out joyfully and their prayers were confident although we are not told what they were actually praying for. Their reaction to life's hardships and suffering was their witness. And it was powerful.

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16:25-34

The night was disrupted by an earthquake. The missionaries would not have expected their prayers to be answered so quickly nor so radically. But with God you never know what is going to happen next. The jailer may not have heard the singing; he was asleep, but the earthquake wakened him. He found cell doors open and all the prisoners free because the staples holding the chains to the walls had been shaken loose. He was frightened out of his wits. Since he would be held responsible for any jail-break and would pay with his life, he was ready to commit suicide. Then he was astonished. Paul, whom he had treated so harshly, reassured him that all the prisoners were still there. This was quite beyond the poor man. He could only think in human terms and by right every sensible prisoner should have been on the run by then. For the jailer it was all unnerving but it made him think about God. How much he knew about salvation is hard to say. He may have heard about the incident in verses 17-18. He was certainly shaken and willing to listen when Paul expounded to him, and to all present, the way of salvation through Jesus Christ. The response was miraculous. The Spirit of God opened their minds and hearts to receive the truth and they recognized it as the answer to their need. The change in the jailer was remarkable. He washed the prisoners' wounds and, possibly at the same well in the courtyard, he and his household were baptized. We are not told of any of the prisoners believing nor of any of them escaping. Paul must have been very sure of the work of grace done in this man's heart if he was willing to baptize him without delay. Of course, Paul and the jailer could both have faced execution in the morning.

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16:35-40

Three significant instances of salvation have been recorded. We may have forgotten that Lydia and others would no doubt have also been praying while Paul was in prison. They may have felt the earthquake, although it could have been very localized, but they would not know about the jailer nor about the joy of his heart and home. Perhaps they were still praying, and prayer was still needed. Paul needed to be quite clear in mind and spirit. Already he was thinking of the future and of the safety of the church after he had left Philippi. How would the believers cope with antagonistic, unprincipled magistrates? However, the cool of the morning found the magistrates in a saner frame of mind and they were eager to get rid of these men they had jailed without cause. They did not seem to have known of the earthquake. God was going to teach them by a different method. They must have been shaken by Paul's message in verse 37, almost as much as the jailer had been. They had blundered. As politicians they would be in trouble with Rome if Paul chose to be difficult. They had no option but to come, apologize, and request politely that the missionaries would leave the city. From then on the politicians would be very careful what they did to the Christians because Paul and Silas were Roman citizens to be reckoned with. We are not told the content of the encouragement in verse 40 but no doubt Lydia and the believers were told of the answer to their prayers and encouraged to be wise and to give no cause for the authorities to be antagonistic. The gospel goes forward best when things in society are quiet (1 Tim. 2:1-4). Paul and Silas left quietly. They did not try to take further advantage of the authorities' mistake.

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17:1-9

One of the many amazing things about the story of the Acts of the Apostles is that the work of the gospel simply kept on going on, no matter what happened. Paul and his company did not linger at the first two places mentioned because their plan was for the more strategic city of Thessalonica. The pattern of Paul's approach was constant. He went to the synagogue and, whether daily or only on the Sabbath we cannot tell, he reasoned from the Scriptures. From the Old Testament he marshalled the evidence that the promises of God had been fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This was exactly what Jesus had said on the road to

Emmaus (Luke 24:25-27, 44-48). During the three weeks of his stay Paul's ministry was wide-ranging. In his letters to the Thessalonians, written later, there is reference to many truths taught during that time. Declaring the truth is a powerful ministry and it had results. Some of the Jews, many religious Gentiles, and quite a few of the prominent women were converted within a matter of days. But, as always, where there is a work of God there is a work of Satan, and the Jews stirred up trouble of a very fierce kind. Keep in mind, of course, that the 'trigger' point was that the believers left the congregation of the synagogue and joined the congregation of Paul and Silas. The synagogue rulers were furious, their anger unprincipled, and they roused a mob of thugs to besiege the house of Jason (who had been converted) where they thought Paul was staying. Not finding the missionaries, they dragged Jason (and possibly Aristarchus and Secundus cf. 20:4) to the magistrates. What an alarming start to their Christian lives! But it did not deter them. Would it have deterred us?

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17:1-9

When the arrests were made Paul may have been hurried away by a back door, leaving Jason and the others to risk whatever consequences came. Perhaps they saw that Paul and Silas could not have stood another flogging. Paul never forgot that people suffered because of their loyalty to him and to the gospel (1 Thess. 2:14-16; Acts 15:26; Rom. 16:3-4). In the spiritual sense the charge of turning the world upside down (v.6 AV, RSV) is seldom made these days. The church does not make this kind of impact. It may be that the charge was one of being political agitators operating on a basis of religion, something like the advocates of 'liberation theology' in our own day. The accusation went on to charge them of opposing Caesar. This same charge was made against Jesus at his trial (John 19:12-15). The final thrust of the accusation was that the apostles were proclaiming another king, named Jesus. Of course the apostles did proclaim the Kingdom of God, and Jesus as the King of Kings, at whose name every knee would bow. But their message was not political, nor was it a challenge to duly constituted authority. The missionaries knew, as Jesus had declared, that his Kingdom was not of this world (John 18:33-38). But any suggestion of treason had to be taken seriously by the authorities and so Jason and his friends 'stood bail' for the missionaries, possibly undertaking that they would leave and not return. Some commentators suggest that Paul saw in this arrangement a victory for Satan in preventing his return to Thessalonica (1 Thess. 2:18) but we cannot be sure of this. What we are sure of is that, as a result of a short, turbulent ministry, a church was founded and it stood to become a missionary church itself (1 Thess. 1:6-8).

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17:10-15

The fact that some are spiritual giants greatly used by God does not in any way cancel out their humanity, and we must think of the feelings of the missionaries as they were once again forced to slip away in the dark from a place where God had blessed their ministry. It must have taken great resolve to go at once to the synagogue in Berea, but what a sweet relief it must have been to Paul and Silas to be met with such a gracious, open spirit. How long this earnest searching of the Scriptures went on uninterrupted we cannot say. But all who are involved in teaching the Word of God will know the blessing that comes to a preacher when he finds a company of people willing to listen and eager to learn. However, the peace did not last but many Jews and Gentiles came to faith. Then when the bitter Jewish agitators heard of the response to the gospel they came with haste to do their devilish work of disturbing the ministry of the Word. Once again the missionaries were forced to move on but it must have been evident to them that, in and through these misfortunes and apparent victories of the devil, the work of the gospel was spreading to an ever wider territory. Never forget the overruling providence of God. There is nothing outside his control. He makes even the wrath of man to praise him (Ps. 76:10, AV). The story develops as Paul, on his own, headed for Athens while Silas and Timothy stayed on in Berea, possibly to monitor the situation in the light of any developments with the civil authorities. But by the time Paul had reached Athens he realized the need for his companions to be with him and he sent for them to join him. True preachers know they cannot do it all on their own.

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17:16-21

‘Athens was not exactly on Paul’s missionary programme’ (F. F. Bruce) and he was just waiting for his partners to join him. He was there more as a missionary on a short holiday rather than a tourist, but he took the opportunity to view the city about which he had no doubt heard a lot. Athens was quite a place in terms of architecture, sculpture and literature and we must think of names such as Plato, Aristotle and Socrates. Politically it had been the cradle of democracy but it was well past its days of glory. Some people criticize Paul for being a ‘Philistine’ because, as he toured the city, he did not view its ‘glories’ as works of art and achievement, but as shrines of idolatry. His spirit was distressed. The works of man seemed to declare glory to man, while all the temples and shrines pointed to the ‘powers’ or ‘gods’ behind them which men worshipped, feared and placated. To Paul these idols were not innocent and he made this plain when writing to the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 10:20). Athens was proud of its wisdom, but it was evident to Paul that their wisdom had brought them no knowledge of God (1 Cor. 1:21). There was a synagogue, but it may well have fallen under the influence of the spirit of the age, just as great parts of the church nowadays think, act and plan in a way that is totally worldly. There was much in Athens that was impressive, and people may well have travelled far to see its sights. But we must not be taken in by appearances. We must ask, ‘Where is God in all this?’ Paul realized God was not in all their thoughts (Ps. 10:4, AV) and that stirred him to reason with the people both in the synagogue and in the marketplace. He went where the people were and spoke to them of Christ.

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17:16-21

Paul was a lone voice in Athens but he knew the power of the gospel (Rom. 1:14-17). Like his Master he saw the people of this famous city as sheep without a shepherd (Mark 6:34). The thought patterns and life attitudes of the people were influenced by two main schools of philosophy. The Epicureans’ aim was pleasure, in the sense of absence of disturbance. They lived for life, did not think of death, tried to cultivate a placid inner disposition and believed that the ‘gods’ took no real interest in the lives of men. The Stoics had a philosophy of self-sufficiency. They believed they were captains of their own souls and destinies; reason was their ‘god’, feelings were excluded, and to endure whatever came was virtue. When these philosophers heard Paul they were contemptuous, calling him a ‘babbler’. Some regarded his message as concerning two different gods: Jesus and resurrection. Yet Paul’s words must have made some impact because he was invited to the Areopagus, a recognized court which had authority over visiting teachers. It was a great opportunity. The officials were honest enough to admit that Paul was declaring a message or philosophy that they knew nothing about and there was a possibility that he might ‘have something to contribute’ to the general pool of religious thought. The comment in verse 21 completes the picture. In spite of all their achievement in the realm of thought they were only investigative and speculative. They had nothing they were sure about. Novelty and new ideas were their interests or hobbies. What an opportunity to speak the sure Word of God! Our generation is almost as ignorant of the Bible and the Christian gospel as Athens was.

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17:22-23

The Athenians were very religious and by building shrines they sought to acknowledge and keep in with any gods there might be. No matter how materialistic and self-sufficient they sought to be, their obsessive concern with something new indicated a restlessness of heart and an uncertainty of spirit from which they could not escape. Paul was aware of this and would no doubt recall the words of Ecclesiastes: that God has put eternity in man’s heart so that man can find rest only in him (Eccles. 3:11). Paul did not attack their religion but rather focused on one point of it, namely the altar to the unknown God, so that he could declare that he had the answer to what they confessed they were looking for. It was a wise way to start. It was also sound theologically, because the heart of the Christian gospel is the fact that God has spoken and made himself known. There can be an awareness of and a response to God through creation, as Romans 1:19-20 shows. The heavens declare the glory of God (Ps. 19:1) and God’s mighty acts of redemption were made known to and through Moses (Ps. 103:7). But, having spoken to the world in various ways down through history, God spoke fully and finally in his Son Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1-3). Man cannot find out God by searching and speculating (Job 11:7, AV). If he tries to do so he ends up making God in his own image, distorting God, reducing him in size and portraying him in ever more grotesque ways (Rom. 1:22-23). People still say, ‘We all have our own ideas about God’, but over

against that, God has made known who he is, what he is and what he requires of all people. This is why in terms of salvation and of Christian service we must learn what God is really like.

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17:24-31

People argue as to whether Paul's sermon was a wise and evangelical one or not. We cannot judge because we have only a summary of it. But the message was clear and sure. He was not 'venturing to suggest', but declaring what was true, things about which he himself had no doubt. Paul knew whom he had believed and what he had believed (2 Tim. 1:12; Gal. 1:11-12). He was persuaded that the message was valid and necessary in every human situation. Some have questioned Paul's method of approach. He does not seem to reason directly out of Scripture as he did in other places but, of course, he was in the public debating chamber not in the synagogue. On the other hand, all Paul said was based on and stemmed from the truth of the Old Testament together with the facts of history regarding the life, death and resurrection of Christ. The sermon began with a categorical affirmation regarding the sovereign God of creation who rules over all he has made. This God cannot be limited to any locality or shrine as if he was the possession of any group or place (v. 24). Nor is this God in any way dependent on men, since He is the giver of life itself, and all life is dependent on him (v. 25; cf. Dan. 5:23). God is also the God of history in all its developments. He deals with all people on the same basis. In his sight there is no place for pride or superiority. The intellectual and the ignorant, the cultured and the base all stand before God in equal need. There is no difference (Rom. 3:22-23). The Athenians were proud of their pure pedigree, and, while Paul did not denigrate that, he made plain that whatever privileges they had, they owed them all to God. That last thought should cause us all to think deeply and be humble.

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17:24-31

Paul continued his sermon in a way that portrayed the whole of life under the providence of God (v. 26). Where we find ourselves and the circumstances of our immediate situation are not incidental, nor are they accidental. They are ordered by God so that we might be prompted and enabled to seek after him. Paul saw the overruling of God in this 'time to spare' that he had in Athens while he waited for his companions. It was an unexpected but God-given opportunity for the Athenians as well as for him. There is a throb of glorious truth in verse 27. The evangelist was making his hearers aware of God, looking to the Spirit of God to apply the truth to minds and hearts. In verse 28 Paul quoted their own poets much in the way that we might quote, 'Trailing clouds of glory do we come, from God who is our home' (Wordsworth). We are not consenting to the false theology of the poet but simply awakening people by familiar words to help them to see that the searching of their hearts was leading them to seek after God. When Paul says, 'We are his offspring' he is not saying, as presumptuous unbelievers tend to say, 'Oh, we are all God's children.' He is affirming that mankind is made in the image of God and that, in spite of the effects of the Fall, there is yet hope (in Christ) that people may reach their true dignity and destiny and not be left groping in uncertain superstition. In verse 29 Paul is calling them away from their own self-generated ideas of God. We cannot any longer plead ignorance because God has spoken and made himself known. The time of ignorance is past. The coming of Jesus Christ signals a new start. It is what we do now that matters. It is time for action. Repent and believe the gospel.

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17:32-34

Verses 30-31 brought into focus an aspect of the Easter message that tends to be overlooked. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is an advance intimation from God regarding the Day of Judgement. The facts of Christ's life, death and resurrection mean that everyone stands exposed in the light of God. Any genuine feelings after God that people may claim to have will be seen to be genuine if they now turn to Christ (John 6:45). Note that repentance is a command from the God who has the right to command. To refuse is an act of deliberate disobedience. If people prefer darkness to light it is because their deeds are evil (John 3:19-21). The whole issue on the Day of Judgement will be settled in relation to the man Christ Jesus. We are not dealing with a remote, unfeeling God, but with the God who came down to the world in his Son Jesus Christ. No one can say they do

not understand. Listen to Jesus. Go to Jesus with every burden and bondage (Matt. 11:28-30). He is the way, the truth and the life and everyone who would come to God must come through him because there is no other name given whereby we must be saved (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). Of course to the Greeks, as to many today, the whole idea of resurrection and judgement was not acceptable. Some mocked and dismissed the whole sermon as not suitable for educated people. But some educated people were moved to interest and to further seeking. And some were moved to faith. Some at least saw in Paul's gospel the answer to the hungers and fears of the human heart. If this message was true, then there was light and hope in human darkness. Paul may have had few converts in Athens, but there is rejoicing in heaven when even one repents (Luke 15:7).

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18:1-3

Paul left Athens, no doubt wondering what he had accomplished. The seed of the Word had been sown. Perhaps years later another preacher would reach Athens and be surprised to discover that hearts had been prepared. How we need to pray for the preaching of the Word of God, praying even more after it has been preached than before. In 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 Paul tells of the attitude of heart with which he came to his next area of preaching. This does not necessarily mean he felt his approach in Athens had been wrong. His apprehension in Corinth (not a nice place to be in) was probably partly a natural human feeling and partly the inevitable travail a true preacher experiences both before and after preaching. Being grounded in Old Testament Scripture Paul would be comforted and reassured by such verses as Isaiah 55:11; Psalm 126:5-6; and Jeremiah 1:12, AV. Encouraged by the Word of God, reassured by the presence of God, and conscious of the call and command of God, the missionary went forward aware that he was under obligation to preach the gospel (Rom. 1:14-15). There was no contracting out. Nor was there a blind blundering forward. Paul went to Corinth, not because it was a well-known 'sin city' with a reputation for sexual licence, but because he saw it as a significant commercial centre with business traffic from all points of the compass, and therefore a place with potential for evangelism. People would hear the gospel, some would believe, and then would return to their own cities and towns carrying with them their new-found faith. Paul, and the eventual congregation in Corinth, would never be able to record in statistics what had been accomplished.

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18:1-3

All of us should thrill at the privilege of sharing in the work of God's grace that brings people to Christ. It is God who does the work, and if we forget this we cease to be of use (1 Cor. 3:5-9). If there is success we must remember that we are reaping where others have sown (John 4:35-38). The snare of statistics, charts and projections is a real one. It focuses on what *we* are doing rather than on what *God* is doing. It is the activity of God in his glorious and perfect providence that we must note here. Long before Paul reached Corinth the gospel had reached Rome and some Jews had been converted. The resultant arguments and division in the synagogues there had caused commotion in the city and this led to the government ordering all Jews to leave Rome. The civil authorities, in their typical ignorance of matters religious, saw no difference between Jews and Christians. One married couple, Aquila and Priscilla, possibly already Christians, had either by choice or by a combination of circumstances made their way to Corinth. They may have been dismayed by the evil atmosphere of the city, dominated as it was by the Temple of Aphrodite which gave religious respectability to sexual licence. Perhaps Aquila and Priscilla would often have asked each other, 'Why did God send us to a place like this?' There was no explanation until one day they met Paul, and a lifetime of friendship and service in the gospel began. Years later, writing to the church in Rome (Rom. 16:3-5), Paul testified to the quality of this couple who had given him, and others, the costly support he needed in his ministry. Missionaries and ministers are human and need human as well as spiritual support, care and encouragement.

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18:4-8

Paul's two colleagues, who had already shared with him in suffering for the gospel's sake, were now by his side. They had brought encouraging news of the converts in Thessalonica standing firm (1 Thess. 3:1-10). They

had also brought a gift of money from Philippi (2 Cor. 11:9-10), which eased Paul's burden of having to work for a living and enabled him to give himself full time to the establishing of a congregation of believers in Corinth. Right from the start Paul reasoned from the Scriptures and sought to persuade the Jews and the Greek adherents of the synagogue concerning Christ. He faced the long-established traditions and prejudices of formal religion that had lost its freshness and vitality. An evangelical minister who goes to a church that has never known real biblical ministry will find the same. Paul's ministry went on for some weeks and resistance to the gospel intensified. His enemies slandered the preacher and even blasphemed Jesus' name. Paul knew that the time had come to make the issue clear and, in the pattern that Jesus himself had spoken of, he shook out his garments before them, making plain that he had fulfilled his responsibility before God and that he was free of blame regarding their eternal destiny. Read Matthew 10:5-15; Ezekiel 33:7-9. The issue of eternal destiny is solemn. That is why we must never precipitate a crisis. But the time does come for a parting of the ways. This developing situation must have burdened Paul's heart. As he spoke the words in verse 6 he must have known the deep constraint of the Holy Spirit, the quiet assurance that there was no other way to go. Such decisions are far reaching and it is best to seek the counsel of trusted colleagues as well as to pray.

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18:4-8

The formal public act of spiritual separation, not easily taken, was followed by God's gracious encouragements. It is fascinating to note that the new work was established in the house next door to the synagogue. It meant, for those who had been converted, who had come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ, a change of congregation. It meant a call to public testimony to both religious and secular society as people had to decide which door to enter. On days appointed for worship there would be no hiding of where people's sympathies lay. It meant the dividing of the religious community (as Jesus said it would in Matthew 10:34-36) and that must have resulted in consternation, criticism and bitterness. At this point the wonderful encouragement came; encouragement for the new believers and the missionaries but not for the Jewish community. The ruler of the synagogue and his household believed the gospel, and it seems that on hearing this amazing piece of news, many of the Corinthians also believed. It must have been a costly decision for Crispus to step out of the whole Jewish community, the context in which he had lived his life, and to identify himself publicly with Christ and his church. This was the Lord's doing and marvellous to see. We must also take note of God's gracious provision, through the God-fearing Roman citizen, Titius Justus. How often, from unexpected quarters, including officers in the Roman army, God provided what was needed. Some new converts prove to be gloriously significant. Who was this man? There are grounds for believing he was none other than Gaius, one of the few people actually baptized personally by Paul (1 Cor. 1:14; Rom. 16:23).

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18:9-11

The beginning of this chapter told of a situation that was exciting, solemn, intense and manifestly successful in the establishing of a church in a pagan city. Today's verses reveal the depth of the personal cost in the experience of a truly great man of God. Never forget that God's man was intensely human and the suffering and scorn he met were not easily coped with. Consider what he reveals of his own feelings in 2 Corinthians 2:12-13; 4:7-12; 7:5; 11:23-29. We are not surprised that the Lord felt compassion for his servant and gave him much needed assurance and encouragement. Without doubt the devil would also be giving Paul much attention, accentuating the dangers, difficulties and hurts, and pressing in on him with the weapon of fear that can so easily distort all our thinking and dominate our feelings. The Lord's word to his servant was, 'Fear not. Don't let the upheaval unsettle you nor the costly circumstances deter you.' Reasons for this were then given to Paul. The Lord was with him; he was not alone. No one was to be allowed to *harm* Paul even if they were able to *attack* him and hurt him. God is still the God who shut the mouths of the lions (Dan. 6:16-22). If we ask why it is not always so and why martyrs suffer and die, we can give no answer other than that it is the way the Master went (John 15:20-21). The third 'word' to Paul was that God had many people in the city who were destined for salvation and that, even though few were *as yet* saved, the work would go on and the harvest would be gathered. How were they to be brought to salvation and life? Paul had no doubts. It was to be by the preaching of the Word in the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 10:14-17; 1 Cor. 1:21).

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Wherever Paul had preached there had been difficulty and opposition from both the synagogue and the political rulers. On each occasion Paul had moved on to a new area, leaving the difficulty behind. But now charges against Paul were made to the Roman governor, and any decision made by him would have been followed as a pattern by other governors, and the advance of the gospel over a very wide area could have been hindered. We learn from history that Gallio (brother of Seneca the philosopher) was an attractive gentleman and had only recently taken up office. The Jews may have felt they could pressurize him because the edict in Rome (18:2) had thrown suspicion on Christians. The accusation against Paul was that he was preaching a religion that did not have the permission and protection of the Roman government. It is interesting to note that Paul did not get the chance to defend himself or his preaching because Gallio refused to draw any distinction between Judaism (which was allowed) and Christianity. He ruled that the whole matter was one of interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures and therefore that the Christians were entitled to the same protection of the law as were the Jews. The case was dismissed. This was more than just an escape for Paul. It created a legal precedent and for the next ten or twelve years, until the time of Nero, Roman law was tolerant and just towards the Christian faith. Later in the story Paul appealed to Caesar because, in the area he then found himself, local Roman rule was being successfully pressurized by the Jews. This story shows how important it is to pray for all who are in authority in the civil realm (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Tim. 2:1-4).

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We cannot be sure at what point in his eighteen-month stay (v. 11) Paul was taken before the governor, but it is clear that the incident did not distract him from his God-given work (v. 18). It seems that the rebuff given by Gallio to the Jewish leaders had resulted in an outburst of anti-Jewish feeling with a fair degree of brutality (v. 17). But Gallio refused to be influenced by the demonstration. The Jews, however, would certainly react and their antagonism towards the gospel would be even more bitter. In this situation Paul saw that an opportunity had been given him by God and he continued his work, building up the church, until he was persuaded that the time had come for him to move on. We are not told how he came to such a conclusion. It may have been an awareness that the church at Corinth was becoming too dependent on him, although the letters to the Corinthians would seem to contradict this. Paul may have sensed already the spiritual pride that blighted the Corinthian church and may have been aware that at present the people were not willing to be taught and led further on. It may have been that he was driven on by a sense of missionary urgency to reach places and people that still had not heard the gospel. Whatever the reasoning, Paul was sure of his guidance and his one desire was to do God's will. He wanted to be able to say, as his Master had said, that he had finished the work given him to do (John 17:4; Phil. 3:12-16; Acts 20:24). We know nothing about the vow Paul had taken (v. 18) except that it seems to have been a Nazirite vow (Num. 6:1-21), the duration of which had come to an end.

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The question of vows troubles some people. Ecclesiastes 5:1-6 says it is better not to vow than to vow and not pay. Samuel's mother made a vow at a time of deep distress and it had great future significance (1 Sam. 1:9-11). Jephthah made an extravagant vow while in a state of great excitement and that was surely a vow that should never have been made and should *not* have been paid (Judges 11:29-35). The Psalmist speaks of vows in a wonderful way (Ps. 61:5-8; 66:13-14; 116:12-14). Why did Paul, so manifestly committed to God, bind himself in this particular vow? Was it a concession to Jewish practice to ease suspicion? We think not. Was it a time of denial for specific service or gratitude to God for deliverance from persecution? We cannot say. It was carried out in public rather than secret and it was for a limited time. Perhaps even his nearest friends did not know the real reason. It was between Paul and God. What we do know is that the supreme thing for Paul was to do the will of God. When he and his colleagues came to Ephesus there was need and desire for the gospel and there was opportunity. But these do not in themselves constitute a 'call' and Paul hurried on, promising that he would

return *if God willed* it to be so. Paul was not only determined to do God's will, he delighted in it, as did many of his companions. That is why Aquila and Priscilla were left behind at Ephesus. There was work for them to do there and God saw that they, rather than Paul, were the ones best fitted to do it. Paul had other work to do. The future would be demanding, and that is why Paul's ministry was one of strengthening the churches. He was determined they would be ready for God. Are *we* ready?

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18:24-28

Some people belittle Apollos and write him off as an unconverted minister. But look closely at the narrative, because God is certainly in it. It may well have been an edict from Rome that led to the departure of Apollos from Alexandria, and therefore he and Aquila and Priscilla would have had a real sympathy for each other. Apollos was eloquent, a man of learning. His preaching would not be simply the stringing together of a few texts of Scripture to produce some 'blessed thoughts'. He had a thorough knowledge of the Old Testament, and that is more than can be said of many Christians who date their conversion many years ago. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord and, apparently, had been eager to learn. His studying had not in any way damped down his enthusiasm, for he was fervent in spirit. There seemed to be a deep spiritual glow about the man and he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus. He was a character, and the churches of our day could do with more like him. He still lacked something important, but the thing that struck Priscilla and Aquila was his obvious potential. What a man Apollos could become for Christ and the gospel! Did anyone see the potential in Paul before *his* conversion? Let no one ever dare to despise education, culture and capacity because, when they are brought into captivity to Christ, these things can be valuable indeed. There is no virtue in ignorance and vulgarity, yet some seem to be proud of such defects. The gospel of which we are servants is worthy of the best we can render, and all our gifts and talents must be laid down at the Master's feet.

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18:24-28

Apollos knew only the baptism of John and this was a spiritual failing because he knew nothing of baptism in the name of Jesus as proclaimed by Peter on the Day of Pentecost. Apollos had not grasped the promise of the Holy Spirit which the Baptist spoke of (Matt. 3:11). On the other hand, he had learned well about John's baptism unto repentance. He was a man who took seriously the whole matter of sin, righteousness and judgement to come (John 16:8). That is more than can be said of some evangelical preachers. Apollos saw clearly that following Jesus and serving God demanded a real forsaking of sin. This emphasis almost seems to have been forgotten in our day. But note that he was also a man with a teachable spirit and he showed no resentment when Priscilla and Aquila took him to their home and 'made good the gaps which had existed in his understanding ... How much better it is to give such private help to a preacher whose ministry is defective than to correct or denounce him publicly' (F. F. Bruce). A word of caution is necessary. Let no overconfident Christian, especially a young person, take this incident to mean that you can go and lecture your own minister. First prove your own consistency and dependability and make it your business to pray with earnest love for God's blessing on those you want to correct. Prove yourself to be a fruitful witness to the gospel by life as well as lip. *Only then*, if you are sure it is God's will (and it is best to ask advice), take it upon yourself to correct others. Look at verses 27-28. Would your minister commend you like that, and would you and your ministry have an effect like that? Note that Apollos had as much good effect on the unconverted as he had on those within the church.

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19:1-7

Consider this group of twelve men. 'That these men were Christian is certainly to be inferred from the way Luke speaks of them as "disciples" ... Had he meant to indicate they were disciples not of Christ but of John the Baptist he would have said so explicitly' (F. F. Bruce). How had they come to faith? Was it during Paul's brief ministry in the synagogue (18:19) or while they listened to Apollos preaching his somewhat limited but soundly scriptural sermons (18:25)? We cannot tell. No doubt there were others witnessing, perhaps even

Aquila and Priscilla in their own home, and these occasions may well have been full of gospel truth. But no matter how sound the preaching, people may not take it all in; they may fail to grasp important points; may pick up something in the wrong way; but still they may respond in saving faith to what they have heard. It certainly seems these men had repented of their sins and had been baptized. Who is to say their conversion was not authentic? But their grasp of and experience of the truth and power of the gospel were obviously defective and Paul discerned at once what was wrong. They had not realized what *had* happened to them when they believed. The same is true of many today. You cannot be a Christian without the Holy Spirit, but many have no understanding of this. They have not been told clearly. When someone comes to faith in Christ he is made alive and enabled by the Spirit, born of the Spirit, he is in the Spirit and the Spirit dwells in him (Rom. 8:9). The believer is sealed with the promised Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13) and the potential, power and life of the Holy Spirit are his inward possession (Eph. 3:14-21). This is the truth Paul expounded throughout his ministry.

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19:1-7

It is interesting that the narrative concerning the limited knowledge of the preacher Apollos and the disciples at Ephesus are set one after the other. In the story of Apollos there is no mention of any second baptism, laying on of hands or any extraordinary experience such as speaking in tongues. He simply received and believed the truth of the gospel and realized that the Spirit of God did in fact indwell him. He was in Christ and Christ was in him (Rom. 8:9-11). In the story of the group of twelve in Ephesus we have something very different. These people are called disciples (v. 1) and referred to as having believed but there *was* obviously something missing. Then Paul seems to have spoken to them clearly about how the preaching and promise of John the Baptist had been fulfilled in Christ, and how the Spirit is given to those who believe. When *they* heard this they were baptized again, there was the laying on of hands, then the coming of the Spirit, then they were able to speak in tongues and prophesy. We have two quite different sets of experiences. If we go back to Acts 10:44-48; 11:15-18 we find in the case of Cornelius that the Holy Spirit was given as they listened and believed. There they spoke in tongues, but Peter did not feel it necessary to mention this when he reported to the church at Jerusalem. The new believers there were then baptized, never having been baptized before, but there was no laying on of hands. Paul's own experience in Acts 9:3-6, 12, 17-19 was again different. What must we learn? As a general rule the narrative of events in Scripture *illustrates* the doctrine but does not *constitute* the doctrine. The Spirit works sovereignly. We must not say that the Spirit always acts in a particular way (John 3:8).

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19:8-10

Paul returned to the synagogue where earlier there had been teaching and discussion regarding the faith of the gospel (18:19-21). For three months, with earnest debate, dialogue and pleading, he sought to win over that congregation which was steeped in Scripture knowledge and religious tradition. He went on with patience and persistence, looking for some response, as every true preacher must look for and indeed expect. But what do we mean by response? Wherever Paul preached there was a twofold reaction. Some came to faith while some were hardened in unbelief. This is what always happens when the Word of God is preached. Paul speaks of this in 2 Corinthians 2:15-16 and unless we grasp the fact that God is working both salvation and judgement (his wrath as well as his grace is revealed, cf. Rom. 1:18) we will tend to be unduly disheartened when opposition and rejection come. As the three months went on, some of those sitting regularly under Paul's ministry became stubborn or obstinate. They gradually became harder and harder, their attitudes stiffened and they became increasingly insensitive to what was being preached. They hardened their hearts (Heb. 3:7-8). They allowed the evil of unbelief to lead them away from God (Heb. 3:12-13), and the Word preached brought them no benefit at all (Heb. 4:2). In fact, the preaching of the Word forced their unbelief and rejection out into the open. Note that it was a group within the congregation that spearheaded the resistance to the ministry. Perhaps it was because they were the 'pillars' of that synagogue and were determined to stay in control that made them react. They refused to 'die to self' and they slandered the preacher and his ministry.

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19:8-10

In response to determined unbelief Paul withdrew, took the other Christians with him, and established Christ's church in the schoolroom of a teacher called Tyrannus. But remember there is a devil and he is always seeking to introduce confusion into God's work. That is one reason why in our particular situations we must be careful about any action of withdrawing ourselves from a congregation or removing a congregation from a denomination. It is so easy to be impetuous and self-willed, and at times what we think is spiritual conviction is in fact human reaction. Some ministers and missionaries have felt that their particular work had come to an end of spiritual usefulness and possibility. But, having no permission from God to move on, they battled through and discovered that they were in fact at the beginning of a new, fuller, richer and deeper work than they ever thought possible. Make sure that you seek and know God's will before making decisions! Paul continued in Ephesus for two whole years after the first three months. The results of this ministry are mentioned almost casually (v. 10) and we must remember how much time passed in steady, life-changing preaching between the more spectacular events. But we must also recognize that it was a work that had its alarming experiences. In verse 11 we will be told that God was pleased to do astonishing things in Ephesus in a way that he did not work in other places. This may be because Ephesus was a city very much attuned to the 'miraculous' and, for example, God may have chosen to show his power in the way that he did to Pharaoh in Exodus 7:8-13. God is free to work as he chooses. We may not prescribe.

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19:11-16

Neither Paul nor any of his company initiated the actions described in verse 12. Evil spirits did come out of the people ministered to in this strange way as God chose to work in this way. But *everything* miraculous is not necessarily divine (Matt. 7:21-23). When there is in society an atmosphere of superstition accompanied by a basic ignorance of God and the gospel, there is the danger of fraudulent miracles. The story in verse 13 is laughable but there are serious lessons to be learned. Exorcism was the 'in' thing and some Jewish teachers regarded themselves as experts in this field. These men recognized that there was power attending Paul's ministry and they were eager to make use of that power. What was happening was that the devil was launching a counterattack against the work of the gospel, seeking to keep control of Ephesus by setting in motion something that would *seem* to be the same work as Paul was doing. The exorcists thought they controlled the spirits, but they were in fact pawns in their hands. The sons of Sceva had no qualms about using the name of Jesus: a Jesus they neither believed in nor served. They discovered that the evil spirits recognized the name and the victory of Jesus and the spiritual authenticity of Paul's ministry. But these men were spiritual frauds and were put to open shame. Be very careful in dealing with the issue of exorcism because the implications are far wider and deeper than most people realize. Paul was not involved in this incident. He did not want the gospel in Ephesus to be linked in people's minds with the commercialized, publicity-seeking lobby of exorcists. The honour of God's name and the integrity of God's work in the city were at stake.

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19:17-20

There is an important lesson to be learned from these verses. The test or vindication of a gospel work in any place is not the amount of commotion and conflict or signs and wonders produced, but the long-term effect on the community. The danger in superficial evangelism that does not call for repentance, change of life and a commitment to discipleship and service is that it may operate like an inoculation. People get a 'small dose' of evangelical religion and it can make them immune to the real thing for the rest of their days. When we read in verse 17 that the name of the Lord was held in high honour, we must link this with verse 10 and the continuing ministry of God's Word. The astonishing events of verses 11-16 culminated in making the people of Ephesus aware of evil and its power in a way that frightened them. But they had also been made aware that Jesus was the mighty Saviour, conqueror of evil, able to save and deliver. As a result of this there was a clearing of bookshelves (as some need to clear out books, magazines and video tapes), and a breaking away from associations and practices in which they had been involved. These were replaced by an open confession of Christ and a commitment to his church and his service. Note how it says clearly in verse 18 that many believers

had to confess that they were mixed up in things they had no right to be involved with. There comes a time when we must stop dithering and come to a clear decision to put our lives right so that we can truly be the Lord's people. Consider 1 John 1:7-9; 2 Corinthians 6:17 - 7:1. It is all very practical. In Deuteronomy 18:9-13 the language is very blunt, and today it would not be regarded as 'politically correct'. But God's Word stands!

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19:21-22

In the midst of an ongoing ministry blessed by God, Paul was always concerned to seek and to know what exactly the Lord would have him do. If we link verses 8 and 10 with 20:31, we see that Paul's ministry in Ephesus had lasted about three years, a long time for him to be in one place. Without doubt Paul had an overall strategy for his missionary labours, and there is evidence in Scripture that he made it his business to evangelize major areas of population which were significant centres of commercial activity and legal administration. Consult a map and you will see that churches had been established on both sides of the Aegean Sea. Now Paul had it in mind to visit again in Macedonia and Achaia, and then to go to Jerusalem with the specific intention of bringing to the church there the gifts of the Gentile believers (Acts 24:17; 2 Cor. 8:1-5; Rom. 15:23-32). That last reference in Romans makes it plain that he expected his visit to Rome to be a passing one, because his heart and mind were set on reaching Spain with the gospel. Paul was a man with vision, but there was nothing impulsive or precipitate about his movements. He had learned in Acts 16:6-10 that sincerity of intention and eager commitment (Rom. 1:14-15) do not necessarily mean that plans are right. God overrules. His ways are higher than ours (Isa. 55:8-9), and Paul planned and communicated with others on the basis of 'if the Lord is willing' (1 Cor. 4:19; 16:7). We see in verse 22 Paul's administrative skill, sending two trusted men ahead of him. But we must see also the mutual trust, the sharing of discussion and prayer. Partners in the gospel should know what is being done and why, and the good of the work is always the first priority.

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19:23-27

We study this story from here to the end of the chapter in sections but we must not lose sight of the sweep of it. It is an up-to-date picture of mob psychology with all its attendant dangers. We have an example of how one powerful man can manipulate an organized workforce and affect the whole of society. We also see how a cool thinking official can defuse an explosive situation; and how circumstances are made to serve God's purposes. In this case it was made clear to Paul that his guidance to leave Ephesus was authentic. Now note in verse 23 that the presence of Christianity in Ephesus is spoken of as 'the Way'. Those who believed in Christ were seen to have a pattern of life different from others. Conversion and a recognizable life of discipleship went together. In Ephesus the trade guilds were not unions as we know them but societies that were primarily social, as those people with much in common came together. Of course, they were all in the same silver business and they had vital interest in the devotees of the shrine of Artemis, the 'mother goddess'. The reasoning in our verses makes it plain that trade and wealth were the prime concerns, and the interest in 'religion' was a secondary thing to Demetrius and his colleagues. No doubt the worshippers of Artemis held that their interest had priority and the nature of the worship of the temple (which had temple prostitutes for those attending) set the tone to the life of the city. The silversmiths were aware that the tourist trade was vital to business. If people became Christians and stopped buying the silver statuettes they would lose money. Self-interest is a powerful drive and religion is sometimes used to camouflage it.

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19:28-34

The best way to confuse an issue, to manipulate a situation in order to get your own way, or to get rid of people who are a nuisance because they live by their principles, is to stir up a demonstration. That is why Christians must be very careful about the kind of mass movements and protests they get involved in. Remember that in Ephesus the bookshops and 'magic circles' had already felt the effect of Christian truth (vv. 18-19). The 'social clubs' of the community were finding that Christians declined to associate with various activities and were adopting a higher standard of business morality. Nowadays people in such situations begin to speak of the

danger of a 'Puritan backlash', just as they do, for example, in a tennis or bowling club or a parents-teachers organization when all the Christians vote against applying for a drinks licence, or purchasing 'adult' videos, or gaming machines. After all, people say that the profit from these activities keeps the membership fees down. Demetrius knew human nature, and in no time he had the feelings of the people roused. They had their convenient, respectable slogan (v. 28), a mob (possibly as large as 20,000), and they manhandled two of Paul's companions. The mass meeting was held in the theatre or assembly place and began to take to itself the form of an official court. You can imagine the charges. These Christians were challenging 'tradition', changing the way people 'had a right to live' and taking people 'away from their own religion'. They would, of course, go on to say that the silver trade was vital to the economy and to interfere would lead to unemployment. It would all sound reasonable and appealing, but the motivation was anti-Christian.

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19:28-34

Human nature is both gullible and self-centred and, because there is a devil, the potential for evil is great. Between verses 28 and 32 there is a development from mere human fury to something that is demonic. When people are confused they may be influenced to do anything! The devil will also try everything to make capital out of the situation. Paul's natural reaction was to go into the crowded arena to protect his colleagues and to speak for them, and for the gospel. But the disciples forcibly restrained him. That could not have been an easy thing to do! Some of the chief citizens or officials who had friendship and respect for Paul also counselled him not to get involved. They knew from experience what an excited crowd could do. In that situation the Jewish community were afraid the anti-Christian feeling would also be directed against them, because a secular mob has little idea of religious distinctions. Think in our own day of how the word 'Christian' is misused and misunderstood by writers and speakers in the press and on television. In the riot atmosphere the Ephesians were in no mood for religious toleration and Alexander was shouted down. Think of how that would further enrage the Jews against the renegade Pharisee Paul and his new message that claimed to be the final word from God to man. When we read the description of the two hours of chanting in verse 34 we should sense the power of such a gathering. The Town Clerk certainly sensed the danger. But we must recognize how the devil had been able to manipulate the whole situation for his own ends. Too often we fail to discern Satan's presence and influence until the situation has reached crisis point. Watch and pray!

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19:35-41

We underestimate God and we misread Scripture if we think that only evangelicals or spiritually-minded people are used by God to do his will and advance his work. The town clerk was a politician and an administrator motivated by his awareness of being answerable to political headquarters (v. 40), but he was God's key man in this dangerous situation. We should be thankful for such men, recognizing that God raises up and anoints whom he will (Isa. 45:1), and we should pray for them (1 Tim. 2:1-3). Note how wisely the clerk handled the situation and learn from this that sometimes we must deal with people and problems by the 'book of rules and right procedure' rather than by impassioned spiritual appeal. The clerk emphasized that everyone accepted that the sacred image (possibly a meteorite in which the semblance of a many-breasted female was discerned) was under the guardianship of the people of Ephesus. He went on to affirm popular belief, and to add (vv. 36-37) that the missionaries had not pursued a policy of attack on or denigration of local religion. There is, of course, a time to speak out against false ideologies, false religion and false living. But the real antidote to the wrongs of society is to preach Christ and him crucified and so bring the message of salvation and eternal life. The wise God-guided policy of the missionaries had led to this significant defence of their work by the secular authorities. Verses 38-40 show the gathering being called to order, insisting on correct procedure instead of a 'kangaroo court'. Then in verse 41 we must again see the power of God by the Holy Spirit at work, for by no other means could such a frightening riot have been so effectively ended. God is able!

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20:1-6

After the uproar Paul called the believers together and there would have been much thanksgiving to God for answered prayer. Some may have felt that the powers of evil had gained a victory because Paul was leaving Ephesus where a great work of God had been done. But look back to 19:21 where Paul's heart was already constrained to go back through Macedonia and then journey to Rome. When we read now of further trouble we should understand that God is at work urging Paul on his journey. We must recognize both the passing of time and the effect on Paul of all his experiences, lest we forget the deep cost of his fruitful ministry. Today's verses cover possibly a year and three months, with three months of that time spent at Corinth, during which time he wrote his letter to the Romans. His visit to Jerusalem was very much on his mind, a visit fraught with problems, as Romans 15:30-32 makes plain. It was a visit on which Paul seemed to set great importance, hoping that the financial gifts of the Gentile churches would encourage the Christians of Jewish background to be more accepting of their Gentile brothers. Something of the cost of his experiences is expressed in 2 Corinthians 1:8-11. Then in 2 Corinthians 2:12-13 we find Paul deeply concerned by the delay in Titus' arrival with news of the disturbances in the congregation at Corinth. Some commentators suggest that verse 3 refers to the discovery of a plan to kill Paul once he was on board ship, and it was this that led to a change of travel plans. The missionary apostle was a man with the same hurts and burdens and battles as we have (cf. James 5:17). He knew the reality of what he wrote about spiritual warfare and armour in Ephesians 6:10-18.

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20:7-12

It is only when we are involved in the spiritual warfare of Christian service that we realize how urgent is our need for ministry, united prayer and fellowship, all of which are part of true worship. In the ongoing battle we learn how vital it is to have with us those who can be depended on both humanly and spiritually. Those named in verses 4-5 were chosen men from the various churches, none of them apart from Timothy well known to us. The word 'we' shows that Luke was with them again. In Troas the company of believers gathered on the first day of the week (a very early confirmation of the practice of meeting on the first day rather than on the Jewish Sabbath), gathering in a private home of some considerable size. The reference in verse 7 to breaking bread indicates the Lord's Supper, while verse 11 refers to the fellowship meal. In apostolic times there would be full working on the first day of the week and many believers would be slaves. This no doubt is the reason for an evening gathering. It was possibly the only time in the week that Christians would have the chance to have fellowship together, to get to know each other and to share news, views, joys, sorrows, needs, burdens and cares. This is still the need in our day, especially if we live in big cities and if we must travel some distance to find true spiritual ministry. We must see to it that our churches are fellowships, and that means that we must make sure that our preoccupation with our special friends does not 'freeze out' others who may be longing for a little bit of care. But the details of the story make plain that the ministry of the Word was the central part of this gathering. For some this might be the only opportunity in a long time to hear God's Word ministered to them.

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20:7-12

Luke, the doctor and scientific man, records the miracle in marvellous detail and yet with simplicity. Poor Eutychus was no doubt as earnest as any, but sitting high up on a window ledge (was the room crowded?) he was probably the first to feel the effects of the lack of oxygen because of the burning of many torches. Perhaps he was a young slave who had worked all day in the heat of a field or a kitchen and had gone to the meeting place straight from work. He was not the last to fall asleep during a sermon! The spirit can be totally willing and the flesh just too tired and weak (Matt. 26:40-41). The young man fell a considerable distance to the ground through the opening that was the window and what alarm must have been felt. Doctor Luke records that the boy was dead. He also records with simplicity what Paul did, and with equal simplicity how the company re-gathered to continue the sermon. There was nothing sensational or dramatic about how the church handled the miracle. Paul's actions were similar to those of Old Testament prophets (1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:25-37) and there was such lack of hesitation that we must assume Paul had the assurance that it was God's will to heal *in this instance*. It is clear the miracle did not distract from nor take the place of the preaching. We do not live by miracles, nor do we advance the Kingdom by miracles, but by every Word from the mouth of the Lord (Matt. 4:1-10). The last detail of the story confirms the well-being of Eutychus (v. 12). Verse 13 indicates that Paul did

not go with his friends in the ship, possibly staying behind to minister to Eutychus and his family. This human element in Paul's pastoral care reminds us of God's care for our human feelings as well as our spiritual good.

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20:13-16

These apparently not very interesting verses should be linked with the reference to frequent journeys and their many dangers in 2 Corinthians 11:23-28. The missionaries we now pray for urge us to pray for safety in travel, and when some of them describe the conditions, the long weary hours involved and the hazards they encounter, we are compelled to think that we are sometimes far too 'spiritual' in our praying. Paul was a spiritual giant but he was also totally human. Think how tired he must often have felt with much of his travelling by foot, not by air-conditioned car, bus or plane. From Troas to Assos was about twenty-five miles, and who knows but that there may have been 'muggers' waiting for chance victims, as in the story of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37). Imagine then what relief the sea journey must have been (provided he was a good sailor) and what opportunity it gave for much needed rest and undemanding fellowship. Do we ever think of Paul and his companions having fun? Do we ever think how God's servants need human friendship as well as spiritual support? Sometimes ten minutes' conversation with an expression of interest and care works more encouragement than being told of many prayers. Note also in our passage the clear decision not to stop at Ephesus but to press on to try to ensure that Paul would reach Jerusalem before Pentecost. There is something clear and decisive about Paul's planning which reminds us of his Master who also set out resolutely to go to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51). Paul could perhaps anticipate what he would have to face there (vv. 22-23), and it may have been in preparation for this that he chose to travel alone by foot to Assos in order to have peace and privacy to pray.

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20:17-38

In order to grasp the drama, the intensity and the spiritual significance of this occasion, it is necessary to read this whole passage and then to spend some days considering it in detail. Recall what happened in Ephesus: Paul's experiences there, and the triumphs of God's grace in salvation among the people. We have a description of Paul's ministry in Ephesians 3:7-13. He was now reviewing that ministry to this particular congregation and handing over both ministry and pastoral care to the elders. Think of this group, minister and elders, very conscious of being together in God's presence, perhaps more aware than they had ever been of how close and valuable were the ties of Christian service. Paul knew he had to leave a work he would never return to, a people he loved and cared for as a spiritual father as well as teacher. Imagine the exercise of his heart as to whether or not he had done all he should have done. Think of the elders, perhaps realizing for the first time just how much they owed this man, how much they had taken for granted and how little they may have given him their true support and fellowship. Would these men wonder if they were in fact spiritually ready and capable of taking on the task being committed to them? But the clock could not be put back. Paul's ministry there was over. The time for parting had come. Right through this whole passage there is a solemnity and a sweetness that are deeply moving. Now we must go on to study, section by section, the profound spiritual instruction that Paul gives regarding preparation for, and the pattern of, all true service. The elders may not have anticipated change. We all tend to assume things will go on as they are. How ready are *we* for change?

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20:17-21

When the elders were called they came without hesitation, showing their acceptance of Paul's spiritual leadership. The gathering was not for discussion but for counsel and exhortation. The fact that Paul started with a defence of his person, life and ministry may indicate that already there was criticism of his ministry and opposition to it in Ephesus (cf. vv. 29-30). It was a grief to Paul that some of his own converts made plain that they preferred the less demanding teaching of more popular preachers (cf. 1 Cor. 4:15; 2 Cor. 11:4-7). In speaking to the elders Paul brought to their notice what they may not have recognized at the time, namely, his very real humanity. We tend to think of Paul as always able to cope, ready for every emergency, and in one

sense that is true. But here he speaks of humility, tears and trials, and these are eloquent and significant words. Paul did not often open his heart as he does here but Galatians 4:12-20 tells us much about his hurts and the hidden cost of his fruitful service which had been particularly severe in Ephesus (1 Cor. 15:30-32). He speaks here about the plots of the Jews and that indicates the ostracism he faced from those who were his own people. He was despised and rejected as his Master had been (Isa. 53:2-3). It must have been moving for the elders to listen to these words. Paul's ministry, however costly, made no concessions. He held nothing back. He did not preach an easy-believism but called for repentance and a life of discipleship, not just a decision for Christ. Ongoing discipleship is the evidence of a true saving faith. This was his message in formal gatherings and personal conversations. Paul took seriously the stern words of God in Ezekiel 34:1-10.

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20:22-24

The word 'commitment' sums up these verses. Paul was set to do something for no other reason than that he was persuaded this was God's will for him. He felt deep down in his soul that he must go to Jerusalem although he had no real assurance as to how it was going to work out. Faith sometimes has peaceful assurance but this is not always the case. Think of the story in Daniel 3:16-18. The young men were sure that God was *able* to deliver them. They believed that he would deliver them. But, recognizing that faith never has total knowledge, they added the words 'even if he does not' and declared that their trust was still in God. Paul had misgivings about developments and the final issue, but he was sure that he must go to Jerusalem. He had asked prayer about this journey, as Romans 15:30-31 makes plain. We shall see in the next chapter that Paul's misgivings increased, and it is not easy to go on when close colleagues question what you are doing. But consider here the realism in Paul's thinking (v. 23). The future was to be even more tumultuous and costly than the past, but self-preservation was never Paul's first concern. Like his Master before him his desire was to finish the work he had been given to do (John 17:4). He was aware that a stewardship of the gospel had been committed to him and he was determined to be faithful (1 Cor. 4:1-5). In due time, he made his great testimony in 2 Timothy 4:6-8. This was a man who understood what it meant to take up the cross and follow Christ. He was a man who gloried in the cross (Gal. 6:14) and was determined that Christ would be honoured in his body, whether by life or death (Phil. 1:19-26).

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20:25-31

There was no false optimism about Paul. He knew that he and the Ephesian elders would never meet again in this world. Parting is never easy, for the bonds that are forged in Christian service are deep and strong, more so even than the ties of blood that bind us together in families. Of course, those who are 'family' twice over, by blood and by faith, are twice blessed. In verses 28-31 Paul may have been giving a hint that he was aware of some among the elders who denigrated his ministry and his person, and he may have been thinking of the story of Samuel (1 Sam. 8:4-7; 12:1-4). On the other hand he may have been setting an example of what their future ministry should be. They were to be responsible for the safety and the growth of God's flock in days to come. One thing they had to be aware of was that God's work will always be under attack, not just from outside, from the unbelievers of the world, but at times in deep danger from some inside the church who have either defected from true faith, from submission to the Scriptures, or from moral integrity of life (Jude 3-4). It is quite alarming to sense in Paul's words that some of the danger might arise from among the elders themselves. It is not easy to disagree with those who have been fellow workers in holy things, and for whom you have had respect and affection. But there is a higher responsibility. The church is God's church, and the people are God's people on whom he has set a very high value, for they have been redeemed by the price of the blood of his own Son. This must make all our dealings with the people, life and work of the congregation of prime importance. It is indeed holy work.

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20:25-31

Two aspects of this passage remain to be considered. When Paul speaks of preaching the whole counsel of God (v. 27, RSV) he is making plain that it needs a whole Bible, Old and New Testaments, to proclaim and present a whole Christ. The great need of individual Christians and of the whole church is that we should come to grips with the full content of Scripture. Secondly, Paul makes plain that what we are in ourselves qualifies the worth and the extent of our service. This is why it is so important that we should be right with God and with our fellows. When we drift (and that is more dangerous than open rebellion because we can conceal it) we become a danger to others and a hindrance to the people and work of God. Both Paul and Peter emphasize this, urging upon all who have to lead and teach in any way that they should be people of faith and integrity. Consider 1 Timothy 1:18-20; 2 Timothy 2:14-19; 3:8-9; 1 Peter 5:1-4. We could well consider also Romans 16:17-18 and the terrible passage in 1 Corinthians 5:1-2 where it seems that a false spirituality had simply dismissed the requirement of holy living. When the immoral behaviour of Christian believers shocks the ungodly, the truth of the gospel is devalued and the name of God dishonoured. We must be alert, because the devil will be ready to take any opportunity to disturb, distract or hinder the work of God and the testimony of the church. Paul's final word in today's passage reminded the elders of his care for the church in Ephesus and how any admonishing he had done had cost him tears. Paul's tears would have been even more if he had known what was to happen to the church at Ephesus in days to come (Rev. 2:1-7).

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20:32

There is a wealth of teaching in this one verse. Humanly speaking the elders were being left on their own. They were aware of the debt they owed to Paul and of how much they had depended on his ministry under God. Yet no ministry is fruitful if it leaves God's people dependent on a man, no matter how spiritual that man has been. Paul always directed people's thoughts and their confidence to God. God is the unchanging factor in the ongoing situation. He is unvarying (James 1:17) and is the rock and refuge of his people (Ps. 46:1-3). Paul commended these dear men to God; he handed them over into God's care; he laid them down beside God. He emphasized the presence of God, the care of God and the power of God to keep them. But he also commended them to God's gracious Word. After all, it was through the Word preached, heard and believed that they had come to faith (Rom. 10:14-17). It was by the Word that they had been born again (1 Peter 1:23-25) and it was by the Word that they would grow in grace and come to spiritual maturity (1 Peter 2:2). It was by the Word of God that they would be led forward into their inheritance (1 Peter 1:3-9). What we have to see here is both Paul's confidence in God as the Shepherd of his people, and his confidence in the Word of God. These are things we must never lose and the two belong together. Perhaps the devil succeeds more in tempting us to doubt God's Word than to doubt God, but if we ever begin to have reservations about our Bibles we will soon be in spiritual confusion and danger. In all our preaching and witness we must remember that the seed of God's Word has the life-giving power of God in it. It will not fail (Isa. 55:10-11).

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20:33-35

Paul had emphasized the importance of God's Word, and the significance of the sowing of the seed of God's Word is seen in Jesus' parables in Mark 4:1-32, especially the emphasis on the seed growing secretly. But Mark's words also emphasize the importance of a right attitude to hearing the Word (cf. Heb. 4:1-2). As Paul spoke of all this to the elders he was really ministering great encouragement to them, urging them to have confidence in God and his Word. But then he returned again to a personal testimony regarding his whole manner of life among them. His words make plain that those who would serve God and shepherd his church must do so without thought of personal gain, whether in terms of money, place, power or popularity. Paul did not claim even his rightful maintenance (1 Cor. 4:12; 9:3-15). In some areas of work Paul made it plain that it was only by the generosity of others that they had been ministered to (2 Cor. 11:7-11). It may have been that Paul discerned the danger to which some of the elders would succumb when they found themselves in a place of spiritual leadership. To be 'out front' is dangerous. We can so easily steal the glory that belongs to God alone. In verse 35 we see from Paul's words what it means to be a bond-slave of Jesus, willing to work hard and so to help the weak. We do not have in the Gospels the actual words of Jesus saying that it is more blessed to give than to receive, but the whole example of the Saviour makes that principle plain. He was rich and for our sake

became poor (2 Cor. 8:9). Jesus was among us as one who serves (Luke 22:27; Matt. 20:25-28). Paul was always concerned to leave his hearers thinking about Jesus. We must do the same.

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20:36-38

These moving verses portray genuine affection and sorrow. Most of these men had a great regard and respect for both the person and ministry of Paul. In many ways his work spoke for itself and the elders knew full well that, long after the critics and denigrators had disappeared from the scene, the genuine fruit of Paul's ministry would remain. Of course, at the end of the day, each person gives account of *himself* before God (Rom. 14:10-12). It is unwise to make precipitate judgements (1 Cor. 4:1-5) and we all need to remember that every person's work will be put to the test (1 Cor. 3:5-15). We must also remember that opportunity passes and when we fail to make use of it at the right time we lose out. In this tearful scene some of the men may have expressed sorrow as they realized that they had not dealt with Paul as they should have done. Some may not have ministered encouragement on a human level as they ought to have done and as Paul needed. Perhaps some had not taken their rightful share of the pain and costly struggle as was their spiritual duty. Now, they would never again have the opportunity. Without doubt others, who had been his true fellow labourers, were heartbroken at losing him although they knew and accepted that God's time for parting had come. In our situations we need to remember that impressive memorial services and glowing funeral eulogies do nothing for the one who has gone, and do not make up for the neglect during the person's life and work. Love must be shown. It must be spoken. So must encouragement and gratitude. It is right to pray for people and to do it out of love. But the pattern of Jesus is that he came down to be near us, and he *spoke* his words of love.

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21:1-6

It had been a costly farewell to Ephesus as the word 'torn' (v. 1) makes plain but, constrained by the Spirit and persuaded he was doing the will of God, Paul and his companions pressed on in their journey to Jerusalem. Having some time in Tyre, they immediately sought out other Christians. This was both natural and necessary, because not even great apostolic missionaries can do without Christian fellowship, mutual encouragement, sharing of worship and being under the gracious benefit of the preaching of God's truth. We must not assume that Paul always did the preaching. We can imagine him delighting to sit under the ministry of some young believer called by God to minister the Word. Not all believers are called to preach (Rom. 12:4-8). The church must examine, test and confirm the call. But even those called would no doubt have moments of anxiety when they saw a man such as Paul in the congregation. Of course he would not be there to criticize, but to hear, receive and delight in God's truth. Verse 5 makes plain there were more Christians in Tyre than we might have expected. The church in the world was growing. In spite of hazards and opposition, Christ was building his church and the gates of hell could not prevail. The early church was a praying church. These converts were well taught, and right from the beginning the believers and their children knew what it was to come together for prayer. Is this a lesson for the church today? What did the unbelieving community think when they saw that group kneeling down and having a prayer meeting on the beach? They would do what other communities had done: they would take notice that these men and women belonged to Jesus (Acts 4:13).

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21:7-16

Link verse 4 with verses 11-12 to see that there were three groups of believers, all claiming the guidance of the Spirit. They all believed they were motivated by a genuine concern for the good of God's work and the well-being of the missionary apostle. But they all came to a different conclusion from Paul. Was Paul right in holding to his own conviction and guidance in spite of the opinion of the church? No one in the actual situation could answer that categorically and even we, who know how things worked out in Jerusalem, cannot answer with certainty. But there are lessons to learn. We see here that the people God uses are human and fallible. We see that the apostolic church, revived as it was, was not always in total agreement. Some spoke 'through the

Spirit' (v. 4); some delivered their message in dramatic form (vv. 10-11); some, including Luke, pleaded (v. 12); but Paul disagreed with them all. He did not consider their 'messages' to be sufficiently authoritative to make him change his own conviction and plan. There was potential in this situation for the break up of the missionary team. But no one resigned in protest. No one sulked and went silent. No one lobbied for others to side with them. There was disagreement, but it was disagreement in fellowship, and the fellowship remained unbroken. In verse 14 they all yielded the matter into the hand of the God they loved and trusted and went forward together (vv. 14-15) in a truly Christian spirit. They did not go forward expecting disaster, nor did they go looking for their viewpoint to be confirmed and vindicated. They simply accepted that on earth there will always be flaws and mistakes, but they looked to God to overrule.

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21:7-16

Before the cautionary words in verses 4, 11 and 12, Paul had a deep and considered conviction that he *must* go to Jerusalem. It was therefore a troubling and sore experience for him to meet such earnest pleadings and warnings not to go. Some say that Paul's friends were primarily concerned to spare him the suffering and restriction that would inevitably come to him at Jerusalem. Others see in this story a parallel with the experience of Jesus when his disciples tried to dissuade him from going to Jerusalem. But here we are told that some spoke by the Spirit of God, which is quite different from Peter's protest in Matthew 16:21-23. What we must see in verse 13 is the agony of Paul's soul. He declared that his friends (not his enemies) were breaking his heart, making it harder for him to do what he was persuaded God was commanding, and he felt himself weakening and slipping. He pleaded with them to help him to be true to God. They could have said, 'But you are wrong.' What they did say was 'God's will be done.' They were not necessarily won over to Paul's viewpoint, but the time had come to end the discussion and to go forward, looking to God. One last point in the passage needs to be noted. Philip the evangelist has not been mentioned in the story since Acts 6:1-6 and 8:26-40. That was twenty years previously, before Paul's conversion, and he may well have suffered during Paul's early persecution of the church. Now they were together in the fellowship of the gospel and you can imagine them recounting their experiences and saying, 'This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes' (Ps. 118:23). Philip's daughters were a credit to him, but Luke does not mention the nature and content of their prophecies.

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21:17-20

The focus is specifically on Paul's ministry. But remember that he was not the only mighty worker for God, even though he was unique for apostolic times and for all time through his written ministry. There were also Philip, Apollos, Peter, Barnabas, Silas and Timothy, to name but some of God's many servants, all different in personality and gifts. None of them, including Paul, would have been any use at all but for the fact that God was pleased to use them and to bless their ministry (1 Cor. 3:1-9). There were other preachers whose persons, motives and ministries Paul was not too happy about, but he spoke wise words concerning them in Philippians 1:15-18; 3:17-19. He would never give ground when the substance and integrity of the gospel were at stake, as Galatians 1:6-9; 2:11-14 makes plain, but he could also be very wise and diplomatic, especially when dealing with those regarded as 'leaders' of the church. At Jerusalem Paul recounted the story of how God had, through the preaching of the gospel, established churches in so many significant cities and also in smaller communities evangelized by Christians from the larger centres. He also delivered to the church at Jerusalem the substantial monetary gift from the Gentile churches (Rom. 15:25-28). Paul's report was received and they glorified God. They could scarcely do anything else. But immediately afterwards (v. 20), the subject was changed. It became clear there had been discussion before the meeting and decisions had already been taken about what the church council was to suggest. We are dealing here with church politics, an area in which what God is actually doing tends to be ignored, both then and now.

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21:20-26

The issue here had in fact been settled in principle as we saw in Acts 15:1,5,6-11,19-21. However, it is one thing to pass resolutions in a council meeting and another to carry them out in the local situation without tension and division. The problem, highlighted in verses 20-22 arose because the church was expanding and people were being drawn in from all corners of society, from both religious and pagan backgrounds. In the early days the church at Jerusalem, largely Jewish believers, had been sorely persecuted but had stood firm, even when suffering real privation. Now new people were flooding in who did not seem to know or appreciate what the older believers had been through. New enthusiasms, new ideas and practices were changing old established ways that had proved effective and fruitful. There was suspicion and also deliberate misrepresentation (v. 21). But there was a real element of truth in what the Jewish believers were saying because Paul stood firm by the fact that salvation was all in Christ, and that to *require* circumcision was a denial of the gospel. The situation in Jerusalem was explosive because the time was the Feast of Pentecost when feelings were running high, and when feelings are high clear thinking is usually absent. Try to understand, so that we can deal with similar situations in our own day. Jews converted to Christ had been trained in traditional attitudes and values with a high regard for God's Law. They were right to hold to high standards of behaviour in church and community. The lowering of standards in Christians' lives in our day is alarming. But we must distinguish between what is basic to the gospel and what is secondary religious observance.

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21:20-26

We may question whether or not Paul was right in yielding to the scheme suggested in verses 23-24 but we know Paul was not the kind of man to compromise truth. The issue for us is to know when to stand our ground, regardless of consequences, and when to yield for the sake of maintaining the peace and order of the church. Paul may well have felt that the request of the church leaders was unreasonable and unworthy. He may have been deeply hurt by the brushing aside of the costly offering brought from the Gentiles. He may have been hurt by the seeming acceptance of rumour against him personally and against his work. He may have been hurt by the unwillingness of these men of note to stand up for him in the face of criticism. Could Paul at this point have been wondering if he should have listened to those who had counselled him not to come to Jerusalem? He must certainly have felt that, in spite of fair and friendly words, his ministry among the Gentiles and his defence of the gospel were being devalued by his colleagues, however earnest their motives were for avoiding trouble. Nevertheless, he consented to the plan; he humbled himself as his Master had done before him. Here is an example of Paul being willing to be all things to all men in order to win some (1 Cor. 9:19-23). For the sake of the Jews whom he longed to see saved (Rom. 10:1-4) he risked the misunderstanding of his Gentile converts and of his missionary colleagues and he took the vow. After all, the leader of the church was called James the Just; could not his advice be trusted? The reassurance was given in verse 25 that no one was going back on the decision of the council in Acts 15:19-21. The outcome was yet to be seen and lived with.

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21:27-32

We make so many mistakes ourselves that we must not be quick to say whether or not Paul was wrong in taking the vow. He was acting on his own stated principle already referred to in 1 Corinthians 9:19ff. Near the end of the period of the vow, Jews from Asia who were at Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost saw their opportunity to attack their long-term enemy. A riot broke out and in the narrative there is no indication of James or any of the Jerusalem believers intervening on behalf of Paul either at the beginning of the trouble or later on. Their own plan had aborted and Paul, who had been pressurized into it, was left to go it alone. We cannot evade the thought that for James and the others self-preservation was paramount. We cannot criticize, for we often in public debate and confrontation remain silent when we ought to speak. One lesson that comes immediately to the fore is that we cannot pacify prejudice. If you show weakness it will be taken advantage of. At the same time we must remember our Lord's words about being as wise as snakes and as innocent as doves (Matt. 10:16). Another thing to see is how Satan grasped at the opportunity given him by confused thinking and action to launch a significant attack against the gospel and its ministers. A practical lesson must be learned here, especially in a day when experiments are so popular in evangelical circles. Before setting a scheme in motion, make sure you are doing the will of God and try to discern where your plan may lead. What may at first seem

harmless can be a snare. What may at first seem to be spiritual may in fact be simply cultural and personal inclination. There is an enemy. His schemes are many and varied (2 Cor. 2:11; 11:14).

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21:27-32

Before focusing on Paul, there are other lessons to learn. In verse 29, we see that the Jews misread the situation, jumped to conclusions and assumed a Gentile had been in the temple. They had recognized Trophimus as an Ephesian which suggests that the ringleaders of the riot were Jews from Ephesus. In that city, the presence and power of God in Paul's ministry had been such that evil men had been subdued and prevented from doing harm. But they had only been subdued, not changed, and we see now the long-term persistence of evil. The devil never gives up (Luke 4:13). The ferocity of the attack was such that a company of two hundred soldiers was needed to quell the riot. Anything could have happened. Perhaps incidents like this, and many others, were in Paul's mind when he wrote in Ephesians 6:10-20 about the flaming arrows, the sudden sharp attacks from the devil. What were the leaders in the church thinking now? Were they concerned only with how it would affect their situation in days to come? Was their view as narrow as that, as if Jerusalem *was* the church, and other places did not matter? Are we parochial like that, as if the work of God begins and ends with our little corner? Part of the problem stemmed from the imbalance of the church at Jerusalem. There were too many people of the one kind, all Jews, and all of a hardline tradition. People such as Peter and Barnabas were away on missionary journeys and the leadership was weakened and unbalanced. Then, while Paul and James were preoccupied with difficult Christians, the powers of unbelief grabbed their chance. Ask yourself: am I a distraction, or am I a support to the spiritual leadership, the stability of the congregation, and its progress?

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21:33-40

It is possible to stand today in the temple area in Jerusalem and to see the actual steps from which Paul made his appeal to the Jews, speaking in their own language. In the account of this event, try to think of the manhandling he must have received from the soldiers as he was chained, especially since the Commander was under the impression that Paul was a well-known dangerous revolutionary. Consider also the ferocity of the riot that required the prisoner to be carried in order to guarantee his safety. Paul would have been grateful that the Roman authorities did not go in for lynching! He would also have recalled an earlier crowd who cried, 'Away with him!' (John 19:15, AV) and he may well have been comforted in that very moment with an awareness that he was in fact sharing the sufferings of Christ. The Commander was impressed by Paul's good-mannered request, his ability to speak Greek and by his identification of himself as a Jewish citizen of the famous city of Tarsus. Permission was given at once for him to address the crowd from a position at the top of the steps, well guarded by soldiers. What we have to note is the amazing poise, calm and presence of mind in Paul. His circumstances were such that many people would have been quite shattered, but instead he was at once master of the situation, ready and able to make use of it for a testimony to the gospel. This kind of calm and composure did not just happen, nor is it the product of a certain kind of personality. It came from Paul's disciplined dedication of life and his close walk with the God of peace. It is the peace Jesus promised to his disciples in John 14:27. It is the peace Paul speaks of in Philippians 4:4-7.

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22:1-5

When Paul spoke in the Aramaic language the crowd was stilled, which reminds us of how the Prince of Peace stilled the storm in Mark 4:35-41. We should not be amazed by the reserves of emotional, intellectual and spiritual energy seen in God's servant if we think of the promises in Deuteronomy 33:25, AV, and Matthew 10:19. Paul may have been aware that this was possibly his last chance to seek to win for Christ his fellow Jews in Jerusalem. His method as well as his message must be noted. He spoke in their own language and on the basis of beliefs they held in common. He did everything possible to conciliate rather than to confront, challenge or antagonize but he had no intention of evading the issue. He began to tell his story: the story of an orthodox, highly-trained Jew, son of Jewish parents and well above average in terms of zeal and dedication (Gal. 1:13-14;

Phil. 3:4-6). The mention of Gamaliel (Acts 5:33-40) would have impressed the Jews, for he was regarded as the top teacher of the law. Paul showed the people that he understood what their position was when he referred to their being zealous for God, even though he knew some had more zeal for Jewish nationalism than for spiritual truth. Remember the crowd of Jews and their leaders who declared that they had no king but Caesar (John 19:15). They had a zeal for God but not according to knowledge (Rom. 10:1-4); their whole attitude was one of striving to be right with God on the basis of their own religious effort. Paul testified that he himself had opposed the Way of Christ. Little wonder the crowd listened. But none of them would know the sorrow of Paul's heart that at one time he had persecuted the church.

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22:6-11

Paul had known the preaching of the early apostles regarding the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He had seen the changed lives of many and their willingness to suffer for the sake of Jesus. But he had hardened his heart against it all. His own religion had not brought him peace with God and the challenge of the gospel had enraged him (9:1-2). He had not been seeking for Christ, but the risen Christ had met and confronted him. Paul did not appear to be an emotional man and his testimony about a light from heaven and a voice speaking his name impressed the people. After all, they knew, for example, the story of Samuel (1 Sam. 3:1-9) and accepted that God did speak to men. The crowd remained raptly attentive as Paul identified the voice as none other than that of Jesus of Nazareth, whom they knew had been crucified in Jerusalem and about whom there had been amazing reports regarding his resurrection and ascension into heaven. What Paul was saying here was the same as Peter preached in Acts 2:22-24; 4:8-12. The Jesus whom people rejected was risen and exalted and his challenge came to Paul from heaven: 'Why do you refuse me?' But it was more than refusal; it was persecution. There on the Damascus road Paul realized that he had been standing against all that God had promised in the Old Testament, all of which had been fulfilled in Christ. Now, if we are not right with God, then we are wrong. This was the crisis for Paul. Would he or would he not yield to the risen Christ? That was the important thing; not the blinding light, nor the voice from heaven, nor the vision. When God speaks to us, by whatever means, we must answer with the obedience of faith.

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22:12-16

The confrontation with the risen Christ and the awareness of how totally wrong he had been left Paul stunned and blinded (v. 11). He asked humbly what he should do next and he was totally dependent on others to lead him by the hand to Damascus. Perhaps there is here an illustration of the way of salvation. Paul was in himself helpless, and he recognized it. He was dependent on another to do what he could not do for himself. In Damascus, Ananias, prepared by God, was waiting to receive this new and somewhat dazed convert (Acts 9:10-19). Ananias, like Gamaliel (22:3), was held in high regard and the mention of his name caused the people to continue to listen respectfully. The language of verses 14-16 is totally orthodox and produced no undue reaction from the hearers. Even the reference to 'all' men in verse 15 was acceptable because the Jews knew they were called to be blessed and to be a blessing to others (Gen. 12:1-3), even though to a large extent they had forgotten this and had lapsed into an attitude of spiritual superiority. This, of course, is the danger in all congregations that have known the blessing of God. Spiritual complacency is a terrible thing and it blinds you to what God is calling you to do. Paul used very carefully-chosen words, trying hard not to alienate his hearers. That is an example to all who testify to Christ. To what extent the people grasped the significance of all he was saying we cannot tell. They may have grasped that he was pointing to Jesus as the promised Messiah, the Son of God, and confessing that in response to God's call he had himself believed and had been baptized. Paul may have felt or hoped that he was winning them over, but there was more to be said, and Paul was about to say it!

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22:17-21

So far, Paul was listened to as a Jew speaking to Jews in the Jewish language. Now he recounted what had happened to him on an earlier visit to Jerusalem. The narrative in Acts 9:26-30 tells how the Christians had

been suspicious of him. At that time Paul was engaging in debate with the Jews of Greek background who showed real hostility because they regarded him as a traitor and turncoat. The persecutor of the church had become its advocate and evangelist. Here, in this passage, Paul speaks of praying in the temple, which he did not attack, and of how, in a trance or some state of ecstasy, God spoke to him and warned him to leave the city. What Paul seems to be doing here is trying to persuade the crowd that such a radical and significant change of attitude on his part must have been based on strong spiritual facts. He reminded them that he had played a part in the stoning of Stephen. Perhaps both Paul and the crowd were at that moment recalling the words of Stephen regarding the Jews' persistent refusal of every word from God and every prompting of the Spirit of God (Acts 7:51-54). Was Paul hoping and praying that the facts of the case, together with his own manifest sincerity and earnestness, would influence and persuade the Jews? The next statement would be the test. In Acts 9:20-25 the reaction of the Jews was hatred and a planned murder. It was the same here. The moment Paul mentioned the Gentiles being incorporated into the true people of God through the gospel, the whole situation exploded in blind hatred. If there is one lesson we must learn if we are to be fruitful and able to go on in Christian service, it is to face the fact of the devilish nature of unbelief (Heb. 3:12).

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22:22-29

The Roman commander may have known some Hebrew, but probably was not able to follow in detail all Paul's speech. But he was clear about the reaction of the crowd. It was dangerous and fanatical and had to do with a charge of blasphemy against his prisoner, a situation that could lead to civil disorder in the city. He decided to order examination by flogging. With great presence of mind Paul spoke of his rights as a Roman citizen (v. 25), and instantly there was a brake on proceedings. This kind of flogging could have crippled him after all he had suffered through the years (2 Cor. 11:24-25). We are not told that Paul cried to God in prayer, although no doubt in the tumult he would have sent a swift arrow of prayer to heaven. Often it is earlier praying that holds us in a sudden crisis and that is one reason why we must not neglect our prayer life (Dan. 6:10). We never know what is going to happen next (Prov. 27:1). The solution to Paul's predicament was not strictly miraculous, although God is still able to do the impossible (Acts 12:1-11). The key that set Paul free here was something from his past, his Roman citizenship, which he inherited from his parents who were not Christians. Earlier in life Paul may have set little value on his Roman privileges but now they saved his life. Never despise what God has made you, where you have come from, or where God has set you. He plans well ahead and his wisdom is seen here in that it was a Roman citizen he called to be the evangelist to open up the Roman Empire to the gospel. There is a time to claim your rights. There is a time to demand to be treated with dignity and respect and to refuse the humiliation that is being used by the devil to hinder the gospel.

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22:22-29

Try to imagine Paul's feelings as the crowd erupted. He would recall how the crowd had shouted to do away with Jesus (John 19:12-15) and how the Sanhedrin had shouted to do away with Stephen (Acts 7:57). He would remember how all through his missionary career the Jews had hounded, slandered, opposed and persecuted him. He would no doubt recall the warnings and pleadings of his friends as they tried to stop him going to Jerusalem. The devil would see to it that all these things would crowd into his mind to destroy his peace. Few of us know what it is to be the target of a mob's fury. In situations like these no believer would cope unless he knew that God is on the throne and that the powers of evil are in fact held in check in order to serve his purposes (Ps. 2:1-4; 2 Thess. 2:7-8). Perhaps it was out of these situations, reviewing them in retrospect, that Paul was able to speak of God working for good in all things (Rom. 8:28), and everything working out for the furtherance of the gospel (Phil. 1:12-14). When we believe this, the peace of God can keep both heart and mind even in the most adverse circumstances (Phil. 4:4-7). Of course, in crises there is no opportunity to use a concordance to look up reassuring texts. We need the Word of God stored up in our hearts. Paul would know the many stories in the Old Testament of how God confounded and restrained evil. It is easy to say our 'Amen' to spiritual truth as we sit in church or in our secure homes studying the Bible. But think of the pictures of riots, stone-throwing and screaming that we have seen on television. It was in that kind of situation that Paul was able to keep his composure and, at the right moment, to claim his privileges as a Roman citizen.

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We are dealing here with the processes of law set in motion by the commander, who was no doubt more than a little uneasy on account of his blunder the previous day. Remember that he was a man who had paid a big price for his Roman citizenship (v. 28), a price that may well have also bought him his commission in the Roman army. Money 'talked' in these days as in our own day, and history records that emperors and their wives were prepared to sell citizenship in order to line their own pockets. This being so, the commander may have been conscious of the need to 'keep in' with the leaders of the Jewish community lest complaints be made against him to someone 'higher up'. Perhaps he was thinking of the trouble Pilate had had with the Jews and of how easily rumours could get to Rome and so destroy all possibility of future promotion. Paul had been kept bound in prison because even Roman citizens had to be dealt with if they had broken the law. Wisely, as he thought, the commander brought Paul to what was regarded as the official representatives of the Jewish people, their council or Sanhedrin. If Paul's crime, which caused the riot, was against Jewish law then the Sanhedrin was the body to deal with it. If it turned out that the crime was against Roman law, then the commander would take up the case. The atmosphere was tense, no doubt with great resentment among the Jews because this Roman officer was sitting in as a government observer in their religious court. The story recalls the trial of Jesus. Paul knew a lot about sharing in the fellowship of the sufferings of Christ (Phil. 3:10; 1 Peter 4:12-14). We know how it all worked out, but for Paul it must have been a great test of his faith (Job 13:15).

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The scene was dramatic as Paul took the initiative and pleaded his case. His claim in verse 1 reminds us of Philippians 3:4-6 and Acts 24:16. There is no element of self-righteousness or self-justification, as 1 Corinthians 4:3-5 and Philippians 3:9 make plain. But the High Priest did not take that attitude, perhaps stung by the fact that Paul was pleading his case before God and not before the Sanhedrin. The presence of the Roman officer made him aware of how little real power he had but he was determined to exercise it to the full. Power-hungry people are always ruthless, not least in the ecclesiastical realm, and they are always quick to claim their authority. History tells us that Ananias was one of the most disgraceful holders of the high office. His great wealth was due in part to his appropriating of the temple tithes and some of his power was maintained by means of violence and even assassination. This man commanded Paul to be struck on the mouth as a protest against his supposed blasphemy. Paul's protest was in order, because in Jewish law a man was presumed innocent until proved guilty, and Paul had not even been charged formally, let alone tried. His words in verse 3 remind us of Jesus' words in John 18:19-23, and were it not for verse 5 we would think that Paul had knowledge of the character and lifestyle of the high priest. Of course, God knew all about Ananias. Some people criticize Paul and say he should have reacted in a more Christ-like way, quoting 1 Peter 2:23 in support. But Jesus spoke strong words in Matthew 23:1-3, 13-16, 25-31. There is a time to speak and a time to be silent (Eccles. 3:7). We have to be sure we are prompted by God and not by prejudice, as Ananias was.

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These verses are revealing and challenging for our own situations. Some of the council were shocked by Paul's words to the high priest but they do not seem to have been shocked by Ananias' command, which was totally illegal and no doubt spoken in a tone of bitter anger. It is amazing how prejudiced we can be. If it is someone we like or someone we feel it is wise to keep in with, we tend to make excuses for their words and actions, but God knows the truth. In verse 5 Paul's response showed his submission to the office of High Priest, although he had scant respect for the man who so ill-used the office. After all, the institution was ordained by God for the good of his people and such an *office* must not be devalued or despised even when some of its *officers* are not what they should be. There is a lesson here for all of us, because in our generation there is a devaluing of the office of the ministry, just as there is a devaluing of the church. This is done often in the name of spirituality, but it can be a spirit of individualism which is essentially an attitude of pride. Paul was clear, as he explains in

Romans 13:1-5, that the governing authorities ('the powers that be', AV) are set in place by God, whether in the secular or religious realm. It is not accidental nor ultimately by human elections that authorities are set in place but by the sovereign providence of God. That is why we must be careful about impulsive rebellion. We do not ignore the obvious wrongs of the religious or political situations and there are legitimate ways of protesting and changing things. But we must handle situations as they are, and not as we would like them to be. Contracting out is not the Christian way. Be realistic, because we are responsible.

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23:6-9

Heresy and doctrinal conflicts are not just modern problems but were there in apostolic times. The Pharisees were orthodox in doctrine. The Sadducees were rationalists and humanists, rejecting miracle, the supernatural and the reality of the world to come. Paul saw the issue, made his affirmation, divided the Sanhedrin, and so demonstrated once again that the kingdom of evil is essentially divided. It has no coherence or stability and it is bound to fall (Matt. 12:25). Note also how someone guided by God is able to discern how to handle a situation and is given, as Jesus promised, the necessary words to speak (Matt. 10:19-20). Paul no longer proceeded with the defence of his person and ministry. He changed his approach but not his position. He knew that the Sadducees were in the majority numerically, but that the minority group of Pharisees were strong in influence. Ananias, being a political and self-motivated religious leader, would possibly have thought this doctrinal issue was irrelevant. There are many like him today. But there are times in church councils when the servants of the gospel need, and are given, the votes of those who do not take a truly biblical stand, and in this way dangers are averted and necessary decisions are carried. In the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland some years ago, it was the combined vote of the evangelicals and the radicals that preserved the *Westminster Confession of Faith* from the attacks of those who did not want to be tied down to any doctrinal statement. Note in verse 9 that it was teachers from the 'fundamentalist' party who spoke up and accepted the possibility that God had in fact spoken through Paul. Their motives may have been suspect, but the result was good.

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23:10-15

For a second time Paul had to be rescued by the Roman soldiers (21:35-36). Note the extreme danger described in verse 10 ('torn to pieces') and remember this was happening in the Jewish Council. Such was the fury among these men of professedly religious convictions that we must recognize the essentially satanic nature of it. This is unbelief and anti-Christ out in the open and, since Paul was not superhuman but a man with feelings like our own, we must remind ourselves of just what it cost him to be the faithful servant of God. Against this background we see the wonderful compassion of God in coming to Paul, standing by him, calming his fears, and assuring him that his convictions about going to Rome were in fact God-given and therefore God-guaranteed. Paul needed this assurance because fear is one of Satan's greatest weapons. Remember that Paul was in custody, possibly chained, certainly under guard. Remember also all that he had gone through, not least the spiritual loneliness of the journey to Jerusalem. He had friends with him then but they had doubts about his plans and actions. The visit to church leaders and the taking of the vow had seemed to misfire and there followed two days and nights of intense stress, danger and physical, mental and emotional tiredness. If ever a servant of God was open to attack from the devil, it was Paul at that time. But the Lord, the risen Christ, whom he knew, loved and served, came and stood by him: stood between him and Satan, and ministered comfort and strength, just as the angel of the Lord had strengthened Jesus in Gethsemane (Luke 22:43). Having gone through conflict himself, Jesus knew what Paul felt and needed. What a Saviour!

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23:10-15

We cannot tell how Paul reacted to the Lord's confirmation that the next stage of the plan was to lead him on to Rome, but he may have fallen asleep, possibly pondering Psalm 127:2. We do not know what Paul expected to happen the next day, but we are shown very clearly just how determined the devil is. When we read verses 12-15 we cannot help thinking of the words, 'Then Satan entered Judas' (Luke 22:3). The blind hatred of these

Jews is quite frightening but this is the ultimate result of unbelief. All pretence of religious devotion, respectability and civilized behaviour disappeared. Nothing was going to change these people. Remember Jesus' words about the desolation of Jerusalem (Matt. 23:37-39) and consider also the solemn words in Revelation 16:8-11. Yet there are other words of Jesus to be considered as we are awed by the bitter, hellish hatred of these Jews and their council. In Matthew 21:43 Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God being taken from the Jews and given to a people who would bring forth the true fruits of God's grace. In this stage of Paul's battles we see the work of God moving slowly but surely further and further away from the Jews, because they refused to be a part of it. This is something we must take seriously. The work of God is always on the move. It will not stop because of our pride, prejudice, unwillingness or unbelief. We are the ones who will lose out if we fall asleep spiritually or if we get entangled in worldly distractions. We will wake up one day to discover just how far adrift we are. Read Hebrews 2:1-4; 4:1-2. Take good care. Drifting is more dangerous than battles. You can drift without noticing.

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23:16-22

Many forget that Paul had family. His relatives may not have shared his faith and may even have resented his conversion, but they obviously retained their interest in and affection for him at least his nephew did. How the young lad came to be in Jerusalem we cannot tell. How he got near enough the plotters to overhear their plans we do not know. The boy may not have had any thought that he was a significant instrument of God, carrying out what may have been the most important act of his whole life. He did not chatter about what he had discovered. He did not go to his family, perhaps because they would not have sympathized; possibly a relative was among the plotters. He did not seek out the Christians. He may not have known where they were. He went straight to his uncle who, being a Roman citizen as yet untried would be allowed family visitors. Paul recognized the hand of God in this, and saw the beginning of the answer to his prayers. He caused the boy to be taken to the commander, who very wisely spoke to the boy privately. No one seemed to trust anyone very much these days, perhaps with good cause. In wartime we were told repeatedly, 'Careless talk costs lives.' It is a warning that gossiping Christians need to remember. The whole detail of the plot was recounted and it was doomed to failure. We should marvel at the lack of prejudice in the commander. Perhaps he had been impressed by Paul's witness and bearing. Warning the boy to talk to no one, he set about his plans to prevent the murder. There is no indication that the nephew went back to his uncle's cell. Paul was not party to the plans being made. He had to wait on in faith to see what God would do.

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23:23-30

How good are we at recognizing miracles? To what extent are we aware of God — not just his presence, but his activity? Are we amazed at and thrilled by the phrase, 'the silent working of everlasting providence'? Sometimes God's deliverances are acts of mighty and obvious power as in Acts 12:6-10 and Acts 16:22-28. But sometimes God works very quietly so that people do not even notice that he is there. Whatever the means of working, whatever the instruments used, be it earthquakes or platoons of soldiers, what we must see is the overruling providence of God (Acts 4:27-28). In this story it is interesting to note the mathematical facts in order to grasp the scale of the incident. There were more than forty would-be murderers (v. 13) and they had the backing of the Sanhedrin, or at least the inner, scheming executive. (We cannot imagine Gamaliel and those like him being party to this scheme.) There were two centurions, four hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen plus a mount for Paul. The escort also carried an official government letter which would have been sealed with the seal of Rome, a guarantee against interference on the journey. The commander knew the depth of the Jews' hatred and took no chances. It was kind of him to be so considerate to the weary apostle. All unknown to the would-be murderers their victim was led safely away from their clutches during the hours of darkness. Their fury later can be imagined. But what may Paul's thoughts have been? He knew the Old Testament Scriptures well. Would he not be thinking of such passages as 2 Kings 6:11-19; 2 Chronicles 20:1-17? Never underestimate God. He is the same yesterday, and today, and for ever.

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23:31-35

When the prisoner and his escort were safely on their way Claudius, the commander, was no doubt relieved at passing on a difficult situation to a higher court. Perhaps he was hopeful that the written report, carefully worded and slanted in his own favour, would impress Felix and even lead to promotion. He carefully omitted any reference to the blunder he had made in ordering Paul's flogging before discovering he was a Roman citizen. The kindness shown to Paul regarding escort and a horse to ride may also have been in the hope that Paul himself would speak favourably about him. It may be that Paul would have been musing over all these things on the journey, wondering just what would happen next, and at the same time relaxing because he was secure. One thing that would be much in Paul's mind was the promise given to him by God (v. 11). His future was not in the hands of men. That is a lesson we all need to learn over and over again. Our times are in God's hand (Ps. 31:15) and it is he alone who keeps our coming and going (Ps. 121:8). Claudius had made it clear that, in his opinion, the issue was one of theological interpretation and not one of civil disobedience. That was a testimony to the fact that Paul and the early Christians were not troublemakers, but rather a benefit to society. At the end of the chapter we find Paul once again having to possess his soul in patience and wait for his accusers to come to the trial. Knowing the kind of man Felix was, ruthless and with scant regard for justice, the missionary apostle would be aware that the way ahead was going to be costly. A twentieth-century veteran missionary was wise when he said to a company of younger people, 'God never said it would be easy.'

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24:1-9

The scene is set for Paul's trial. Felix, the Roman governor, has been described as a man who 'exercised the power of a king with the mind of a slave'. His rule had led to restlessness and upheaval and his ruthlessness had alienated many moderate Jews. Tertullus, the advocate for the prosecution, may well have been a Jew and he had no doubt been paid well to do this job. His opening words were total flattery, ignoring the truth, and spoken to make Felix well disposed towards his case. Perhaps the governor was aware of this. The same duplicity in manipulating of facts is evident in the charge against Paul. It is easy to criticize Tertullus but do we never do the same kind of thing, speaking only part of the truth and giving it a slant so that *we* will come out well? Paul was branded as a religious troublemaker. He was accused of being the leader of an extreme and fanatical sect called the Nazarenes. The charge about profaning the temple was similar to the one laid against Jesus (Matt. 26:61), and it was false. Paul had done everything he could to respect the temple, and his actions had been misunderstood. Ananias and his 'gang' were really angered by Paul's changing the 'church'. It had become a religious institution discredited in the eyes of the people, spiritually dried up and led by corrupt men. Paul, through the gospel, was transforming the religious life of the whole Roman Empire and the Pharisees did not like it. They were saying he was an extremist, but they were the ones who burdened the people with their radical and ruthless legalism (Matt. 23:1-4). What they really objected to was that Paul would not toe their party line. They were being displaced and they hated Paul and the Christ he preached.

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24:10-19

Having listened to one side, Felix now called on Paul to speak. Remember, if it could be proved that Paul was in fact a disturber of the peace, then it would be serious for him, and for the church in its ongoing witness. Paul, like Tertullus, began graciously, acknowledging that Felix had many years of experience in dealing with Jewish territory and issues. But Paul did not flatter, nor did he attack his accusers. He stuck to facts and stressed that these could be verified (v. 11). He suggested that he could scarcely have done all the terrible things he was accused of in a mere twelve days. He stoutly denied the charges of troublemaking, because, after all, it was the others who had caused the trouble and sparked off the riot. Felix knew well how prone many of the Jews were to do just that kind of thing. Like the good lawyer that he was, Paul called for proof, because no Roman court would accept accusations against a Roman citizen unless they were substantiated. In verse 19 Paul pointed out the defect of the court proceedings. The main witnesses were not present and could not be questioned. But the chief point in his case is stated in verses 14-15. He gave his clear testimony that he followed in the way of Jesus Christ, and that that way was in fact in total accord with the Scriptures, the law and the prophets, which his

accusers professed to believe and to accept. Paul declared the heart of the matter to be the fact of the resurrection. The real issues were Jesus Christ and him crucified and risen, and the fact of the resurrection of all men to stand before God's tribunal. The clear factual nature of Paul's speech contrasts with the vague generalities spoken by Tertullus. The truth must be made clear.

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24:20-23

Paul was wisely careful but he was not a coward and, having stated facts succinctly, he gave a public challenge to Ananias and his deputation to state specifically what it was that they had against him. Here again men were confronted with central gospel truth. There comes a time when division is inevitable. People either bow to the risen Christ who is Lord of all or they refuse and reject him. Religion is not an acceptable substitute for the obedience of faith. Religion is all about what *we* do and it leaves 'self' untouched and uncrucified. The deputation of the Jews was given no chance to reply to Paul because Felix brought matters to a close, saying he would give his verdict later. We are told that Felix had an accurate knowledge of Christian truth and practice (v. 22), but how he acquired that knowledge we are not told. It may have been from his wife who was a Jewess and whose father Herod had had some rather disturbing dealings with the earlier apostles (Acts 12:1-4,20-23). If this is so, then Felix may have been a bit worried as to how this whole matter would affect him personally. In this he appears similar to Pilate, whose self-interest caused him to hand over Jesus to be crucified (John 19:12-16). As the story goes on, we shall see that Felix, being essentially a corrupt schemer, had hoped that funds at Paul's disposal might come to him by way of a bribe. This may explain partly the decision to make Paul's time of custody as humanitarian as possible, although, of course, Felix knew he was required to treat a Roman citizen according to the rules of justice. Is it not amazing how contact with the gospel reveals people for what they are? *God is light* (1 John 1:5; Heb. 4:13).

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24:24-27

After some days Felix sent for Paul to hear more. He did hear more. Paul expounded the facts of the gospel systematically under the headings of righteousness, self-control and judgement to come. Felix did not like the sermon. Righteousness had little place in his life. Four years previously he had enticed Drusilla, aged twenty, away from her husband to be his third wife. Paul made it clear that you cannot be right with God if you go on living in contempt of his moral laws. But Paul was dealing with the basics of the gospel and righteousness has to do with justification and being right with God and accepted by him. This righteousness no man can work for himself. No doubt Paul would have declared, as he did later when writing to the Romans, that God's wrath is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18-21) and against those who suppress the truth to ease their conscience in the interest of their wrong lives. This would lead on inevitably to the issue of self-control, which would again stab the consciences of Felix and his wife who were open adulterers. They may have been interested in the Christian faith and wanting to hear more, but there was always the insistent call to repentance (Acts 20:21). If we are to put our faith in Jesus Christ, there has to be a turning away from our sins. If there are things in our life and our relationships that God cannot bless, then they must go. We can imagine Felix saying, 'But we love each other,' and Drusilla saying, 'I no longer love the man I first married and I love Felix.' We hear that kind of thing in our own day. But that means we have no self-control, we are controlled by our instincts. Felix was afraid, and he brought the sermon to a halt.

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24:24-27

The first two themes of the sermon must have disturbed Felix but when it came to judgement he was afraid, and that was the right reaction. It is important for all of us to think about the day of judgement because the time is appointed (Acts 17:31; Heb. 9:27). This is a theme seldom preached. But there are also days of judgement in this life and Felix may have been thinking of the possibility of a summons to Rome to give an account of his administration, if this case led to trouble. It is a fact that what a man sows, he reaps, plus the increase, whether in this life or the next (Gal. 6:7). God cannot ultimately be mocked. A time *will* come when the books are

opened and the throne of judgement is set (Rev. 20:11-15). We must be ready. We must give diligence to make our salvation sure (2 Peter 1:10) because there is only one way of salvation and one name by which we can be saved (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). Paul also taught Christians about the judgement to come in passages such as 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 and 2 Corinthians 5:6-10. Felix was afraid, but not enough, because he procrastinated. Perhaps he always meant to be serious about God and about salvation, but he never got round to it. At the end of the day he was left a sinner without a Saviour. So far as we know, he died in his sins without hope (John 8:21, 24). He would stand silent and guilty on the great day of judgement. He had listened eagerly to Paul; had agreed with the Scriptures; had felt God near and that Christ was real. He had even trembled. But he did not come to Christ. Many are like him! But it may have been the day of salvation for some others who were listening. We never really know what is going on when the truth of the gospel is being declared.

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25:1-5

Paul was in custody for two years. Think how frustrating that must have been for a man so eager to extend the borders of his missionary activity. We cannot imagine Paul wasting his time fretting when we remember the references in his epistles to the need for patience and perseverance (Rom. 5:3-5; James 1:2-4). Luke, who has given us such a detailed account of all that had been happening, no doubt made use of this time to continue gathering and checking information to enable him to write both his Gospel and Acts. In due time the new and less experienced governor, Festus, took up office and the Jewish leaders, having nursed their wrath to keep it warm, immediately resumed their attempts to get Paul into their power. Felix had done them a favour by leaving Paul in prison and now they sought a favour from Festus. Their hatred of Paul was quite diabolical and when we in our day meet this same kind of prejudice, contempt and opposition, we must at once recognize it for what it is. We are not fighting against mere flesh and blood but against principalities and powers of the kingdom of evil (Eph. 6:10-18). The amazing thing, on a merely human level, is that Festus, like his predecessor, refused to be manipulated by the Jews. We do not know his reasons. It is not likely that he believed the gospel or that he respected Paul. It may have been that he disliked the Jews and objected to their obvious desire to control him. Or it may simply have been a desire to assert his own authority as the new procurator. Whatever the reasons, his attitudes and actions were the instruments by which God frustrated yet another murderous plot and guaranteed a fair trial for the apostle. When we say that God is on the throne we speak truly.

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25:6-12

This second trial would never have happened if Felix had done the right thing earlier, pronouncing Paul innocent of the charges and setting him free. But political considerations had made him trifle with moral and spiritual principles. That is always the temptation for politicians. Festus compromised (v. 9). How terrible it must be to be constantly trying to pacify a group of people who have the power to make life difficult for you! How many Christian ministers are blackmailed in this way by powerful people? Time and again in the Old Testament the obstinacy of the people of God broke the spirit and the commitment of the prophets (Amos 2:11-12). We are not told the details of the charges brought against Paul and we assume the Sanhedrin presented exactly the same case as before Felix. But they had no proof and no witnesses to bring forward. All Paul had to do was to make a straightforward denial and the situation was deadlocked. It is plain from verse 8 that the accusations had included one of crime against Caesar. If the Sanhedrin had omitted this and made the issue one totally concerned with Jewish religion and the temple, Festus might have handed the matter over to the religious court to deal with. It was the blind fury of Paul's enemies that prevented them from seeing this opportunity. Festus knew what he should do with Paul, just as Pilate knew what he should have done with Jesus, but there was moral weakness. Paul could see the possibility of being handed over to the enemies of the gospel if the charge concerning Caesar was dropped. That would have hindered the spread of the gospel, and so he spoke the official words every Roman citizen had the right to use, 'I appeal to Caesar.'

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25:6-12

How would we react if we found ourselves in a situation like Paul's? A great deal would depend on our walk with God and on the basic attitudes we had to ourselves, and to our work, as servants of God. In Philippians 1:19-30 we see that Paul's personal interests were secondary to his commitment to serve Christ. His concern was that his life, and ours, should be worthy of the gospel and cast no shadow on it. He recognized that suffering for the gospel's sake was an integral part of true Christian life. Think of his position before Festus. He had already been in jail without trial for two years. You can imagine people saying, 'There is no smoke without fire!' There comes a time when doubts and suspicions have to be dispelled and Paul was thinking very clearly. There is a grandeur in his words in verses 10-11. He did not know what the outcome of appealing to Caesar would be but, having learned well from God in and through the Scriptures and in his lifetime of discipleship, he took the same attitude as David in 2 Samuel 24:14. It may be that in the midst of this tense court situation Paul could already perceive the hand of God in all that was happening, recognizing that this was one sure way of reaching Rome. He had set his heart on getting there, believing that it was most surely God's will for him. Some decisions have to be made quickly. Paul could see that Roman justice could be perverted in Jerusalem. The trial of Jesus had shown that. He reckoned it was less likely to be corrupted in Rome where the influence of the Jewish establishment was negligible. He appealed to Caesar. Perhaps Festus was relieved to get the man off his hands. But he had lost some of his self-respect.

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25:13-22

Festus still had a problem because he had to write a formal report to Rome giving the details of Paul's case which, of course, unlike Felix, he did not understand. Just then two people with considerable knowledge of Jewish matters came to him on an official visit. Herod Agrippa the Second, and his sister Bernice, were children of the Herod in Acts 12:1. An earlier Herod had murdered John the Baptist (Mark 6:14-29) and a still earlier Herod (the great-grandfather of Agrippa in today's passage) had slaughtered the infants at the birth of Christ (Matt. 2:16-18). The Herods were a strange family but they certainly had a comprehensive knowledge of the Jewish situation and Agrippa had a reputation for being an authority on Jewish matters. When Festus made his report it was obvious that he was quite at a loss, with little understanding of what it was all about. His reference to Jewish 'superstition' (v. 19, RSV and AV) revealed his ignorance and perhaps even contempt; but he may have used the word 'religion' (NIV) out of deference to Agrippa who, after all, was regarded as being of Jewish descent. Festus was equally vague about Jesus, perhaps wondering if he was real or fictitious, a character from legend, or whether he was alive or dead. The description of Festus fits many people today: people who would claim to be religious or even 'Christian' in some sense, but who are totally vague and uncertain about the facts. Festus was an educated man and a competent administrator but he was ignorant about the things that really mattered. The story of the death and resurrection of Jesus was public knowledge but he had not thought about its significance. How clear or vague are we?

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25:23 - 26:1

The scene is a court and the preliminary examination of a man who has appealed to the highest court in Rome. It is not a trial. In fact it is a picture of one of the most astonishing congregations ever given to a preacher. Present were two Roman governors, Festus and Agrippa, their attendants, military chiefs of staff and their subordinates; the prominent men of the city, councillors, representatives of the Faculty of Advocates and (following our contemporary pattern) everyone who should be invited to such a 'royal' occasion. We can imagine the number of civil servants, and secretaries all ready with their notebooks. Besides all these there were the Jews: the High Priest, the executive of the Sanhedrin and the religious lawyers from Jerusalem. There would be doorkeepers, stewards and messengers. What a congregation! Paul would need all his composure and presence of mind to cope. But he was ready. He was always ready to preach the gospel, for he felt himself under obligation to God to do so (Rom. 1:14-15). While waiting to be called he would ponder how best to present his case, a matter to which he had no doubt given a great deal of thought. He was quite clear that he was not ashamed of the gospel (Rom. 1:16), and his attitude would have been that he would boast only in the cross of Christ (Gal. 6:14). He was being called on to give a reason for and a defence of the hope of the gospel (1 Peter 3:15) and there was much more at stake than his personal acquittal and freedom. If Paul was found guilty of

crimes against the state and against humanity then the future freedom of the church and the safety of believers through the whole Roman Empire would be in peril. What a responsibility!

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26:2-8

Paul began his speech graciously and wisely by recognizing that Agrippa was a well-informed man, knowing a great deal about the Old Testament. Festus, on the other hand, was out of his depth and did not really know what the issues were (a situation often repeated in church gatherings). How much the assembled company knew we cannot really tell, but the influence of Christians was widespread (think of the educated man from Ethiopia in Acts 8:26-40). Of course, wherever the truth of God is being testified to in sincerity, we can expect the presence and power of the Holy Spirit who is God's only effective worker, and who is not hindered by the barriers that to us seem to render some situations as hopeless. Paul asked for patient attention because he was going to make a lengthy statement of defence of himself and of the central truths of the Christian message. The danger came from the religious authorities who accused Paul of distorting the truth of the Scriptures, disturbing the life of the religious community, and of being an extreme fundamentalist. It all has a contemporary ring about it. Religious prejudice does not change. Paul stated that he held to the inspiration and authority of the Old Testament, stood in the traditional faith of the fathers, and affirmed the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. In our day, those who stand by the fundamental doctrines of Scripture are derided as not really being part of the denomination to which they belong (as if the denomination as it has become was the important thing). But it is those who deny fundamentals and seek to 'adjust' the Christian message to suit 'intellectual honesty', 'contemporary insights' and 'political correctness' who stand in denial of God's gospel.

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26:9-11

Paul declared himself to have been a strict Pharisee (v. 5), and affirmed that the central issue concerned the resurrection of the dead (v. 8). He made plain that it is possible to believe the doctrine of resurrection in theory and yet refuse to believe that God actually raised Jesus Christ physically from the dead. That was the position of his accusers and Paul admitted that earlier he had been exactly like them. He had actively persecuted Christians as impostors and frauds because they preached Christ risen and ascended (Acts 4:1-3). In spite of all the evidence of the empty tomb and the resurrection appearances; in spite of the transformation and courage of the disciples; in spite of the growth of the church and the manifest blessing of God upon it, Paul had refused to believe. His religion, the traditions and practices of his fathers, and his ingrained desire to justify himself before God by his own efforts on the basis of God's law, had blinded him (Rom. 10:1-3; Phil. 3:3-9). Like so many before and after him, he refused to believe that his traditional religion pointed him to Jesus, in whom alone God's promises were fulfilled (John 6:45). He would not surrender to Christ (John 5:39-40). It is the same today. Religious people will hold to their traditions, work for 'their church' and at times even give generously, especially if their own church building is at stake. But when Jesus Christ is preached as the sinner's only hope; when good works are shown to be hopeless as a way of salvation; when conversion and discipleship are pressed on them, they react and refuse. In earlier days Paul's religion had not brought him peace with God. When he saw Stephen, so assured of acceptance with God, his fury knew no bounds (Acts 9:1-2).

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26:12-15

The last thing Paul, or anyone who knew him, expected was that he would be converted to Christ. But we should never despair of anyone, especially those of our own families, and we should go on praying for their salvation. In Romans 16:7 it seems clear that Paul is referring to relatives and not just fellow-Jews who came to faith in Christ before him. You can imagine how they would have prayed for him. We have already studied the details of Paul's conversion (22:6-21) which is recorded here again, stating the facts in a plain and ordered way. The bright light, the prostration and the voice were *not* the vital things as far as Paul was concerned. The heart of the experience was simply that Jesus Christ, alive and exalted, met him and confronted him. Paul was not looking for Jesus nor did he want Jesus. He was taken hold of (Phil. 3:12) and for the rest of his life he was in

no doubt that this was a meeting by sovereign, divine arrangement. Paul realized that his conversion was the work of God, not man, and that he had in fact been destined for this very day from before he was ever born (Gal. 1:15). This is why he spoke so clearly of being chosen in Christ before the creation of the world (Eph. 1:3-4). Of course, all of this did not register in the moment of his conversion experience. He thought it through as the years went by, guided and inspired by the Holy Spirit whose task it is to lead disciples into all God's truth (John 16:13). Paul's testimony could be expressed personally, theologically and gloriously in the words of the hymn, 'And while I passed my Saviour by, His love laid hold on me' (Anon). This should be our testimony, creating in us ever-increasing wonder and making our hearts tender.

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26:16-18

Paul, deeply religious, was made aware that in refusing Jesus, whom God had made Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36), he was fighting against God. This must have shattered him, but he knew at once that he was being dealt with by God. The reference to kicking against the goads (26:14) suggests that already Paul's conscience had been troubling him, convicting him of the truth of the gospel. Of course he had not admitted that, even to himself, and the repression of spiritual conviction had resulted in his opposition of an extreme kind. When the voice said, 'I am Jesus,' Paul knew the moment of truth had come. There and then he believed and surrendered. In Acts 22:10 Paul recorded that he had asked what he should do, but here the focus is all on the risen Lord. In the moment of his being laid hold of by Christ Paul was given a clear assurance not only of acceptance but of a lifetime of service planned out for him by God. Paul's conversion incorporated a commission. Conversion that is separated from service is not a biblical concept. Paul was saved to serve; but service must be in the will of God. He was sent to the Gentiles (22:17-22). This was seen as an innovation and deeply resented by the Jews. God assured Paul of protection, which he certainly needed later in life. The outreach to the Gentiles had always been part of God's plan of salvation. Abraham's call was to be a blessing to all nations (Gen. 12:1-3). We too must recognize God's purpose is wider than just our personal conversion. The Lord has other sheep to bring who may be very different from ourselves (John 10:16). That is why we must be in the place God appoints for us, doing the work he has given us, and not distracted even by other Christian activity.

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26:16-18

In verse 18 we see why Paul was not ashamed of the gospel, recognizing it to be the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16), and why he felt privileged to be a preacher (Eph. 3:8). The detail of the gospel commission burned in Paul's heart all his days, as Colossians 1:12-14 makes plain. Study the elements of the message. Men and women blinded by sin and by the god of this world (2 Cor. 4:4) will have their eyes opened to see their need, their sin, the danger of judgement and the glorious salvation of God. Only God by his Spirit can do this (John 16:7-11), and he does it through the preaching of the gospel (1 Cor. 1:21). Those who live in darkness (and there are many kinds of darkness), who grope in frightened uncertainty, without hope in this world or for the world to come, will be turned from darkness to light. Light transforms everything and brings all the bits and pieces of life into focus. Jesus said that those who followed him would have the light of life (John 8:12). The power of Satan, which holds so many unsuspecting people in ignorance of God and in spiritual bondage, will be broken. Many do not realize that they are not free. Many do not even believe in Satan. But many who trifle with the occult and the supernatural find themselves trapped in a frightening bondage. Many who try to break free from habits and addictions of various kinds find they cannot. Many find stirring within them thoughts and passions that seem to come from hell. Then people begin to realize they need the one who has conquered sin and Satan and is mighty to save. That Saviour brings full and free forgiveness of all our sins, breaks the tyranny of sin and brings us into the family fellowship of God.

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26:19-23

Paul concluded his defence with a statement packed with truth. Since he had realized that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, crucified, risen and ascended, Paul could do nothing other than obey him. Beginning right where he

was at Damascus, where people considered him a persecuting unbeliever; then at Jerusalem his home territory, where his Jewish colleagues thought of him as a traitor to his whole tradition; and then wherever he went, Paul preached the gospel. No doubt it was most costly to witness where he was best known. We are inclined to be bold for Jesus in official preaching situations where it is expected that we would take a stand on biblical truth, but in the local neighbourhood, at our places of work and especially in our social and recreational places, we tend to remain silent. It is easier to give a verbal testimony at a distant meeting than to live a life of consistent grace and truth in our homes, where we may be the only believer. Note that what Paul preached was not an 'easy-believism'. He called on people to repent and have done with their sins and their God-forgetting way of life. He called on them to turn to God in saving faith through Christ who is the only way (John 14:6). And he called on them to show by their changed lives that the spiritual experience they claimed was in fact real (v. 20). In 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3 Paul speaks of a work stemming from faith, a labour prompted by love and an endurance inspired by hope as being the elements of true conversion. These three elements he describes as turning to God from idols, serving the living God, and waiting for the coming again of the Saviour (1 Thess. 1:9-10). We can all test our conversion. It is not a passing emotional experience.

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26:19-23

There *is* a time for plain speaking in the face of critics, especially when the truth of the gospel and the good of Christ's church are at stake. This is what Paul did here. He pinpointed the fact that the Jews had tried to murder him when he was in fact being obedient to God. He declared that, in the face of their persistent opposition, God had helped and preserved him, and brought him to Agrippa's court, where he looked for justice. Then he stated his final point of defence. All he had ever preached was in total conformity to the Old Testament Scriptures and therefore he was standing in the true and faithful tradition of God's truth, God's promises, and God's work, while his critics were not. This needs to be affirmed in our own day. We, who claim to be evangelical, stand in the true apostolic tradition of our fathers. We stand where they stood on the biblical gospel, and we affirm what they affirmed: that all the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament find their full and final fulfilment in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Think of our Lord's words in Luke 24:25-27,44-48; John 5:39; and Paul's words in Romans 15:7-13. Note how Paul was thoroughly versed in the Scriptures. He had thought through his position, knew where he stood, and was ready and able to state his case. It is not enough to have vague beliefs and careless tolerance. We must know where we stand and we must know the scriptural basis for that stand. Nothing else is any use. If we begin to doubt the Scriptures and to drive a wedge between Old and New Testaments we will soon be lost. The whole of Scripture centres on Christ, and it takes a whole Bible to present a whole Christ.

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26:24-26

In verses 19-21 Paul had made clear to Agrippa the real reason for his arrest and the accusations against him. This was the issue Agrippa had to settle before Paul could be sent on his way to make his appeal to Caesar's court in Rome. Just as he was ending his defence, Festus broke protocol by shouting the comment noted in verse 24. The man was out of his depth, not understanding spiritual truth, and seeing no reason why an intellectual like Paul should enrage the Jewish hierarchy and lay himself open to such danger and slander for the sake of what seemed to him some vague religious belief. There are many people like Festus who just cannot see why Christians insist on having specific convictions and holding to a certain way of life. Festus could see the close attention of Agrippa and how he was taking it all seriously and that probably worried him. After all, Festus had to go back to his own territory and he did not want to have the powerful Jewish lobby against him. We must see a note of panic in Festus' outburst. Paul, quite calmly, refuted the charge that his great learning had unhinged his mind. After all, he had been educated by Gamaliel, one of the most respected of teachers (Acts 5:34; 22:3). In the face of the assembled company he called on Agrippa to confirm that all that was being said was sober truth. Paul's heart must have thrilled when he affirmed that the life, death and resurrection of Christ were not elements of some shady sect or secret society, but well-known, well-attested public facts. We need to remember this today. The faith we profess is not some vulnerable, shaky, speculative story. It can stand the closest scrutiny. It has nothing to hide. It is history (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-3).

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The facts of the gospel, grounded in and confirmed by the Old Testament Scriptures, had been stated by Paul with great clarity before the whole company and now, with masterly directness, Paul challenged the king on a personal level (v. 27). Agrippa seems to have believed the facts of the story of Jesus, as many people do, but that is a very different thing from the commitment of faith. Agrippa had considerations that influenced him. His political position required him to pacify Festus lest he should report to Rome that the king was influenced by a trouble-making Jew who was apparently off his head. On the other hand, Agrippa could not declare publicly that he did not believe the prophets, because that would enrage the Jewish lobby and he would lose influence. The king did what many do to escape decision. He made fun of the preacher's earnestness, saying, 'You are trying to make me a Christian.' The AV reads, 'Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.' Perhaps Agrippa was more moved and challenged than he was prepared to admit. He knew, as Pilate had known, what he *ought* to do regarding Christ. But he refused. The NIV translation suggests that Agrippa said mockingly, 'Do you think one short sermon is going to convert *me*?' Paul's answer (v. 29), raising his shackled hands as he spoke, has all the tender compassion and deep urgency of a true evangelist. Perhaps as he spoke, he looked round at the sea of faces, trying to detect if the Spirit of God had in fact been doing his work of conviction and conversion in others even as he had borne witness to his Saviour. Just think, someone could overhear two Christians talking about their faith in Christ and, hearing the gospel, be converted.

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The hearing was over and, humanly speaking, Paul's fate was in the hands of two weak, wilful, unbelieving politicians. The discussion between the two officials was in private. The fact that Luke knew the details about what was said suggests that one of the attendants did come to faith, and 'leaked' the details. Paul had to wait to hear what his fate would be. What did he hope for? What did he think about? Did he spend the time in prayer or, believing that the issue was settled and in God's good hand, did he take the opportunity to rest? Would *we* have been able even to sit still in such circumstances? It all depends on what we think about God. Do we believe our times are in his hands (Ps. 31:15)? Do we believe that God is working out what he has appointed for us (Job 23:14, AV) and that nothing can frustrate his plans (Rom. 8:28)? Paul would know the story of Daniel in the lions' den and also the assured faith of Daniel's friends when they trusted even when they did not know how things would work out (Dan. 3:16-18). No doubt Paul would look back over his own life with thanksgiving for the times when God had overruled in his circumstances in order to lead him on into further service. The officials concluded that Paul could have been set free but for his appeal to Caesar. The truth is that Paul could not have been set free because God wanted him in Rome and his earlier decision to appeal to Caesar had in fact been prompted by the Holy Spirit. Events were to prove that his guidance was truly God-given. We are not sure whether Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians after he was in Rome or during an earlier imprisonment in Ephesus, but his words in Philippians 1:12-14; 4:4-7 deserve close study.

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This is the beginning of a fascinating story of people and events. The word 'we' (v. 1) indicates that Luke had joined Paul. Some suggest that the beloved doctor (Col. 4:14) signed on as a member of the crew or as the ship's doctor in order to be with Paul. Note how the story begins: 'When it was decided'. On one level it was a government decision but as far back as Acts 19:21 Paul felt that he should be heading for Rome, a conviction the Lord confirmed to him in Acts 23:11. Months and years went past and then in Acts 25:11-12 and 26:32 we have the appeal and decision that led directly to this journey. The civil authorities were taking Paul to Rome in full accord with the plan of God, who works everything in conformity with the purpose of his own will (Eph. 1:11). But there were problems (v. 4). Progress was slow and difficult (v. 7); winds blew them off course (v. 7) and the ship had to hug the coast (v. 8). This journey was going to be physically and spiritually demanding. But God is kind and knew that Paul needed human as well as spiritual support. Aristarchus, who later shared his

imprisonment (Col. 4:10), was on board the ship as well as Luke, and the companionship of these two must have meant a great deal to Paul. Almost in passing (v. 3), we are told of the kindness of the Roman centurion. It may be that he was impressed by the character and the gracious manner of the apostle, and who knows but that that may have been the beginning of his coming to Christ. We must not be surprised when we come across people with apparently no church connection who have been prepared in advance by the Holy Spirit to hear and to believe.

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27:9-12

Captains of sailing ships had to take careful note of winds because in certain conditions it is simply too dangerous to risk a voyage. When it became apparent that the journey across the open Mediterranean from Crete to Rome was going to be attempted, Paul spoke up. No doubt he was aware of the natural hazards, but his words in verse 10 seem to express concern communicated by God through his Spirit. Paul was an experienced traveller and he may well have sat in on the deliberations of the ship's council. He may have been asked specifically for his comments. We are not told that he made any reference to God but he was a man whose counsel should have been heeded. Of course, we do not always listen to advice given by men and women of spiritual stature. So it was here. The owner may have been influenced by financial considerations, since a ship laid up in port loses money. The captain was not likely to disagree with his employer, and he may have been offered a bonus to do the trip. The centurion was swayed by human considerations and, of course, the majority opinion was to 'take a chance'. God had spoken, through a Spirit-filled man, but his voice was not recognized. The decision to sail was taken. All Paul could do was to wait upon God, to see both what he would do and how the situation would develop. There was nothing else Paul needed to do. He was quite sure that men, however wise or foolish, could not ultimately frustrate the will of God. God *could* have swayed the centurion to make him listen to Paul and follow his advice but God does not often *force* people to do what is right. His ways are past finding out (Rom. 11:33) but his ways are always right (2 Sam. 22:31).

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27:13-20

When we do not wait upon God it is easy to be taken in by circumstances and to conclude that all is well. The gentle wind (v. 13) soon made everyone forget Paul's earnest warning and they went ahead. There *is* a time to go forward in faith, but some go ahead with no real assurance that they are doing God's will. They hope they are right, and tend to say that if it is not so, God will frustrate and prevent them. But that may not happen. We need to recall Jonah's story. He was running away from God and at first everything fitted in beautifully. A ship was ready to sail and he got a berth on it (Jonah 1:3). But then a terrible storm overtook Jonah and endangered other people because he was out of God's will. Paul, however, was in the centre of God's will, proceeding to Rome in and by the will of God. The swift onset of the storm must have alarmed everyone, and its ferocity was such that every effort to handle the ship failed. The owner's hope of profit vanished as the cargo was dumped. The captain's hope of a future career crumbled as the stage of abandoning ship was reached. Most of the people on board were terrified and felt they were victims of circumstances, tossed about by the power of the elements, and this went on and on, night and day. The detailed description of the various activities indicates an eyewitness account and makes plain that even passengers were conscripted to help with what was needed. The dinghy, possibly full of water, was pulled on board with difficulty. Cables were passed under the ship and secured to try to prevent it breaking up. All sail was lowered, the cargo was jettisoned and finally all spare gear was thrown overboard. They abandoned hope. What did it all mean? Time would tell.

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27:13-20

Was this just another storm, one of those things that 'just happen', or do we look for spiritual significance? There *are* 'natural' disasters, which are part and parcel of life in a fallen world, and these have to be met in faith. But God is the Creator God and rules the elements. Was he then being a showman, bringing things virtually to disaster to show his power? That would be a perverse way to interpret the story. In the Jonah

situation the storm was designed to bring a rebellious prophet to repentance so that he could bring the message of salvation to Nineveh (Jonah 3:1-5). In Mark 4:35-41 the storm on the Sea of Galilee came upon the disciples because they were determined to follow Jesus. It was used to expose their slowness to learn and to teach them faith. Paul's storm was not going to be stilled. God had other plans. Is there a common element in these three stories? Are we to see in them the activity of Satan? Jonah was destined to take his saving ministry to Nineveh and might have perished in the storm. The disciples were being tempted to turn back from Gadara where a needy soul was waiting for the salvation of God to come to him. Paul was on his way to Rome to continue his significant ministry, not least in writing letters to the churches. Do we not see the opposition of Satan in all these situations? Both God and the devil are at work in the storms we meet, but the initiative is always with God. Did any realize what momentous things were being worked out in that storm? Perhaps not even Paul realized the extent of the work that lay ahead of him. God's hand was on him and that guaranteed the devil's enmity and opposition. If the Lord is calling and preparing you for service, watch out for the devil.

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27:21-26

In this story there is nothing said about anyone thinking about God at all. If Paul was sharing in all the emergency work, as is likely, he would be regarded as just 'one of the group', in the same predicament as themselves. But that was not the case and, after a long time of silence, and not until all human effort and self-confidence had come to an end, Paul began to speak with astonishing calm and assurance. We must not forget Paul's prayers during the voyage and the storm although he would not have had much opportunity to be alone and quiet. Of course, prayer is not to be thought of as an emergency measure; it is a way of life. If we pray at the right time, crisis will never catch us unprepared (Daniel 6:10). Paul spoke plainly: 'You should have listened to me.' The passengers and crew may well have resented his words, but they were true. They may have been baffled by his assurance in verse 22 but must have listened with amazement to his glowing testimony in verses 23-25. He declared that there is a God who saves, a God who meets us right at the point of our need, not an unknown God but one who cares and who speaks peace and hope to his people. There is a lesson here on witnessing. Had Paul spoken earlier, the people would have been too preoccupied with their own problems to listen. There was nothing pressurized or exaggerated about his words, attitude or claims. He declared his faith and trust in God, and the whole bearing of his person made plain that it was so. This man's faith did not ignore circumstances nor was it dependent on circumstances. He was in the same danger as they were and yet he had a rock and refuge that gave him a serenity the others must have envied.

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27:21-26

Do you envy people who seem to be able to cope no matter what happens? In a terrifying storm Paul not only coped, he took charge. What was his secret? It was first of all the presence of God with him all along the way in a personal relationship of love and trust. Paul's God was a God to speak to and a God who speaks to his people. His 'secret' was secondly a belief in and an awareness of the purpose of God. The will of God was not an abstract theological concept. Paul believed that God had a specific will for his life, all planned out in perfect wisdom. This is one reason why he was able to accept and work with situations that were far from ideal. He really did believe that in all things God works for the good of his people (Rom. 8:28), and that God's will would be done on earth as it is perfectly done in heaven. 'Thy will be done,' is not a pious phrase in the Lord's prayer. It is a statement of fact, to rest in and to be rejoiced in. Notice how simple Paul's witness was. He was not embarrassed to speak about an angel messenger from God. He was not ashamed to declare that he belonged to God and lived his life to serve him. He pointed these frightened people to God and urged them to keep up their courage. He made it plain he had prayed for them and that God had assured him that his prayer was answered and that all would live and reach land safely, although the ship would be lost. No doubt Paul was burdened for these people, longing for them to be brought to saving faith in Jesus Christ. But he spoke only what God gave him to speak in these circumstances. He knew that it was the work of the Holy Spirit to open minds and hearts to the Saviour. Do we expect God to work? If not, why not?

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27:27-32

Paul assumed leadership both spiritual and practical. He focused their thinking and spoke so calmly about running aground (v. 26), that the seamen were sufficiently reassured to be alive to their work. About midnight, though they could not see any breakers, they could hear them and took soundings which confirmed that they were nearing the shore. It was dangerous to go further in the dark, so they let out stern anchors to prevent any further drift and waited for daylight. The sailors, motivated by self-interest, would have been confident of reaching the shore in the lifeboat, but that would have left the ship and everyone in it without any skilled seamen to handle it when the time came to slip the anchors and beach the vessel. By this time Paul had gained the confidence and trust of the centurion, and without delay the sailors' escape-plan was foiled. Paul was very observant of the practical realities of the situation. No one could ever say of him that he was so heavenly minded that he was no earthly use! It may not have been wise or necessary for the soldiers to cast off the small boat which could have proved a useful help the next day. Paul himself may have been vexed by this impulsive action but he would have been the first to recognize, and to make allowance for, the strain and tension of the soldiers. True spirituality never loses its humanity. The amazing thing is the authority and influence of Paul. This cannot be imposed, nor worked up for the occasion. It stems from the inward integrity of a man who is right with God and who lives his life in company with God. We can lead people only when we have won their confidence. But we cannot lead them further than we ourselves have gone with God. Later, they may become our teachers.

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27:33-38

There is a false spirituality that is insensitive to people's humanity. Sometimes we only pray for people when what they need is our actual company and words of friendship. Sometimes we urge people to pray and to be more earnest about sin and Satan, when what they actually need is care, understanding and a suggestion to visit the doctor. Think of how the Lord ministered to Elijah in his exhaustion and depression in terms of food and sleep, not spiritual counsel and challenge (1 Kings 19:1-8). That came later. Note how plain and straightforward Paul was. He seems to have been the one who organized breakfast and he reminded everyone that the physical labour and the fear and uncertainty of the past days had taken their toll. They may have been sea-sick in the storm, soaked to the skin and in the process of getting ashore they would be buffeted and exhausted. If they were to cope with the demands of the new day they had to eat. There is a lesson here we all need to learn well. At times, the demands of our situation are such that we must just keep going, but at the earliest point we must make it our business to get both rest and food. It is not Christian to press ourselves to breaking point. God does not want us broken in that sense; that would simply make us less fit for service. Paul set the example, said a prayer of thanksgiving in the presence of all the people, and in so doing directed their thoughts to God. What a witness! What a balanced spiritual attitude this man had! People like this are a blessing wherever they go. But never think life was 'plain sailing' for Paul. See his humanity in such passages as 1 Corinthians 2:3; 2 Corinthians 2:13; 7:5-6; 12:7-9. But he never let difficulties get in the way of his service.

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27:39-44

The sailors who had been prevented from escaping now proved their worth, and the details of their deliberations and actions make fascinating reading. They certainly knew about the sea and ships. What they did not bargain for was the shoal, and when they grounded, it was obvious that the ship was breaking up. Now the soldiers were the problem. Their training and discipline reminded them they were responsible for the prisoners and the consequences of letting them escape were serious. For a moment Paul and his companions were in danger of their lives, but the centurion asserted his authority and the soldiers' plan was foiled. Again we must see the rage and sudden outburst of Satan seeking to destroy God's servants. But Satan was foiled by the swift action of a man who, as far as we know, was not a believer. Of course he could well have been converted at some point during the storm as a result of the gracious and courageous witness of Paul. How many of the others may have been brought to faith we are not told. How many weak and uncertain believers were brought back close to the Lord in and through the storm we cannot tell. One thing was clear: God was with Paul and God was at work.

But Paul, like all the others, had to struggle ashore soaked and battered after fourteen days of terrible storm. We are not told much about Paul's prayer life on the ship but, of course, no wise man boasts or makes a show of his prayer life (Matt. 6:5-6). Paul certainly drew near to God. He was assured in verse 22, and it came to pass exactly. Luke, writing up his diary, summed it up beautifully saying, 'So it was that all escaped to land'. He might have added that God's method had been unusual. But it was effective.

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28:1-6

We saw in the previous note God's unusual but effective methods of furthering his purposes and of bringing his servants to their appointed place of service. Often it may seem that there is more chaos than order, and much of the turmoil or conflict of our Christian experience may seem to have no point in it. But God is in the midst of it. God is in everything, ruling and overruling in things natural and spiritual, things good and bad, causing his will to be done. This may be difficult to believe at times when life is in turmoil. Many struggle with a verse such as Romans 8:28 especially if they expect life to be easy. But when we do set our minds as well as our hearts on God, then we begin to learn, as Paul learned, to be content in whatever set of circumstances we find ourselves (Phil. 4:10-13). This contentment of faith has to be learned. It does not come easily and it never comes to those who choose to remain on the edge of Christian commitment. Only those who walk with God when life is simple and uncomplicated are able to cope with crisis when it comes. Now look in detail at today's verses. Paul, like all the rest, struggled ashore. He had been the man of prayer on the ship and the man of moral and spiritual leadership when decisions had to be made, giving both encouragement and inspiration. Now we find the great man gathering sticks for the fire, the same as all the rest, and possibly giving the lead in the humble and obvious task. Here is a test of true spirituality in a fellowship. Do you see the 'ordinary' things that need to be done, the shifting of seats, the washing of dishes, the giving of lifts, the scrubbing of floors, or do you just see the 'spiritual' things? Make sure your values and priorities are clear.

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28:1-6

Only when they reached the shore did the company realize they were on Malta, whose inhabitants were generally regarded by Romans and Greeks as uneducated and uncultured. Whatever their reputation, they certainly acted with great humanity, hurrying to light a fire to dry and warm the shivering shocked survivors. We have seen Paul's leadership in ordinary things and now take note of his reaction to the viper twined round his hand. Paul would have been as tired and as vulnerable as everyone else. God's mighty men are not superhuman, and without doubt the 'serpent' was a devilish attack on God's significant servant at a critical moment. Was it possible that the snake would succeed in preventing Paul reaching Rome when he had survived so many other attacks of various kinds? When the Maltese saw the snake hanging with its fangs stuck in Paul's hand they concluded that this must be an act of divine justice. They thought of Paul as a murderer being pursued by 'heaven', not being allowed to escape, and they may well have regarded the rest of the company as being somehow involved. There was no saying what they might then have done. It is interesting to note how people regarded as 'pagans' seem to have had an indwelling sense of 'god' and 'justice' (cf. Romans 1:18-20; 2:14-16). Of course, such instinctive awareness needs to be taught in God's revelation of himself, else they will come to wrong conclusions as they did here. When there was no sign of Paul dying as a result of the snake-bite they decided he must be a god. Paul would remember that in Lystra (Acts 14:11-19) the people had first thought him a god and then decided to stone him. The devil loves to make use of superstition.

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28:7-10

This is the only account of Paul's ministry during the three months on Malta. The chief man of the island obviously had considerable estates and extended generous hospitality to the shipwrecked company. He may have heard of the incident with the viper or may have surmised that a Roman citizen being transported to Rome under military escort was a man of some significance. On the other hand, he may simply have been someone with a true humanitarian spirit, able and willing to show kindness and hospitality. We must see here God in his

providence ministering to faithful Paul on a practical level and bringing him on his way to Rome. Without doubt Paul would be appreciative and would express his gratitude. The good man's father was sick (v. 8) with what was possibly a recurring illness on the island. As a doctor, Luke makes plain that the healing of this man was a miracle, in answer to prayer, although verse 9 indicates that Luke's medical skill was also involved in the 'out-patient' clinic. In this story there was a general healing of what may have been an epidemic. It does not say that hands were laid on every person who came. Nor does it say Paul was personally involved in each case. In other situations healing did not always take place. Timothy, a missionary colleague, was sickly all his life (1 Tim. 5:23) and was advised by Paul to take a certain medicine. Trophimus was left sick in one place though he too was one of the missionary team (2 Tim. 4:20). Paul himself lived with his 'thorn', which may well have been a physical ailment (2 Cor. 12:7). We dare not build a 'healing ministry' on these verses, but must see that medical work can be the first stage of gospel outreach in some communities.

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28:11-16

In Malta, when winter gave way to Spring, the journey resumed. They called at Syracuse on the east coast of Sicily, went on to Rhegium on the toe of Italy, and finally came to Puteoli in the Bay of Naples. In this major seaport, busy with trade, it is not surprising that there were Christians, considering the constant coming and going of business people and their servants. We must note the irresistible spread of the gospel by means other than the ministry of well-known apostles and missionaries. In the providence of God on the Day of Pentecost there were 'devout men', men under reverent Old Testament instruction, from every nation, far and near, including Rome, who heard the gospel preached in the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:5-13). A mighty work of salvation was done and these converted pilgrims went back home to witness to their new-found faith. The work went on and so did the persecution, resulting in further waves of Christians being scattered throughout the whole Roman Empire (Acts 8:1,4). Read Acts 8:26-40 and try to imagine the influence for Christ that would be exercised back home by such a high-ranking civil servant. In Acts 10:1-23 we see another instance of how the Spirit of God works to prepare people's hearts for the coming of the gospel. This should teach us that wherever our path leads us, whether in clear obedience to a call from God or by the overruling providence of God, we should look for Christian believers or for others whose hearts are just waiting to hear from us the story of salvation (Acts 16:11-15). This means, of course, that we must be ready to identify ourselves as Christians and to give a reason for the faith we hold, and to do it with grace, wisely and not in a confrontational way.

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28:11-16

After a week of beneficial fellowship and ministry with believers in Puteoli they went on. Luke's words, 'So we came to Rome', summarize the long story that began away back in Acts 22. We have emphasized the providence of God and the means by which he advances his purposes. Now we see the magnificent ministry of some of the believers in Rome (vv. 15-16). They did not wait for Paul to come to them. They did not wait for this much maligned apostle to 'prove himself' as they listened critically to his testimony and ministry. Prompted by the Spirit of God they came to meet him, giving him an official welcome, and escorting him back to the city. It was an act of spontaneous grace in which they identified themselves with Paul and welcomed him in a way that encouraged his heart. 'Some of them got as far as The Tree Taverns ... about thirty-three miles from Rome; others walked ten miles further and met him at the market town of Appii Forum' (F. F. Bruce). No one will ever know just how much this gesture meant to Paul as he looked to the future. It would have helped him shed something of the weariness of the past months. Three years had passed since Paul had written his letter to the Christians at Rome, in which he had expounded the gospel and also declared his desire to visit and to preach to them (Rom. 1:7-13; 15:22-33). But, having met difficulty and criticism from believers and unbelievers all through his ministry, he would have had some misgivings about how he would be received in Rome. He did not know what reports and rumours had gone on ahead of him. But his doubts and fears were swept away by the welcome of those believers who had tramped so far to meet him. God must have been pleased.

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28:17-22

After verse 16 there is no more mention of 'we', which indicates that Paul was separated from Luke and possibly from his other companions, although there was some contact as Colossians 4:14 and Philemon 23-24 indicate. Both these letters were written from Rome. Notice the reference to the soldier-guard (v. 16). Picture the situation. Paul, a high-born Jew, an intellectual, a lawyer, a scholar and an apostle of Jesus Christ, was almost certainly chained to his guard, wrist to wrist, like a common criminal. What Paul felt, and what other people felt about it, is plain from the reference in 2 Timothy 1:16-18 to one man who was not ashamed of his chains. Paul uses a marvellous phrase in Ephesians 6:20 when he refers to himself as an ambassador in chains. No amount of public contempt and devaluation could take from him the awareness that he was in fact the appointed representative of the King of kings, who loved him and had died for him (Gal. 2:20). Paul had sufficient freedom to be able to invite people to his dwelling and since he could not follow his policy of going to the synagogue, he invited them to call on him. The very fact that there were still Jews in Rome means that the edict of expulsion referred to in Acts 18:1-2 was no longer operating. That edict, ten years earlier, had made no real distinction between Jews and Christians and, although the aim was to get rid of Christians, the Jews had been affected. Now, it seems, the Jews did not want to get involved in any situation that might get them into trouble with the Roman authorities, and their words in verses 21-22 seem to indicate a calculated attempt to remain neutral. They pleaded ignorance. But they were simply making excuses. We meet the same attitude today.

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28:17-22

The essence of Paul's statement echoed what he had said right through his ministry. He protested that he had done no moral wrong, neither had he spoken or acted against the Jewish people nor their customs. Indeed he had always claimed that in Jesus Christ all the promises of God in the Old Testament had found their fulfilment. This is what an evangelical and biblical ministry should do in a congregation that has been traditionally religious, but has never been taught in the doctrines of salvation, and has been conditioned to the thought of salvation by works. To denounce it all just causes resentment. True ministry must show people that what they grope after and understand so defectively (but often sincerely) comes into focus in Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection. Some will find an excuse in saying that they do not understand. That is what the Jews did here. But were they being honest? It was three years since Paul had written his Epistle to the Romans, and there was a well-established church in the city. That epistle had stated clearly the doctrines of salvation and the significance of the Jews in the economy of God. Had the leaders of the synagogue no knowledge of the Christian presence in the city, its worship and evangelism? They certainly had news from far and near about what they called 'this sect' (v. 22). Could they really make the statement in verse 21 with honesty? They knew about Christ and the gospel but they did not want to get involved. Religion is one thing, but to let it become the dominant thing in life is quite another. How many uncommitted 'Christians' are there? Are you one? Read Jesus' words about confessing him before men, and think well (Matt. 10:32-33).

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28:23-28

Some gatherings are far more significant than people realize at the time and there are occasions when decisions are made that determine a person's eternal destiny. This is one reason why we should pray earnestly for every church service where the Word of God is read, preached and applied. The picture in verse 23 is glorious and, without question, Paul would have been aware that he was fighting for the souls of his congregation. His text was the whole of the Old Testament, and from the Law and the Prophets he expounded salvation through the promised Christ. The content of such preaching and discussion can be seen on various occasions throughout Acts, and we need only read Paul's epistles to have a fuller grasp of the truths he must have urged on his hearers. If time permits read quickly through the following passages to see the kind of reasoning Paul urged on the Jews: Romans 1:1-6, 16-18; 2:17-29; 3:1-2, 9-20; 4:1-12; 9:1-8; 10:1-21. Now, in today's passage, look at verse 24. There was a division and a separation. Some believed and some refused to believe. It is always so. The one glorious and gracious gospel message is to some a sweet sound of life in its fulness and to others it is the

solemn seal of death and judgement (2 Cor. 2:15-16). How we need to urge men and women to believe unto salvation while the day of grace lasts and while the message of gospel truth is still registering in their minds, hearts and consciences. Imagine Paul quoting to the Jews from their own familiar Scriptures, 'How long will you waver between two opinions?' (1 Kings 18:21) or, 'I have set before you life and death ... therefore choose life' (Deut. 30:19, AV).

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28:23-28

In verse 24 it seems that the majority refused to believe and most of the Jews continued to reject the gospel. Having fulfilled his charge to go to the Jews first, Paul declared that the Gentiles would hear the same message and that they would believe (v. 28). He was neither taken aback nor hindered by this hardness of unbelief, recognizing that what was happening was not a new thing. Hundreds of years previously the Holy Spirit had said to Isaiah, right at the start of his ministry, that this unbelief would be manifested (Isa. 6:9-13). It takes the courage of faith to go on when you know that your ministry under God may make the deaf more deaf and the blind more blind. Preaching the Word does not operate in a neutral situation. The seed of the Word falls into ground already affected by what has happened to it (Matt. 13:18-23). Those who hear are already conditioned by a long series of choices, attitudes and decisions. Some have evaded the issue of Christ so often and so long that they have lost the power to react, and for them the issue is settled. A judicial blindness and hardness has come upon them. They have put themselves beyond redemption. Of course, it is only God who knows human hearts, and it is not for us to pass judgement. We are called to urge on all repentance and faith, and in the context of the proclamation of the gospel it will in fact become clear who are of God and who are not. All who are of God will come to Christ (John 6:45). Read John 3:16-18 but do not pass over the words 'condemned already'. Unbelief is frightening, but we must not be deterred by it. Jesus met it (John 1:10-11). Stephen spoke of it in Acts 7:51. Today, if you hear God's voice, do not harden your hearts (Heb. 3:7-8, 15; 4:7).

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28:30-31

Some manuscripts add verse 29 recording that after Paul's quotation from Isaiah the Jews left arguing among themselves. Who knows but that by the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit some were later brought to faith? We must never give up hope. Remember that Paul himself was at his most antagonistic when he was converted. The work went on for the next two years. Some suggest that period was the statutory time accusers were allowed to prepare and present their case. It is generally believed that in the end Paul was martyred. But we are not told if he was found guilty at his trial in Caesar's court and then executed or if he was in fact released for a period, after which he was again imprisoned, tried and executed. The immediate generation for which Luke was writing would have known the facts and the Holy Spirit seems to have been satisfied that we, in our time, do not need to know. In his last letter (2 Timothy 4:6) it is clear that Paul knew his end was very near. What we must be aware of is that for the two years, while Paul continued his ministry under certain restrictions of movement, he must have lived day by day not knowing just when the summons would come. Every new day was cause for thanksgiving and every night was a time to commit the issues once again to God. We all need to be like this, because we simply do not know what a day may bring (Prov. 27:1; James 4:13-14). Perhaps Paul remembered Jesus' words about working while the opportunity was there (John 9:4). Think how often in the Gospels we are told that evil men could not lay a hand on Jesus because his time was not yet come (John 7:30; 8:20). It is a practical matter to recognize that our times are indeed in his hands (Ps. 31:15).

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28:30-31

There is clear evidence here of the overruling providence of God. Rome had about two million inhabitants of whom one million were slaves. Among the citizens a vast proportion of the wealth was in the hands of a few. Nero was emperor and the general atmosphere was one of fear, suspicion and prejudice. The Jewish establishment remained stubbornly opposed to the Christians. In that situation Paul stayed two years in his own hired dwelling and, without any government interference, continued teaching all who came to his house. There

is no mention of the persecution under Nero and we assume it had not yet started. There is no account of the end of Paul's life. Neither is there any indication that Luke intended to write a further instalment. He ended his story on a note of victory. The Word of God is not chained (2 Tim. 2:9). Earlier Paul had spoken about a door of opportunity along with many adversaries (1 Cor. 16:9) and his time in Rome was the same kind of experience. For a season Satan was bound. The mouths of the lions had been shut by God (Dan. 6:22). Paul, not sure whether or not he would ever be released, followed his own counsel to others about redeeming the time, and he wrote several of his epistles. Luke in his Gospel recorded 'all that Jesus began to do' in his lifetime (Acts 1:1). In Acts he records all Jesus continued to do through the apostles, and many others, less prominent, who were also used by God. The emphasis throughout has been on what God was doing (1 Cor. 3:5-9). Right to the end of the story, in spite of the devil's hindrances, Paul bore witness to the Lord Jesus Christ. As a true servant, he would rejoice that after his departure the work would go on. It still does.

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