

# Acts 8:26-40

## TRANSLATION

*And an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, "Rise and go down to the south, by the way which descends from Jerusalem to Gaza; that is the desert." And he arose and went. And behold, an Ethiopian man, a eunuch of the dynasty of Candace, the queen of Ethiopia, who was over all her treasury, who had come to worship in Jerusalem, was returning. And sitting on his chariot, he read the prophet Isaiah. And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go and join with this chariot." And Phillip ran, and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and he said, "Do you know, indeed, what you are reading?" And he said, "How can I, except one guide me?" And he besought Philip to come up and sit with him. And the portion of Scripture which he read was this:*

*"As a sheep was lead to the slaughter;  
And as a lamb before the shearers is dumb,  
So he opened not his mouth.  
In His lowliness His justice was taken away;  
Who shall declare His generation?  
Because His life was taken from the earth.*

*And the eunuch answered and said, "I pray you, of whom is the prophet saying this, concerning Himself or some other?" And Philip opened his mouth, and having begun from this Scripture, proclaimed the good tidings of Jesus. And as they were going along the way, they came upon a certain body of water, and the eunuch said, "Behold, water. What hinders me from being baptized?" And Philip said to him, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he commanded the chariot to stand still. And they both descended into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And the Spirit of the Lord, having snatched away Philip, the eunuch saw him no longer, and he was going his way rejoicing. And Philip was found in Azotus. And he was passing through, proclaiming the good tidings to all the cities until he came to Caesarea.*

## COMMENTARY

### A Troubled Officer—Doorway to the Dark Continent

The singular success of Philip in Samaria, where a significant number of people were involved, did not cause him to lose sight of the value of the single individual. Accordingly, he did not question the instruction through an angel to leave behind the “fertile field” of eager Samaritans and go to the desert. The Negev, as that area is called, is a hot arid wilderness. And his mission was to a solitary soul from Ethiopia. Was there no one else to go? Could it be a ploy to divert his attention from the obvious blessings of the ministry in Samaria? How could Philip make such a decision? How could he be sure the angel was truly from God, and not a delusion of Satan? By normal standards it was not a logical move. Nor did Philip even go back to Samaria afterward, but to the small coastal village of Azotus and on to relative obscurity.

But the episode of the Ethiopian officer leaves for the followers of Christ an enduring guidepost in the constant problem of determining God’s view of things, and avoiding human misconceptions. Especially in the matter of service, there is the tendency to approach the task from the perspective of humanistic commercial productivity. We have developed the “marketeering personality”, where everything is seen in terms of percentages, promotions, and gross sales.

The question should be—what does God want? The prophet Isaiah heard the word of the Lord in the matter and recorded it. **“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your**

**thoughts”** (Isaiah 55:8,9). And Zachariah—**“Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, said the Lord of hosts”** (Zachariah 4:6).

The episode of Philip and the Ethiopian defies all the modern principles of promotion. It seemed an exorbitant waste of time and energy, but the net result was the introducing of the gospel to the continent of Africa—a consequence quite beyond the imagination of Philip. Philip simply heard the word and obeyed it. His was the mood of Tennyson’s “Light Brigade”—“Theirs not to reason why; theirs but to do or die.” It was not necessary for Philip to know anything but the order given.

But how did he know if it was God’s order? He knew. Jesus said it. **“If anyone will to do His will, he shall know . . .”** (John 7:17). God has ways of confirming His word in terms of the individual. What is required for each person is different. What is needed for confirmation for one, differs from what another needs. The problem is willingness.

In the absence of rationale, it is incumbent on the Spirit of Christ to make His will known to His servant in whatever way necessary. That is His responsibility—**“If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?”** (I Corinthians 14:8). If the message is not clear, don’t go. Don’t go on reason, or on someone else’s word, or on fuzzy feelings. You have a right to know, and God has a responsibility to make it known. And He will. But wait for His timing. If you are not sure, He is not ready to give you assurance.

*“But Philip had an edge, didn’t he? He had an angel.”*

Well, so do we. Probably not a flaming specter in the night, but something, or someone, will be used as God’s messenger. The word “angel” simply means messenger. We don’t know what form Philip’s “angel” took. We know it was a messenger from the Lord. It was clear enough to Philip that he dropped everything and went.

When Philip observed the Ethiopian’s chariot, the Spirit said to go and join himself to it. Again, Philip knew within that it was what the Lord wanted, so he ran to comply. The Ethiopian was reading a passage from the Bible when Philip joined him. The Spirit had prepared both the servant and the seeker. That is the way it is when we trust the Spirit to guide us in our service to Him. When we go in the flesh or on human orders, the task is often hard and unrewarding. If we are uneasy about the situation or find it difficult to get into, the chances are that it is not of the Spirit. Go with the flow. If it doesn’t flow, don’t go. Sometimes people mistake reluctance for unwillingness. If you are reluctant, it is probably because the Lord has not given you the faith and freedom to go ahead. When the Lord is with you in a matter, He will give you the faith and grace, and it will flow readily.

The matter may, indeed, be difficult, but you will have freedom in it. Trust the Lord to minister through you as He sees fit, but don’t go beyond your gift. Paul said to the Romans: **“I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly [level-headedly], according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith”** (Romans 12:3). Don’t go by what others think you ought to do, or by your own worthiness, or ability. If the Lord has an assignment for you, it will come

together, and you will find yourself doing it willingly and readily. But let the Lord put it together. He can bring things together in ways we could never engineer. Often the timing must be so well coordinated that no human being could arrange it. The Lord can and does the same things through us today—ordinary Christians—as He did with Philip in the matter of the Ethiopian. You don’t have to be anything special or very, very “spiritual.” You don’t have to try to outguess God and engineer things. He often works when we are not aware of it (or worthy), to place us in the situations He has in mind. The author has hundreds of such experiences. Suffer one such personal experience which will serve to illustrate the point. It is a most outstanding experience, and yet not at all uncommon in the author’s ministry over a great many years. At the same time, the young man who participated in this experience and who was, in fact, the Lord’s instrument, is a student at the Harvester Training Institute, but does not regard himself as anything special. The experience is as follows:

The author was traveling in the Middle East with some of the students from the Harvester Training Institute. Two of them decided to take a side trip down to Eilat, on the Red Sea. There they had a ministry to some young people they met. One of the young men, David, wanted to give a young lady one of the booklets—*The Living Word*—but did not have a copy with him. He took her address to mail it to her, but later misplaced it. Subsequently, we went up to Greece. David decided to go overland through Istanbul and down the Greek Peninsula. Two of us had planned to take a ship around the Greek Islands, and Istanbul, and back to Athens. We were all going to Athens eventually but did not arrange to meet there, because of timing problems. When the two of us had finished our tour of the Greek islands and had arrived in Athens, we registered in the hotel, and went immediately up to the Acropolis.

We had been seven days on the Aegean Sea and had no idea where David was at that time. While we were on the Acropolis, sitting on a wall, David walked up. It was most surprising to us, but not altogether improbable. Later, the three of us spent some time touring the Peloponnesus and later returned to the hotel. David was sitting on the balcony, reading *The Living Word*. Our hotel was across the street from the palace. The changing of the guard was taking place. David looked up from his reading and was startled to see, watching the spectacle, the girl to whom he had promised to send the book. He immediately rushed down to the street and gave it to her.

In this simple narrative there are many details left out which were equally significant, but the incident serves to indicate that the intricacy of planning, needed to bring all this about was quite beyond any human capacity. Nor were any of us making a conscious effort to arrange the trip in such detail. Even the hotel we stayed in was a change of plans, which we made for various reasons, but not particularly conscious of any urgent reason for doing so. It was merely a decision we made for circumstantial reasons, but obviously we had been unconsciously guided by the Spirit. Over some thirty-five years of ministry, the author has had countless such experiences but does not see himself as particularly “gifted” in discerning the Lord’s will. In fact, most of these unique experiences have been brought together

by the Lord, when the author has not been really conscious of special guidance.

The essential impact of the narrative of Philip and the Ethiopian is the illustration it gives us, of the unique ways in which God has effected the spread of the gospel from ‘the shores of the Mediterranean, to the far western shores of the Pacific Ocean. For the most part, this incredible success has been in the simple faithfulness of the servants of the Lord to go where He had led them and to do what He has given them to do. The modern methods of mass media promotion and twentieth-century technology have been employed, long after the message had already reached the western shores of the American continent. In fact, while media presentations and mass methodologies have had their place, the substantial work of the spread of the gospel has been done by the thousands and thousands of simple servants of the Lord, faithfully ministering in the towns and hamlets and villages of the world, touching the lives of the people whom the Lord has brought under their care.

The personal application is that any child of God, however simple, or whatever the gift, has a place in the body of Christ to share in the fulfillment of God’s purposes in the world. Put your life in His hands, and trust Him to do through you, what He will. You don’t have to be special—just willing.

# Acts 9:1-19

## TRANSLATION

*And Saul, yet breathing threatening and murder against the disciples of the Lord, came to the chief priest and asked from him letters to the synagogue in Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the "Way," men or women, he might lead them bound unto Jerusalem. And while he was going, he came near to Damascus, and suddenly a light out of heaven surrounded him; and falling upon the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting; but rise up and go into the city, and it shall be told you what you should do." And the men who were accompanying him, had stood stunned, hearing the voice, but seeing no one. And Saul rose from the ground, and having opened his eyes saw nothing. And leading him by the hand, they brought him unto Damascus. And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.*

*And there was a certain disciple in Damascus, by the name of Ananias; and the Lord spoke to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Behold, I am he, Lord." And the Lord said to him, "Rise up and go to the alley which is called 'Straight,' and seek in the house of Jude, one by the name of Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. And he saw a man (in a vision) by the name of Ananias entering and laying his hands upon him, so that he might see again."*

*And Ananias answered, "I have heard from many concerning this man, what evil things he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call upon Your name." And the Lord said to him, "Go, because this one is a chosen vessel to Me, to bear My name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him what things it is necessary for him to suffer for My name's sake." And Ananias went and entered the house, and laid his hands upon him and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord has sent me—Jesus, whom you saw on the way in which you were coming—in order that you may see again, and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately, there fell from his eyes, as it were, scales, and he saw again, and he arose and was baptized; and taking nourishment, he was strengthened.*

## COMMENTARY

### Saul—Radiant Grace to a Raging Rebel

The very breath of Saul was charged with electrifying animosity toward Jesus and His yet unpretentious band. (The expression translated “breathing out” really means “inner breathing” or “charged within”.) With savage abandon, the fierce champion of the law of God, more fiercely ravaged the followers of the Son of God in blind defiance of the very truth of God which he cherished. His was no intellectual excoriating of perceived error, but a fanatic, if not demonic effort to expunge from the earth, the precepts and progeny of the “outrageous imposter” from Nazareth.

But the text takes little notice of the heinous nature of the crimes. It goes immediately to the Savior, “Whose grace is greater than the sins.” The conversion of Saul is a classic example for all time of the true process of salvation. It is so easy to become enmeshed in the tangles of the human methodology of salvation and to lose sight of the simple reality of God’s power to save. There are countless systems of salvation—steps and rules and requisites—when all that is really needed is the power of the Holy Spirit to penetrate the heart. The Spirit cuts across all ideologies and predispositions, and shatters the vain illusions of the mind. In the redemptive episode of Saul, the radiance of divine energy overwhelmed the darkness of human folly, leaving the presumptuous and arrogant ideologue blind and helpless.

The role of fanatic had been unworthy of the scholar. Saul’s mindless rage at a simple “Palestinian philosopher,” imposter or not, was certainly an indication of the satanic source of his animosity. Saul’s own mentor, Gamaliel, had already given the sage assessment of the matter. His pupil would have done well to heed it. “If this work be of man, it will come to naught.”

But two observations must be made in regard to Saul’s irrational behavior. First, when Satan employs a mind in his service, he first divests it of reason. (A good thing to keep in mind when confronting unusually eccentric ideas, supposedly from Christ.) The extent of Saul’s rage against the Christians was totally out of keeping with the measure of his familiarity with the wide diversity of such groups, which, as Gamaliel pointed out, had over the centuries come and gone. The irrationality of the New Testament Saul is reminiscent of the Old Testament king of the same name, whose pursuit of David defied all reason.

The second observation is that sometimes the perversity of the soul must “come to the full” before the Spirit of God can work. The very blackness which engulfed Saul became the *raison d’être* for turning on the light. God knew where Saul was, but Saul did not. God must plumb the depths of the soul—a most painful exercise—before the soul will respond to the light. Jesus said it, **“They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick”** (Matthew 9:12).

So the fire-breathing Saul, charging down the Damascus road in vengeful rage, is suddenly shattered by a burst of light and falls helplessly to the ground. One of the great enigmas of all times—*Why does not God do this to all persecutors of his people? Why not Nero or Hitler? Or the communists?* The answer lies in the reason why God stopped Saul. He was not protecting the Christians; He was salvaging a servant. As He said to Ananias—“He is a chosen vessel.”

But now we open a thornier question. *Does God choose, and not bring His chosen to acceptance? Was Saul predestined? Could he or would he have refused? And what of the prophets? Remember Jeremiah. God had said concerning him, “Before I formed you*

**in the belly I knew you; and before you came out of the womb, I sanctified you; and I ordained you a prophet unto the nations”** (Jeremiah 1:5). And there was a stream of specially chosen agents of God through redemptive history for thousands of years—Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, and the prophets, to name but a few.

To what degree were they all prepared of God from the womb? To what degree are all of God’s people chosen? Jesus said to His disciples—**“You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you and ordained you”** (John 15:16). Was Jesus saying this only to the disciples who were the twelve apostles, or to all who would follow Him?

One thing is certain—God alone can penetrate the human heart and bring forth life in the spirit. Jesus said it, **“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father, but by me”** (John 14:6).

*But if it is all by Him, why does He not come to everyone as He did to Saul? If every human being would so encounter Christ, would they not all believe?*

The answer is, no. The evidence is that many who witnessed the miracles did not believe. Further in Luke’s account of the “rich man and Lazarus,” the beggar at his gate, the rich man, having died, was in torment and begged Abraham (whom he apparently conversed with) to send someone to warn his family about the “awful place.” The response of Abraham was, **“If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, they will not believe one who has risen from the dead”** (Luke 16:31).

*So then, on what basis did Christ elect to appear to Saul in a special way?* First, he had a special mission. It was evidently more than a drawing to salvation. It was the rescuing of a vessel that had been prepared in a special way. Secondly, Saul’s

rebellion against Jesus was out of ignorance. In reality, it was his intense devotion to God that made him fanatically opposed to what he thought was an imposter. This did not excuse Saul from responsibility and retribution. The agony of his error would leave him a legacy of sorrow that would haunt him for the rest of his life on earth. (Let those beware, who trifle with other peoples lives in irresponsible teaching and action, however well-intentioned. To cause “one foot to go astray” is forgivable, but not so easily forgotten.) In the third place, it ought to be observed that Paul, the converted Saul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, never uses his own dramatic conversion experience as a model of the salvation process for others to follow.

So, we must classify Paul as a special case. In a certain sense, all who come to Christ are elected. After all, the very name given the body of believers—the *ekklesia*—means “chosen out.” But in yet another sense, He elects those who want to be “elected.” “Whosoever will, let him come unto Me.” Paul, himself, said it, **“Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord, shall be saved”** (Romans 10:13). If you care about Christ, you have been chosen. Let God take care of the theology of it all. And let Him be the judge of the rest of mankind.

*So then if Paul was the chosen vessel, how widespread is such predeterminism? Is everyone so predestined?*

Now we have a question that no one can answer for sure.

*But aren’t there many Scripture texts?*

Yes, on both sides. In the general governance which God exercises over His universe, there is a measure of inexorable divine sovereignty and a measure of human responsibility. If there were no human responsibility, there would be no basis for divine judgment. If the sovereignty of God

were not ultimate, there would be no basis for certainty about the final outcome of God's purposes for His creation. Somewhere between these two points lies the truth. But only God knows the absolute truth. We humans must be content with functional truth. That is, we know enough to function as the children of God, but we will not know ultimate truth until we are consummated in our eternal state. That may seem an oversimplification, but since the church has been at war over the subject for centuries, it should be obvious by now that God had not chosen to reveal to us the ultimate truth on the subject. There are scholars and saints on both sides of the question. It is presumptuous to assume otherwise.

Suffice to say that Paul was a specially prepared vessel. Are you a prepared vessel? Am I? We are not sure, but obviously if we have responded to God, we have been called to Him. In the womb? Out of the womb? We don't really know. Probably many, like Paul, were prepared in a special way before they were born. An argument against abortion? No doubt.

Functionally, if one has come to Christ, one could be a specially prepared vessel. (All of us are prepared in one way or another.) One must keep open to Christ. He'll do with one what He has planned. And that will be one's only hope for peace and fulfillment. One doesn't need to be clever, or religious, or faultless. One just needs to be His.

Prostrate on the ground and sightless, Saul knows beyond doubt that something superhuman has struck him down. He considers not for a moment the possibility of some natural phenomenon, such as lightning. The voice is unmistakable and unmistakably from heaven. **"Who are**

**you, Lord?"** But what particular manifestation from heaven? God? Spirit? Angel? Whosoever it was, Saul was thoroughly overcome. In one stroke, all the philosophical and theological fallacies with which he had indulged his fleshly mind were turned to straw. **"I thought I ought to do many things against Jesus of Nazareth"** (Acts 26:9).

The "straw" theories were consumed, but the process of reeducating would take many years. It began with an old "war horse" named Ananias. Saul had been led by the hand to the house of Jude of "Straight Alley" There he lay totally devastated, unable to eat or drink for three days. Saul had to know that he was no longer in control of his life. He would be now, forever, a bondsman of Christ. **"I am crucified with Christ, and I no longer live"** (Galatians 2:20). He who had given his life indulging the religious flesh, believing himself to be a favorite of God, would now realize that he was the "chief of sinners" and that there was nothing good in his flesh. His was not an obsequious facade of false modesty, but a genuine conviction that he was utterly helpless apart from Christ and totally incapable of saving himself.

When Saul had been sufficiently divested of all self-sufficiency, he was ready for the reconstruction. If Saul was a prepared vessel, so also was Ananias. But the summons, even from God, was met with reluctance. **"I have heard."** When God calls, beware of "what you hear." Satan will say anything or do anything to stop you from doing the Lord's will. He even uses well-meaning, but misguided Christians to confuse the issue. **"Never mind what you hear, he is a chosen vessel."** Ananias was seasoned enough to discern the Lord's voice. (It takes time to cultivate such sensitivity, therefore, the need of many for help.)



**“I will show him what he must suffer.”**

*Oh, but if one has enough faith, should one have to suffer? Are not all sicknesses and pains and privations covered for the Christian in the atonement?*

Let Paul’s example put such nonsense forever to rest. He, himself, chides the Christians in Corinth for such thinking—that it was time for life to be lovely; “to reign as kings.” Paul’s life would not be lovely. Satan would see to that. Nor would God stay the battering of his flesh, but would never fail to strengthen his spirit. His was the ever triumphant cry: **“But God stood with me.”**

So with reference to the conversion of Saul, we observe the following:

1. Saul was at the very darkest moment of his rebellion and error.
2. He was not in any way looking for new truth, much less a revelation or personal visitation.
3. He was utterly helpless and could not do anything to save himself.
4. There were no steps, or vows, or promises, only the power of the Holy Spirit.
5. There were no guarantees or benefits offered—only the Spirit and sight and salvation.



# Acts 9:19-31

## TRANSLATION

*And he [Saul] was with the disciples in Damascus for some days. And immediately, in the synagogues, he preached Jesus, that this one is the Son of God. And all they who were hearing him were astonished, and were saying, "Is not this he who, in Jerusalem, ravaged those who called upon this name, and has come here unto this [place] in order that he may bring them bound unto the chief priest?" But Saul, rather was empowered, and confounded the Jews who were dwelling in Damascus, demonstrating that this One is the Messiah.*

*And as he was accomplishing a considerable number of days, the Jews took counsel together to kill him. And their counsel was made known to Saul. And they were watching the gates closely day and night, so that they might kill him. And the disciples, taking him by night through the wall, lowered him down, seated in a basket.*

*And, arriving in Jerusalem, he attempted to join with the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles, and recounted to them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that He spoke to Him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus. And he was with them, going and coming, in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord. And he was speaking and debating with the Greeks, and they seized him to kill him. And the brethren brought him to Caesarea and sent him unto Tarsus.*

*The church, then, including the Jews and Galileans and Samaritans had peace, and were being edified, and were going in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, were being multiplied.*

## COMMENTARY

### **Saul—Bold for Yahweh; Now Bold for Jesus, the Messiah**

In Saul, the man, nothing was really changed, insofar as his personality was

concerned. He was a bold, relentless, hard-driving defender of the one true

God before he was saved; and he was a bold, relentless, hard-driving defender of Jesus the Messiah after he was saved. It is tempting to conclude that the boldness with which Saul defended Jesus the Messiah was the result of the conversion experience. His *conviction* about Jesus was, indeed, different, but not the boldness with which he pressed his new-found faith. As with Peter, so with Saul. Thunder was in their souls. But thunder in the soul is no match either for Christ or the Devil. All the traits of the natural self are powerless in the grip of the spirit-forces of the universe—divine and demonic. Those who trust in their own human resources, to resist Christ or to battle Satan, will find this out. If Peter's error was to trust his will to die for Christ, Saul's error was to trust his intellect to dismiss Him. Neither the will, nor the intellect of the fleshly mind is of true value apart from the Spirit of Christ. But imbued with the Spirit, each is a mighty tool in the hands of Christ. Neither Paul, nor Peter could have accomplished their mission without their native gifts, but then that is precisely what God had in mind when He prepared them. So their native "gifts" were an important part of the vessels, but the effective use of those gifts was possible only through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The unfortunate fallacy of many Bible "teachers" is that the Holy Spirit will turn every believer into a "lion" like Peter or Paul, if only one has the faith. It is as though the personality of every convert will be excised and a universal one installed. The assumption is that every Christian should act exactly according to a preconceived pattern, like marionettes or automatons. The directions call for so many parts of boldness and so many parts of emotion; so many parts of fervor and so many parts of verbosity. The thesis is that once the Holy Spirit comes in, everyone has the "tongue of the learned." But if everyone is a mouth,

where were the hands, or the feet?

Personalities are not automatically changed by conversion. The human personality is a very complex thing. It is made up of myriads of nerve paths in the brain—nerve paths that have been established by hereditary factors—the genes one is born with; and environmental influences—what one has experienced from birth. Some personality traits are accumulated like habits, more or less easy to break. Some traits are an essential part of one's being—like mildness or aggressiveness—and are not changed, nor do they need to be.

*But doesn't Paul say that if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature and all things have become new?*

No, he doesn't say that, but he does say something like that to the Corinthians. But we must first translate it correctly. Paul has made certain assertions about the meaning of salvation—"**And He died on behalf of all, that they who live should no longer live to themselves, but to the One who died on their behalf and rose again. So then, if anyone be in Christ, he is a new creation. The old things have passed away; behold, they have become new**" (II Corinthians 5:15-17) (Author's translation).

Paul is first showing that the natural self is no longer a valid basis of life. Even his relationship to Christ is no longer in the flesh (v.18). That is, he does not look for fleshly satisfactions from his identity with Christ, because his ties to Christ are in the spirit realm. When we become saved, we become part of a whole new order of things—a new creation. He does not say "creature", but "creation"—a general category, and not individual. You might even say "a new species"—a fellowship of living spirits, and not dying selves. This particular passage has nothing to do with habits and practices of the natural self, but with our inner

essence, which has now partaken of the nature of Christ, according to Peter (II Peter 1:3). Paul is not promising the Corinthians that everything they are in their personalities will be different. In fact, the words “all things” belong in the next sentence. “All things are of God . . .”

This is not to say that our habits and practices are unimportant. They are indeed important, but the correcting of faulty practices is not guaranteed with salvation. A great many Christians, if not most (even Paul), struggle with personality problems or unsound practices all of their lives. This, of course, is what Paul was referring to in Romans 7, when he said, “*The good that I would, I do not; and the evil [unsound practices] that I would not, I do*” (v.19).

In summary, the boldness of Saul, expressed in this passage, must not be seen as an example of what happens to all who experience conversion. It was rather one of Saul’s gifts as a prepared vessel.

The champion of the one true God became the champion of Jesus, the Messiah. Once again we must recognize the uniqueness of Saul, and not assume that every new convert ought to be able to go out immediately, as Saul, and become an articulate defender of the faith. “The fact of salvation does not automatically include the content of salvation” (Dr. Harold Ellens). To give witness to one’s faith is the immediate province of all who have experienced the touch of Christ, but the capacity to present the theology of salvation or to debate its validity requires special knowledge of the Scripture and special gifts. Saul’s situation was not lack of familiarity with the Word of God—he was extensively trained. His problem was the inability to recognize Jesus as the Messiah of the Old Testament prophets. Much damage has been done and much misrepresentation of the truth by those who assume that because they

have experienced salvation, they are qualified to become teachers. If God has called one to be a teacher, one must have the gift and pay the price of preparation. There are no short cuts. It takes years of study and seasoning to prepare true teachers of the Word—guides to the souls of men. Even Paul required years of preparation before he actually began his ministry of teaching the church. To give a witness to the work of Christ within is a privilege that every believer shares from the moment of new birth. To be an effective defender of the faith is something else. The reason for bringing this matter into focus is that many a Christian seeks to go out as Paul did, as a great defender of the faith, and has been discouraged by an apparent lack of effectiveness in discussing the faith with others. They think the Holy Spirit must make instant experts in all matters of salvation; that in conversion, the brain is suddenly filled with knowledge of the holy. If one is unable to provide adequate answers to the questions of all the challengers, one feels that one is lacking in the power of the Holy Spirit. The fact is, the effort to provide answers to all questions can result in turning the questioner away, if the answers are inadequate. The truth of the matter is that the more one knows, the more one realizes that there are large numbers of questions that do not have good answers. The knowledgeable have less trouble saying, “I don’t know,” than the unknowledgeable.

So Saul was a prepared vessel, learned in the lore of the “faith of the Fathers” but woefully deluded about Jesus. Once the scales had fallen from his eyes, he was immediately mighty in the defense of his erstwhile “Enemy”

And thus also, the “hunter” became the “hunted.” In “poetic justice” the tormentor would know torment. His mighty words had gotten to his former colleagues, and they vowed to kill him. The disciples became aware of the plot,

and helped Saul escape. A word of caution—do not assume that if the Lord is with one, it should not be necessary to employ human means of deliverance. God was as surely the initiator of the basket, as He was of the more spectacular angelic deliverer of Peter. We would, of course, prefer the angels to the basket (the ego is better served).

Paul escaped to Jerusalem, but the disciples there were afraid of him—“**Not believing he was a disciple.**” They had reason to be skeptical, of course, but doubt was not an uncommon condition among the followers of Christ from day one of His earthly sojourn. Nor was it that different after Pentecost, as, for example, Peter’s unfortunate lapse at Galatia. The crucial question is whether faith is an energy of God in the spirit or something cultivated in the flesh. Paul told the Ephesians that “it is a gift of God, not of works.” That is, it cannot be produced through human actions. Therefore, it is not of the flesh. All the feelings or musings of the earthly mind do not affect the reality of the faith with which God has infused our spirits. The faith which is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22) is not dependent on what our mind thinks or feels about it. Doubt is a common human problem. But it is a surface matter in one who possesses Christ. The true essence of one’s faith is as constant within our spirits as Christ, who has said, “**I will never leave you, nor forsake you.**” Human feelings will fluctuate as long as we are on the earth and are not to be

trusted as a gauge of our true identity with Christ. Our confidence is in Christ, and not in our capacity to sustain feelings of confidence about Christ.

So, as faltering as the faith of the early believers was, the strength of the body of believers was then, as it is now, constant in the citadel of the faith and grace of Christ.

Barnabas came to the rescue, and Saul was duly received by the brotherhood (although he had not seen the last of opposition either by his own kinsmen or the Greeks, who also tried to kill him, or of his own fellow-believers, who caused him no little grief). These were among the “great things he must suffer.”

The church was “**comforted, edified, multiplied.**” Many “doomsayers” in the church assume that the church of today is much inferior to the church of Paul’s day. Perhaps there is an inordinate amount of promotionalism and commercialism in the earthly organization which is usually identified as “the church.” But if one considers the church to be the “body of Christ” (“**the Lord knoweth those who are His**”), then we must consider the hundreds of millions who have been added to the church since the first century, and we can only rejoice in the fact that Christ is today, the most significant figure on earth—recognized in every corner of the world. And His people, divided as they may be, still cling to Christ, *en masse*, as the Savior of the world.

# Acts 9:32-43

## TRANSLATION

*And Peter was passing through all [places] to go down also to the saints who were dwelling in Lydda. And he found there a certain man by the name of Aeneas, who was a paralytic—bedridden for eight years. And Peter said to him, “Aeneas, Jesus Christ is healing you; rise and make your bed.” And immediately he rose up. And all those dwelling in Lydda and Saron saw him, which ones turned to the Lord.*

*And in Joppa there was a certain disciple by the name of Tabitha (which, being interpreted, is called Dorcas). This woman was full of good works and merciful deeds which she had done. And it happened in those days that she became sick, and died. And they washed her and placed her in an upper chamber. And Lydda, being near to Joppa, the disciples, having heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him, urging him, “Do not hesitate to come to us.” And Peter rose up and went with them. Whom having arrived, they brought into the upper chamber. And all the widows stood before him, weeping and showing him the cloaks and garments which Dorcas had been making while she was with them. And Peter, putting them all out and kneeling, prayed. And turning to her body he said, “Tabitha, arise.” And she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. And he gave her his hand and raised her, and having called the saints, presented her to them alive. And it became known around all of Joppa, and many believed on the Lord. And he remained for some days in Joppa with one Simon, the tanner.*

## COMMENTARY

### **Peter—Faltering Fisherman and Vessel of Blessing**

Peter’s life had been boats and sea and fish. Nothing much required for that but hardiness and perseverance. But in an incredible moment on the shores of Galilee, his life was turned inside out. In the flesh he was still faltering; in personality, still hardheaded and rash, but the Spirit of God had chosen him, not as a model citizen, but as an instrument of service. Nor did God ever make of him in the flesh, a model of anything. He

would still be, until his death, the faltering fisherman. But the flawed vessel would be, forever, a channel of the flawless mercy and power of God.

As Jesus stood on the seashore on that memorable day, watching the rugged and burly fisherman handling his nets, it would have seemed unlikely that He would have seen in him, a channel for the flow of the Spirit and energy of the

God of the universe. It would have seemed less likely as the days of discipleship went on, and Peter displayed his denseness and perversity. It would have seemed totally absurd in the courtyard on the day of Jesus' arrest, when he faltered before a mere maiden. But remember, the vessel must be of clay, that the power may be of God. Perhaps the greatest miracle of all was that Peter should have been able to accept and know the forgiving grace of God, so that he was not overwhelmed by the sense of guilt, as was Judas, who went out and hanged himself. The difference was, of course, that Judas had not, apparently, ever really entered into an identity with Jesus, as had Peter and the rest of the disciples. Judas had his moment in the upper room, when the spirit of the Evil One fully engulfed him, and he went out to do his nefarious deed. For all of Peter's obtuseness and frailty in the flesh, he was, nevertheless, like Paul, a "chosen vessel."

So Peter, chosen, humiliated, and recovered, and now the agent of God, was passing through the land to visit the saints at Lydda. He was not bent on a "healing campaign" nor a "mighty mission." He was just "passing through" and encountered a paralytic—a flawed fellow human. (Whatever the flaw makes no difference. All are equally helpless before God.)

Jesus wanted to heal the paralytic. It was not Peter, the "divine healer," demonstrating his gift. It was Jesus Christ electing to heal. Nor was the election based on any apparent merit on the part of the paralytic. There was no issue of forgiveness or faith on the part of Peter or the paralytic. (In today's "healing meetings", much is made of both.) Here, Christ elected to heal. Peter was the agent. The paralytic was healed.

"Make up your bed." Why, in such a glorious moment, such an inglorious demand? Probably to emphasize the fact

that he would not be going back to it.

The purpose of the healing became evident. The dwellers of Lydda and Saron turned to the Lord. The healing had not been for the comfort of the paralytic, nor the promoting of Peter, but the salvation of the people. Never let it be forgotten—God did not send His Son to the earth to make another Eden for His people, but to lift them from the prison house of mortal flesh to the glorious liberty of eternal spirits in the kingdom of God. If the mission of Christ or His disciples had been to heal all the sick, or feed the poor, their mission would have been universally regarded as an abject failure.

But yet another more startling miracle occurred in the raising of Dorcus from the dead. She had been a beloved and blessed servant of the people, but Peter did not need that to persuade him, nor was it the basis of Dorcus' deliverance. If it had been so, every faithful servant ought to be raised. Ere he saw the weeping widows, Peter had already been compelled to come (doubtless by the Spirit within), in spite of the fact that he knew she was dead.

Once again, the end result of the miracle was the salvation of souls. For the most part, unfortunately, healing today is promoted on the grounds of deliverance for the comfort of the individual—"the deliverance ministry." "Come to Jesus and He will heal and prosper." And once again, the healing was by simple command—"Tabitha, arise." It was not Peter's power. It was not based on Peter's faith or faultlessness. He was merely the channel. Nor was it based on Tabitha's faith—she was dead. Christ wanted to heal her, and He did. No bartering vows, or fastings, or all night vigils—just a simple command from a simple fisherman.

It was so with Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. He was raised from



the dead amidst a crowd of doubters, including Mary and Martha. But with Lazarus, as with Tabitha, there was more at stake than the comfort of bereaved relatives. The Messiahship of Jesus was being demonstrated.

If God wanted to raise the dead today, He would. It would not take “super faith,” or “super piety,” or “super vigils”; it would take only the desire on the part of Christ to heal. As Christians, we are no better or worse today than the Christians of Peter’s day. We have no less faith, or fervor, or piety. It simply does not suit God’s purpose at this time.

The day will come (soon, we hope) when all believers will be raised. Until then, let us be faithful to whatever tasks and gifts we have, not reaching for the spectacular, nor the earthly “Edens,” but being content with whatever God chooses to do through us.

Spectacular as the incident was, Peter did not run about Palestine with triumphant entourage, conducting “deadraising” campaigns. He remained in Joppa with a simple artisan—Simon, the tanner—ministering quietly to the saints.



# Acts 10:1-8

## TRANSLATION

*And a certain man in Caesarea by the name of Cornelius—a centurion of the cohort called “Italian”—a devout man and a God-fearer, with all his house, doing many kindnesses for his people, and praying to God continually. He saw clearly in a vision, about the ninth hour of the day, an angel of God entering in to him and saying to him, “Cornelius.” And he gazed at him and being afraid, said to him, “What is it, Lord?” And he said to him, “Your prayers and your kindnesses have ascended for a remembrance before God. And now send men to Joppa and invite one Simon, who is called Peter; this one is lodging with a certain Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea.” And as the angel who was speaking to him went away, he called two of the aides and a devout soldier of those who were attending him, and when he had related everything to them, sent them to Joppa.*

## COMMENTARY

### **Cornelius—Soldier, Sensitive, Seeker after God**

Cornelius the centurion, servant of the Roman Empire, man of war, was praying to the God of peace. And the God of peace responded by using him in the vanguard of the crusade by the Prince of Peace to capture the spirits of the Gentile world.

*But why a soldier, of all people? Why should God select such a controversial figure for His first Gentile encounter? Why not a merchant? Or fisherman? Or senator for that matter? But a soldier?*

Point one to ponder—He did. God does what He will in the universe and the cosmos. Daniel made this point to Darius four centuries earlier, and Paul made it to the Romans (chapter 9) in the enigmatic statement about the Egyptian pharaoh.

*Well, then, how can He find fault with us poor mortals?*  
We'll save that question for later. Right

now, let's talk about the soldier. Why a soldier for His revelation to the Gentiles? For that matter, why simple fishermen as His first followers, or why the vengeful Pharisee, Saul, as the chief spokesman for the New Testament revelation?

It is important at the outset of any discussion of God's purposes, to realize that we are not always capable of understanding what He is doing, any more than a child can understand the parents. There is a “generation gap.” And there is a “generation gap” between ourselves and God. Again, we are not in a position to justify God's actions. With the best of intentions, we may seek to explain why God does things, but if we could be His “justifiers”, we would put ourselves above Him. He does not need the approval of humans.

*But is it wrong to discuss these things?*

Not at all, as long as we understand the limits. To answer the question of why God chose a soldier, and a centurion at that, would be purely speculative, and therefore, not too profitable. To discuss, on the other hand, the issue of God's apparent approval of soldiers, and therefore of war, is quite in order (although actually, Jesus simply did not express disapproval). How shall we look at these issues? This is a substantial question, like the problem of pain. There may be a point at which we must simply leave the matter to God and trust that "the Judge of all the earth shall do right."

The major question is—does God approve of war, and if so, why? Of course, we have to ask what kind of war? It is obvious that God not only accepted the inevitability of war, but also ordered it on a number of occasions in the Old Testament. In fact, on some occasions, He chastened those who did not carry out His orders completely (as, e.g. King Saul).

But who were the enemies that were the objects of God's wrath? They were themselves agents of Satan—possibly his very progeny (produced by him) through the intermingling of humans and evil angels (as, for example, in Genesis 6:2). They were the Philistines, the Ammonites, the Amorites, the Moabites, the Midianites, and the Amelekites and others. Each one of these nations had an origin and history that made such an evaluation not beyond possibility. David's wars were all fought with such nations, which were especially hostile to God. David was fighting for God's honor, not his own, from the youthful encounter with Goliath to the godless nations around him. The New Testament conflict is another matter. It is with "spiritual forces of evil in the heavenlies." The Old Testament enemies were earthly expressions of these "spirit forces." (In the Old Testament, God communicated with His people largely in earthly symbols.)

So then, we must first recognize that war was, on many occasions, approved of and even ordered by God. Human efforts at justification of this are at best, questionable and at worst, a presumptuous attempt to place human judgment over God. Ultimately it has to do with a conflict between God and Satan, the implications and parameters of which are beyond human perception. We can only say that the wars ordered by God were, in His own infinite wisdom, justified as part of the larger conflict between Himself and Satan.

*But what about the death of innocents?*

We must understand something about death. It looks different from God's perspective. For those who are not innocent—who purposely perpetrate evil on the earth, death removes them. But for the innocent, death is a release from the wretchedness of earth.

*But death often comes with torment.*

Life comes with torment. In wartime, better the release of death than the bondage of life in tyranny. There are many things in life that are worse than death. Death is not always unwelcomed or unmerciful.

*But if God ordered war in the Old Testament days, does He do it today? Does He really take sides? Can any nation really say that God is on its side?*

That all depends on the situation. Some are clear-cut, like World War II. Given the aggression and the express and published aims of Adolph Hitler, the allies had no choice but to fight. Other wars are not so clear-cut, like the conflict in Vietnam.

In many wars of modern history, people on both sides have claimed God's blessing. They can't both be right. We have no way to really tell. We can only speak with assurance in matters where God speaks with certainty. We may not

understand His ways, but we can trust the “Judge of all the earth to do right” (Genesis 18:25). In fact, such trust is only possible through the Spirit. Thus, while unbelievers stumble over these matters, the believers rest in the ultimate wisdom, righteousness, and mercy of Christ. This rest is not naivete, or unawareness, or blindness, but a strength within the spirit that overrides doubts and fears of the finite perspective of humans. The mind says, “Why do you believe in the midst of such contrary evidence?” The spirit responds with confidence beyond reason, in the integrity of God. Remember also that this entire discussion is in the interest of people who really want to know. If one merely wants to use these difficult questions as a reason for not believing in God, there is very little that anyone can do to convince such a one, no matter how adequate the answer. If one truly wants to know God, the promise of the Scripture is that God will respond to the true seeker after Him. Our concern is not to prove God, something the human can never really do, but to enlighten as to the implications of God in the universe.

*Well, may we go back to a previous question—if God orders the affairs of the universe, how can He find fault with us poor mortals?*

He doesn't. “Poor mortals” are in a different category than scheming leaders, who go against God. **“The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against His anointed”** (Psalm 2:2). As for the “innocent”, God doesn't find fault, “He makes a way of escape.” Only God knows who the innocent are, and ultimately what to do with them.

[But now, back to Cornelius.] Cornelius, touched by God, was a devout and benevolent “God-fearer.” (The expression “God-fearer” was applied to those who,

though they did not actually receive circumcision, nevertheless, joined in temple worship and prayers as a seeker after the God of the Jews.) Cornelius' many benevolences or kindnesses to the community were evidence of his sincere heart and were noted by God as qualifying him for this great moment in which God would now open the door of faith to the Gentiles.

*But how could a soldier and a centurion at that, be of such a character?*

God knows—I don't. But that's what he was, according to the Scripture. In fact, that is one of the strong evidences for the validity of the Bible. The Bible never attempts to manipulate the truth. That is, it doesn't conceal data that might be regarded as damaging, either to the case for God or the character of his people. If we had been selecting the data, we doubtless would have had some less controversial figure at the vanguard of the Gentile movement.

Cornelius represented the power of Rome—the scourge of the world. In the person of Cornelius, we are assured that Rome was no match for God. In a few hundred years (less than a day to God), the pagan empire was reduced to rubble and replaced by another empire which became, in fact, the custodian of the faith. In 316 A.D., the emperor Constantine moved the capital of Rome to Byzantium—gateway to the Black Sea—renamed it Constantinople and Christianized the empire. To this day, in Istanbul (Constantinople) in the Cathedral of Saint Sophia, many important manuscripts of Christendom are preserved. Constantine himself ordered the collection of all the manuscripts that made up the New Testament and bound them into four great editions.

The touch of the Holy Spirit upon Cornelius was like a dagger plunged into the breast of Rome that would penetrate

to its very heart.



# Acts 10: 9-23

## TRANSLATION

*And the next day, while those men were traveling, and were drawing near to the city, Peter went up on the rooftop to pray, around the sixth hour. And he became hungry and wanted to eat, and while they were preparing, a trance came upon him. And he was seeing heaven opening, and a vessel of some sort, as a great sheet with four corners, being let down upon the earth, in which were all kinds of four-footed beasts and reptiles of the land and birds of heaven. And there came a voice to him, "Rise, Peter, kill and eat." And Peter said, "In no way, Lord, because I have never yet eaten anything common and unclean." And a voice again a second time said to him, "What God has cleansed, call not common." And this occurred three times, and immediately the vessel was taken up into the heaven. And while Peter was troubled as to what the vision which he saw might be, behold, the men who had been sent by Cornelius, having inquired after the house of Simon, stood at the gate. And having called, they inquired if Simon, who is called Peter, was being entertained there. And while Peter was deeply disturbed concerning the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold three men are seeking you. But arise, and go down, and go with them, nothing doubting, because I have sent them." And Peter went down to the men and said, "I am he whom you seek. What is the occasion for which you have come?" And they said, "Cornelius the centurion, a just man and a 'God-fearer,' being attested by all the people of the Jews, was divinely directed by a holy angel to invite you to his house and to hear words from you." And inviting them in, he offered hospitality.*

## COMMENTARY

### **Peter's Vision—Stunning Revelation; Startling Assignment**

Peter was an enigma. If he was bold and impetuous (and sometimes a bit insensitive), he was also deeply committed to the law of God. He was one of the truly faithful "remnant"—those Jews who had remained true to God in the midst of the adulterous perversions of the "faith of the fathers." We don't always associate Peter with this facet of

Israel—he seemed merely a common and unlettered fisherman. The Pharisees had identified him as an "ignorant man," but they were really referring to a professional category, as one might distinguish between a medical doctor and a layman in medical matters. He may have had a considerable amount of knowledge in other areas. In support of



this thesis, the Greek of his epistles is superb and ranks at the top of the writings of the New Testament.

Now to this loyal member of the Jewish remnant, who, even after his momentous revelation, was highly sensitive about “eating with the Gentiles,” for example, came a stunning word from God—**“Arise, Peter, kill and eat.”** What was he to eat? Animals—strictly forbidden in the law. (Let the vegetarian take note.)

**“Not so, Lord, for I have never eaten anything common or unclean.”** Very salutary. He was pure and innocent (the memory of his recent humiliation having faded). But his cherished legal citadel was soon to be shattered. *“It doesn’t matter anymore, Peter go ahead and eat.”* Of course, this raises some very disturbing questions. Did God change? Were His instructions to the Jews, capricious? Does fidelity really matter in the vastness of the universe?

Point one—God is not changeable, or capricious. Point two—fidelity does matter, tremendously. First, is God changeable? Not changeable—flexible. There is a big difference. Sometimes the rules have to be changed with conditions. God doesn’t change, but the world changes; society changes; people change. Laws of a century ago, for example, would be ludicrous today. It was a new order of things and a new set of circumstances. The dietary laws, for example, crucial in the wilderness, were not so applicable in first century Palestine. Of course, there is a vast difference between the moral law of God, which never changes, and the regulations that govern the processes of society. The same difference exists between criminal laws and municipal codes. The criminal law involves moral and ethical matters, which correspond to the moral laws of God—murder, theft, extortion, etc. The municipal code, on the other hand, involves matters of public rights and the smooth function of the community. There

is also the relationship between state and federal laws. There is a good deal of overlapping. A state law regarding theft, for instance, becomes a federal matter when state boundaries are crossed.

Thus we must distinguish between laws based on the changeless principles of God’s moral nature and the relations based on the specific requirements of a given situation. Nor were the regulations of Sinai capricious. They had many vital applications for the needs of the group in the wilderness and in the early occupation of the Promised Land.

But now there were not only different circumstances, but a whole new order. In fact, it was the order of things God intended from the beginning. It was the Law of Moses that was temporary. This is a constantly recurring theme in the New Testament. Paul is the specialist in this. His letters to the Romans and Galatians, are particularly strong in this theme.

In the classic passage on this subject—Romans 3—Paul declares that the law was given specifically for the purpose of revealing the problem of sin, and the fallen human nature. **“Now we know that whatsoever things the law saith, it saith to them that are under the law; that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore, by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight; for by the law is the knowledge of sin”** (Romans 3:19,20). The law was considered a temporary expedient until the coming of Christ, to verify the need for Christ, who would replace the Law of commandments and ordinances by His own sacrifice. In Romans 7, Paul likens this to the situation of marriage. He says that under the law, the woman was bound to her husband until his death. In the analogy, Paul shows that in the sacrifice of Christ, the Old Covenant expired and

the people of God were freed from it. To the Galatians he says that if one who is freed from the law goes back to it, he has put himself once more into bondage and has, in fact, fallen out of the context of grace. Moreover, if one puts oneself under restriction to any one law, one puts oneself, *de facto*, under all the laws. **“Stand fast therefore to the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. Behold I, Paul, say unto you that if you be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law. Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; you are fallen from [out of the context of] grace”** (Galatians 5:1-4).

The obvious meaning of the above passage is that any one who relies on circumcision (symbol of the law) is not relying on Christ, but on the law of Moses, for salvation. If one were to rely on the law, one would obviously be out from under the “umbrella” of grace.

In God’s word to Peter, He was not urging him to do something unlawful, but something now permissible in the new order of things, since such earlier regulations were not applicable to salvation or morality, *per se*. By analogy, let us say, for instance, that the municipal code of a given city has prohibited the use of a certain section of beach because of contamination, but later builds a sewage plant and corrects the condition. Let’s say that a certain resident of the community is aware of the new sewage plant but not aware that the city has already rescinded the former ordinance. Now, let us say that the mayor of the town suggests to the citizen that he take his family to the beach in question for a picnic. The citizen says, “Oh no, I have never taken my family to

that contaminated beach.” The mayor says, “What the city has purified, don’t call contaminated.” What would once have been a violation is now an invitation. Of course, disobedience to the ordinance, while in force, would have been an ethical matter, aside from its harmful consequences. And so, the dietary laws that God established. Peter was rightfully concerned, but had failed to capture the full significance of the liberating and purifying sacrifice of Christ.

An important observation here is that Peter, though filled with the Holy Spirit from the Pentecostal episode, was still confused. The coming of the Holy Spirit into the light does not guarantee, of itself, a correct understanding of all matters of faith. Salvation is a completed fact, apart from the mental comprehension of the meaning of salvation. Two thousand years after the revelation of truth through the Scriptures, it is essential for those who are going to be teachers to pay the price of preparation and not to rely on personal experiences, however remarkable. The instruction given to Peter was by a remarkable revelation. Our knowledge of it comes through the inscripturation of that revelation in the Bible—through intensive application to the study of it.

The ultimate significance of this particular revelation to Peter became obvious to him later, though baffling at first. This was, of course, because it was indeed a word from God. He might otherwise have rejected it as an unreliable dream or fantasy. When the emissaries of Cornelius arrived at the gate, Peter was immediately assured of the meaning of the episode. Not only had he comprehended the meaning regarding dietary laws, but he had grasped the larger significance of the opening of the faith to the Gentiles. Up to this point, the Jews were not even allowed to eat with the Gentiles. Now God said to Peter—“Feed them!”

Unfortunately, as humans, our visions

fade; our memories are short. Later on, in Galatians, Peter stumbled over this very matter. So much that Paul had to reprimand him. Peter had given to the council of Jerusalem a brilliant defense of his ministry to the Gentiles. Later on, however, in Galatia, he caused a great stir by leaving the table of the Gentiles to go and sit with newly-arrived Jews. This was a complete reversal of what he had

so astutely perceived in his vision.

If this is a negative note on which to leave this section, let it never be forgotten that the most glorious revelations come through inglorious channels. Our only hope is daily sensitivity to our dependence on Christ, the true glory of God within the vessel of clay.

# Acts 10:23-33

## TRANSLATION

*And the next day he rose up and went with them, and certain of the brethren, who were from Joppa, went together with him. And the next day he entered Caesarea. Cornelius was eagerly awaiting them, and he called together his kinsmen and his close friends. And as Peter drew near to enter, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet and worshipped him. But Peter raised him up, saying, "Rise up. I also myself am a man." And he accompanied him, and entered, and finding many having come together. He said to them, "You know how it is unlawful for a man, a Jew, to join or come together with another nation. But God showed me not to call any man common or unclean. Wherefore also, when I was sent for, I did not hesitate to come. I ask, therefore, to what purpose you have sent for me?" And Cornelius said, "From four days ago until this hour, I was praying at the ninth hour in my house, and behold, a man stood before me in shining raiment, and said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your kind deeds have been remembered before God. Send therefore unto Joppa and call for Simon, who is called Peter. This one is visiting in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.' Immediately then I sent for you, and you have done well that you have come. Now then, we are all before God to hear all the things which have been appointed to you by the Lord."*

## COMMENTARY

### The Spirit of Christ Penetrates the City of Caesarea

Peter came to Caesarea, the city of Cornelius. He could not have picked a more notable example of Gentile culture in the land of the Jews. It was the Roman capital of Judea; a military stronghold; a cultural center with a magnificent amphitheater opening out to the sea. It had been built by Herod the Great, the quintessential sycophant, who had risen to power selling out his people to Rome.

Cornelius the centurion, the Gentile, quintessential symbol of Roman power, rushed eagerly to meet the simple

fisherman from Galilee, disciple of the erstwhile carpenter, rebel rabbi, crucified by Rome in a religious squabble with the Pharisees. **"You have done well that you have come. Now then, we are all before God to hear all the things which have been appointed to you by the Lord"** (Acts 10:33). So certain was he that Peter was from God that upon his first encounter he had dropped to his knees to worship him, much to Peter's dismay. And so certain was Peter that God had summoned him to Caesarea that he had no hesitation about accompanying Cornelius' emissaries.

There was no room here for fleshly rationale. The certainty must go beyond the human mind. What Gentile could ever have knelt to worship a Jew? What Jew could ever have set aside the law to embrace a Gentile? “The middle wall of partition” separating Jew and Gentile had indeed been shattered by the power of the Holy Spirit, and Cornelius begs a Jew for words **“appointed by God.”**

The greatest miracle of all is not physical healing, or exorcism, or spectacular signs, but the opening of the human mind to receive the truth of God. Until the Spirit opens the mind, no amount of human knowledge or forensic skill can avail. But once the Spirit opens the mind, the grace of God flows in a river, sweeping away doubts and debating. This is the energy of faith **“without which it is impossible to please God.”**

*But if we cannot come to God without faith, and faith can only come from God, what hope is there, unless God Himself initiates the belief? And on what basis does He choose whom He favors with faith? And how can He judge those not so favored?*

God’s part is belief—man’s part is the *will* to believe. God responds to the seeker after truth. **“If thou shalt seek the Lord thy God, thou shalt find Him if thou shalt seek for Him with all thy heart and with all thy soul”** (Deuteronomy 4:29). God comes to those who need Him and want Him. As Jesus said to the Pharisees—**“They that are whole need not a physician, but they that are sick”** (Matthew 9:12). So the key to God is need. To want help is to find it. Cornelius had reached up to God, and God reached out to him.

*But how does one know He’s there?*

How does one know anyone is home? **“Knock, and it shall be opened.”**

A prepared vessel encountered a prepared heart. This is the ultimate key to the work of God in the world. It is not fleshly promotions and frenetic activity, but quiet waiting upon God for instruction and going in the confidence of the Holy Spirit. Only the Lord of the harvest knows what to do with His harvesters.

# Acts 10: 34-43

## TRANSLATION

*And Peter, having opened his mouth, said, "Of a truth, I perceive that God is no respecter of persons, but in every nation he who fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him. The word sent to the children of Israel, proclaiming peace through Jesus Christ—this One is Lord of all—you know the word, which has come to all the Jews, beginning from Galilee after the baptism which John preached concerning Jesus from Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about exercising benevolence and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, because God was with Him. And we are witnesses of all the things which He did in the region of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom also they killed, having hung Him on a cross. This One, God raised on the third day and gave Him to become manifest, not to all the people, but to witnesses who had been appointed beforehand by God—to us who ate together and drank together with Him after His having been raised from the dead. And He commissioned us to preach to the people, and to bear witness that this is He who was anointed by God as a Judge of the living and the dead. To this One all the prophets bear witness, that all those who believe on Him may receive forgiveness of sins through His name."*

## COMMENTARY

### The Essential Evangel—Forgiveness of Sins

God, at last, confronted the Gentiles. Carefully He had chosen the channel and directly He had appointed the words. No words were wasted on traditions germane to the Jews alone. No instructions given that would serve fleshly religious pose. Centuries of accumulated ritual and regulation, festival and façade, were severed in a stroke from the simple reality of offended Deity and restored humanity. That is the "pith and marrow" of the matter. A multitude of symbols and observances and cultural accoutrements may surround the kernel of truth. (Nor are they necessarily inappropriate. The life of faith may be enriched and facilitated by

countless instructions and insights.) But the irreducible minimum of identity with God is expressed in Peter's words, immortalized in the Holy Writ—"All who believe on Him may receive forgiveness of sins through His name."

In these words the impenetrable barrier between Deity and humanity is shattered forever. "The veil of the temple is rent in twain from the top to the bottom." Access to God is eternally assured.

And to whom is it assured? To all who believe. Not to all who believe and follow the rules, or observe the steps, or clean

up the life, or make vows—to all who believe. Jesus said, **“This is the work of God that ye believe on Him who sent Me”** (John 6:29). To put salvation on any other basis—on any kind of human capacity—is to invalidate the essential necessity of the sacrifice of Christ.

There was no requirement of penitential baptism; no call to commitment; no implied obligation. Christ was presented and forgiveness promised for the taking. Of course, the acceptance of forgiveness implies the sense of need. Before one would join oneself to Christ, one would have to see the purpose of it. One would have to recognize both the existence and claims of the Deity. In the early interaction between God and man, there was offense significant enough to cause the Spirit of God to withdraw from mankind and leave His creation with a legacy of mortality Dead in spirit and subject to the decadent impulses of godless flesh, the human creature was unable to fulfill the righteous requirement of God. The law given to Moses on Sinai only served to emphasize this grim reality, as Jesus demonstrated in the “Sermon on the Mount.” (Not a code of conduct for all to follow, but a standard fallen man could not attain.) Paul gave this principle a comprehensive expression in his letter to the Romans. **“By the works of the law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin”** (Romans 3:20).

So Peter’s opening statement to the Gentiles—*“Everyone who works righteousness is accepted by Him,”*

immediately put salvation beyond the reach of his audience. Even Cornelius’ “deeds of kindness” only showed his seeking heart and made him a candidate for God’s grace. For the Gentile to experience salvation required the recognition of this inadequacy to meet God’s requirement and the consequent appeal for forgiveness.

Once again, as we saw earlier, it was evident that the sense of need was the basis of God’s response. Without faith it is impossible to please God, but without God’s grace it is impossible to have faith. The key to the dilemma is the need. Without a sense of need there is no extension of grace; and without the extension of grace there is no faith.

The Gentiles were not required to assume the great load of Jewish traditions, nor to enter into the process of penance and baptism attached to the national apostasy. They were required only to recognize their own individual failure before God and to turn to Him for grace.

Much distortion of truth has been foisted upon the seekers after God by the attempt to attach a host of human religious traditions to the simple offer by Christ, to come to Him for rest and restoration. **“Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly in heart. And ye shall find rest to your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light”** (Matthew 11:28-30).

# Acts 10:44-48

## TRANSLATION

*While Peter was speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were hearing the word. And the believers who were of the circumcision who came together with Peter were astounded, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon the Gentiles. For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and magnifying God. Then Peter answered, "No one can indeed forbid water, can they, that these should be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit even as we?" And he directed that they should be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain a few days with them.*

## COMMENTARY

### The Holy Spirit Comes to the Gentiles

For the Gentiles, it was the most crucial moment in the history of their civilization—when God touched them. And with His touch, He made them an essential part of Himself. What greater moment could there be? The God of the universe is, in essence, Spirit. He replicated Himself—produced other beings like Himself, also spirit in nature. In time, the catastrophe came. Mankind was stripped of the spirit nature and lost the capacity to function in the eternal purposes of God. At this point, the human shared the fate of mortal animals—merely decaying existence. The moment at which one is lifted beyond this fate to the recovery of the spirit—identity with God—is the moment one ceases to exist as animal and becomes a spirit being, once again functioning in consonance with God and in keeping with the eternal human destiny which He had originally intended.

To the Jews this moment had already come. Pentecost had been the fulfillment of God's purpose in the restoring of His

people at the spirit level. (Although there remained yet earthly promises to be fulfilled.) The veil of the temple—the Jewish symbol of limited access to God—had been rent in two from the top to the bottom. The access to God was open. Then came the Holy Spirit to make real to their hearts what had been accomplished in the sacrifice of Christ. But the Gentile had been, thus far, excluded from God's direct and universal presentation of salvation. (Individual Gentiles had never been excluded from God's grace, as for example, Cornelius himself.)

Now comes the moment when God reveals Himself with the same remarkable manifestations as He had in the event of Pentecost. The Gentiles would not be inferior members of the family. Those who accompanied Peter were witnesses of these manifestations and were astonished. *"The Gentiles have received the gift of the Holy Spirit even as we."* There would be no question of this. Had the Gentiles not received the same



miraculous demonstrations, there would always be a debate as to the authenticity of their experience. How important that they too should speak in tongues; that they too should engage in ecstatic worship; that they too should be baptized.

Now we come to the crucial issues of the application. What may we glean for ourselves today? What is the message to all who would come to salvation in the future? To all who would be touched by God? We have looked at the subject of the essential requirement and nature of salvation. But what about the manifestations? How can one be sure one is saved or possesses the Holy Spirit? Are there always outward manifestations, or unmistakable feelings? Do inner emotions always get stirred up in some way where salvation is genuine? Must there be tears, or rejoicing, or ecstasy? Must there be tongues if the Holy Spirit has truly come?

The answer to these puzzling questions is really quite clear if we stay strictly with the Bible. There is never any connection between salvation and emotions, per se. It must be understood at the outset that emotions are part of the human nature—the personality. They are like the intellect—based upon patterns in the brain that are established by heredity and circumstances, or environment. The sum total of personality is the complex of behavioral patterns in the cortex of the brain, based upon traits passed on genetically, and traits acquired by the input of data, faulty or accurate. Emotions are simply responses to experience based upon one's personality or behavior patterns. Thus, some are more given to emotional reactions than others. The Holy Spirit brings truth to our spirits. The natural self reacts to this truth in keeping with individual behavior patterns. The Holy Spirit does not give emotions—only truth. It is a misunderstanding of this principle that gives rise to the erroneous notion that any true touch of the Holy Spirit

must evoke emotional responses. There is, of course, nothing wrong with emotional responses. But these responses must be seen as individual, and not universal. The matter of “tongues” is something else. Plainly, in the Pentecostal episode, tongues were a manifestation of divine power, sanctifying the revelation and the chief spokesmen for that revelation. At each new manifestation of the Spirit—to Samaria, to the Gentiles, to the Ephesians, there was an accompanying sign—tongues—to validate the experience and the apostles who shared in it. Beyond that, there is little mention of the experience, either in the rest of Acts or in the Epistles. It emerges briefly in I Corinthians but is a response to some problems in the matter. In I Corinthians 12 and 14, Paul puts the whole issue of tongues in perspective. *“I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue”* (I Corinthians 14:19). Paul did use tongues in his private worship but certainly de-emphasized its overall importance. In chapter 12 he asks the question, *“Do all speak with tongues?”* (I Corinthians 12:30). The construction of the question in the Greek text requires that it really be translated, *“All do not speak with tongues, do they?”* A negative answer is expected by the phrasing of the question.

In countless verses having to do with salvation and the coming of the Holy Spirit, only a small handful refer to tongues. It is never given as an essential corollary to the coming of the Holy Spirit. However, tongues as sign of the authenticity of the experience was necessary in the initial revelation, because they did not have, as we do today, the New Testament scriptures for their authority.

*“While Peter was speaking, the Holy Spirit came upon all who were hearing.”* There were no steps to take; no commitments made; no special efforts to

believe and no waiting. The Holy Spirit came of His own volition, upon all who were hearing. It is assumed in many circles today that without great human efforts and commitments, the Holy Spirit will not come. That is a gross error. How can any human ever achieve the response of the Holy Spirit by self effort? All of Scripture is contrary to such a concept. The self cannot even muster faith, much less goodness. Our part is to ask—His to come. Jesus said *“Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you (Matthew 7:7).*

*But how do we know He has come. What is our assurance?*

The one central guarantee that the Holy Spirit has come to us is that we want

Him to come. We want to have Him within us. We care about Christ. Apart from the Holy Spirit, this would never happen. Believers through the centuries have had a great many different kinds of experiences and manifestations. It is not ours to question the validity of their experiences. Paul said that it was not wise for Christians to compare themselves with one another. We cannot always tell the difference between human emotions and spiritual expressions. One thing we can do is cling to the reality that He has come to us, personally, because we have asked Him, and we want Him with us.

**HIS COMING IS AS INSTANT AS OUR ASKING.**



# Acts 11:1-18

## TRANSLATION

*And the apostles and the brethren who were of Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. And when Peter went up unto Jerusalem, they who were of the circumcision questioned him, saying “You entered with uncircumcised men and ate with them.” Then Peter began and recounted to them the sequence [of events], saying, “I was in the city of Joppa praying; and I saw in a trance, a vision—a kind of vessel descending as a great linen cloth, settling down out of heaven, and it came to me; unto which I gazed and perceived and saw four-footed creatures of earth, and beasts, and reptiles, and birds of heaven. And I heard also a voice saying to me, ‘Arise, Peter, kill and eat’. And I said, ‘In no way, because there has never entered into my mouth anything that was common or unclean.’ And a voice answered a second time out of heaven, ‘What God hath cleansed, do not call common.’ And this occurred three times, and was taken up again altogether into heaven. And behold, immediately three men stood at the house where I was, having been sent to me from Caesarea. Then the Spirit told me to go together with them, nothing doubting. And these six brethren also came with me, and we entered the man’s house. Then he declared to us how he saw an angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send to Joppa, and invite Simon, called Peter, who will speak words to you by which you may be saved and all your house. And as I was beginning to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as also upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, as He said, ‘John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If then God gave the like gift to them, as also to us, having believed the Lord Jesus Christ, how was I able to hinder God?” And when they had heard these things, they also glorified God, saying, “Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance unto life.”*

## COMMENTARY

### **The Cross at the Crossroads—For the Jews Alone, or All Mankind?**

The Jews had long believed that they were the only true people of God. All others were called the *Goyim* (nations)—and were to them hopeless outcasts from the kingdom of God. To have dealings

with them was tantamount to dealing with dogs. Thus the bitter animosity (Religion, perhaps more than any other force on earth, can foster such impenetrable barriers.) For Peter to have eaten with

Gentiles (the uncircumcised) was tantamount to “dancing with the Devil.”

Circumcision was the centerpiece of the Jewish religious ritual. It was the ultimate distinguishing mark of the Jew. It was a surgical procedure that was almost irreversible. (It could be done with extreme difficulty and intense pain.) The only way a Gentile could ever be fully accepted in the Jewish community was by this rite. If he did accept circumcision, he was taken into the Jewish community as a convert and called a “proselyte.”

Cornelius was a friend of the Jews; an avid pursuer of their God; but he had never been circumcised. He was therefore identified as only a “God-fearer”—not a convert or “proselyte.”

Almost immediately after Pentecost, a rift occurred in the Christian community over this matter. It was symbolic of the whole issue of the place of the Mosaic law in the new order. Did the sacrifice of Christ, in fact, abrogate the Law of Moses? Were those who followed Christ excused from the law? Was obedience to the law no longer important—had God reversed Himself? Had He therefore become changeable?

The chasm was broad and deep that separated the two factions. It was in many respects as deep as, or even deeper than the chasms that separate segments of the body of Christ. It would seem that in the glow of the fresh revelation of the Holy Spirit, it ought to have been different. Could not the Holy Spirit, who brought the spectacular gift of tongues, also have brought harmony among the believers? The “circumcision,” before whom Peter stood, were not faithless Pharisees. They were members of the body of Christ.

They had been “filled with the Spirit.” Perhaps had even spoken in tongues. Why then was there disharmony among the believers? Could not the same Spirit

who brought miracles and tongues have brought also unity of belief? Why this challenge to Peter? The answer to the question is found here in chapter 11. The Spirit had indeed brought harmony, but only to those who were in tune with His Spirit. Such ones received the word of Peter, who had himself obviously been attended by the Spirit. When the Spirit truly speaks, those who are open to the Spirit truly listen.

There is nothing wrong, of course, with raising questions. It is a matter of the attitude with which questions are asked and the spirit with which answers are received. The Jewish leaders who had become believers were as loyal to the law as Peter. To them, Christianity was a supplement to, rather than a replacement of the law. It was natural for them to be concerned. The important thing is that their spirits were open and the word of Peter received without further dispute—**“Then God has granted to the Gentiles repentance unto life.”**

But how does one know who is speaking “in the Spirit,” or, for that matter, when one is open to the Spirit. This is a very deep question. Important clues to the answer can be found in this passage. There is, here, a profound controversy. It is one which has plagued the church even to this day. It would seem that the matter had been resolved in this episode with Peter. Indeed, for those who were open to the Holy Spirit, it was readily resolved in the relating of Peter’s experience with Cornelius. He simply related the facts. There was no effort on his part to marshal arguments in his defense. The Holy Spirit had obviously spoken through him, and those in tune with the Spirit received it. That should have ended the matter. Strangely enough, Paul was still confronting the issue in his letter to the Galatians some twenty years later. But the really crucial question for us today is, “How do we know who is speaking in the Spirit?”

In this passage, there are important clues. In the first place, Peter was speaking strictly from the Word of God. But it was in a different sense “the Word of God,” because it had come as a direct revelation to Peter. It was confirmed as the Word of God, because it became, then, part of the inscripturated revelation which we have as the Bible. A basic criterion today is faithfulness to this written revelation. Of course, faithfulness to the “written revelation” has also its requirements. Passages that are taken out of context or distorted by inadequate understanding of the Word would not be blessed by the Holy Spirit. Outside the direct revelation of Scripture, any private revelations that are allegedly from God must be “suspect.”

The second clue is that Peter’s ministry had been effective with those who heard it. The Spirit attended his words and touched the ones who heard them. The third clue is that when the questioners asked him about it, Peter’s answer satisfied them. And so, today, with those who purport to be teachers of the Word, there must be a strict adherence to the Bible; an adequate knowledge of the Bible; and a substantial effectiveness of the Word going forth. This effectiveness is to be seen, not in emotional stirrings, but in a meaningful application to life. The Jewish questioners had received the Word and immediately received the Gentiles as potential members of the kingdom of God.

Of course, while the Word may be given in the Spirit, one may not always be open or in tune to the Spirit. How does one know? In the first place, one must come, praying that the Lord will bless both speaker and hearer. In the second place, one must be in the habit of listening to

Christ. It is possible for one to be walking in a way that dulls the voice of Christ. If one receives substantially more input from the world, than from Christ, one loses one’s sensitivity to the Spirit. It is not that walking in the flesh will cause one to lose one’s salvation, but rather to lose one’s sensitivity. This is why many Christians make serious mistakes that cause them great difficulty.

The controversy raged long after Peter’s Spirit-filled discussion of the issue. A number of Jewish believers did not receive the Word, even though it had been confirmed as something from God. They became, then, the instruments of Satan that caused other believers to stumble. Many a Christian today, though not possessed by Satan, has yet been used as an instrument of Satan when their spirits have gotten out of tune with the Spirit of Christ.

The Galatians had been hard hit by the controversy over the law. Paul sums up the matter in his epistle to them, **“Oh foolish Galatians, who has bewitched (deluded) you, that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ had been evidently set forth, crucified among you? This only would I learn of you; received you the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now made perfect by the flesh? Have you suffered so many things in vain—if it be yet in vain? He therefore that ministers to you the Spirit and works miracles among you, doeth he it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Even as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness”** (Galatians 3:1-6).



# Acts 11:19-30

## TRANSLATION

*Some, then, having been dispersed as a result of the persecution which took place over Stephen passed through unto Phoenicia and Cypress and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except the Jews only. And there were certain of them—Cyprians and Cyrenians—who came to Antioch and were speaking to the Hellenists, proclaiming the tidings of the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. And the word was heard in the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem concerning them, and they sent out Barnabas unto Antioch; who, having drawn near and having beheld the grace of God, rejoiced and encouraged all with purpose of heart to remain steadfastly with the Lord, because he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and faith. And a considerable crowd was added to the Lord. And he went unto Tarsus to seek out Saul, and finding him, led him unto Antioch. And he was with them a whole year, gathering together a considerable crowd in the church and teaching them. And the disciples were labeled Christians first in Antioch.*

*In these days prophets went out from Jerusalem unto Antioch. And one of them, by the name of Agabus, signified through the Spirit that a great famine was about to take place over all the inhabited land, which came to pass at the time of Claudius. And as for the disciples, each of them, even as he had prospered, determined as a service to send [assistance] to the brethren dwelling in Judea; which also they did, having sent it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.*

## COMMENTARY

### **The Body of Believers in Function and Fellowship**

The Holy Spirit has come in glory and signs and wonders. There were healings and tongues and marvelous manifestations. Now we see the believers settling in to their functional, earthly process. In parallel, on the Mount of Transfiguration, the disciples had seen Jesus in marvelous glory. They wanted to remain in that hallowed place. But

Jesus led them back down the mountain to face the demons and desolation of the earthly scene. For when the glory of the vision fades, its true virtue is seen in the effectiveness of its application to the demons and devastations of the earthly “vale of tears.” But the church must confront the reality of its earthly mission. It is tempting to seek the glory



of personal experiences for their own sake, rather than to see the touch of God as an endowment for the manifestation of the glory of God on earth.

The shattering experience of the martyrdom of Stephen brought about a scattering of some of the disciples to heretofore untouched regions—Phoenicia, Cypress, and Antioch. The gospel was thus being spread to other parts of the Middle East. Some were preaching to the Jews only, but others were proclaiming to the “Hellenists” the **“tidings of the Lord Jesus:”**

The word “Hellenist” was applied broadly to those who participated in the spreading of the Greek culture. (The original name for Greece was Hellas.) Alexander the Great, a Macedonian, having conquered Greece in the fourth century B.C., appreciated its culture and spread it far and wide throughout the Middle East. Many cities were established by him after the pattern of the Greek city-state. Cities whose names end in “polis,” as for example Persepolis, can be easily identified as such cities. Thus, the name Hellenist applied to a very large group of people. Alexander the Great was really an agent of God (unwittingly) in spreading the Greek language throughout the Middle East, thus providing a vehicle for the revelation of God in the New Testament. The precision of the Greek language is, to this day, unique among the languages of the world. It is far more precise than English, and thus makes a much more efficient means of communicating the truth of God.

But now the word “evangelize” (“to preach the gospel”) comes into prominence. It is a word that needs some attention. Like many other words in the English language, it has been so abused as to have lost much of its impact. Popular expressions such as “the gospel truth,” “gospel and blues,” as well as careless and commercial usages of the word in the church, have robbed it of its

great substance. The Greek word, *euaggelidzo*, usually translated by the phrase “to preach the gospel” really means “to proclaim the victory tidings.” Since the word is in such constant usage in the New Testament, we will go into it a bit here. The word “gospel” is of Anglo-Saxon roots and meant “God’s news.” It came to mean simply “good story” or “good news” (as in our word “goodbye,” which is a contraction of “God be with you”). Many modern translations use the phrase “good news” or “good tidings.” But given their usage in the English language, both these phrases are far too weak to express the full substance of the word as used in the Greek language. An outstanding example of the usage of the word by the Greeks is found in the writings of Aeschylus (Greek dramatist, c. 500 B.C.). In Book I he is writing about Agamemnon and the Trojan War. He speaks of a watchman on the walls of the palace at Argos who was waiting for the proclamation of victory at Troy. For the phrase “victory proclamation”, he uses the word *euaggelion*, which is the word used in the New Testament that is translated by “gospel.” Neither “good news” nor “glad tidings,” as used in our English language is adequate. We use the phrase “good news” for a large number of trivial matters that would hardly qualify for the Greek usage of the word. So, those who went about preaching the Word were not merely bearers of something “nice to know,” but the heralds of the greatest victory of all time—the triumph of God over sin and death. As with many other Greek words, it is not easy to find a smooth equivalent in English. But however we translate the word, it carries with it the idea of an official proclamation of great magnitude. The Anglo-Saxon expression “God’s news” comes closer than “good news.”

The effectiveness of the proclamation was seen in the turning to Christ of a great number of these pagan worshippers of Olympian deities.

When the Jews in Jerusalem heard of the interaction with the Hellenists, they sent Barnabas to Antioch to look into the matter. Immediately upon his arrival, he sensed that what was going on was a genuine work of the Holy Spirit and encouraged the new believers to hold steadfastly to Christ. Barnabas' sensitivity in the matter was, according to the next statement, based upon the presence of the Holy Spirit within him. This accounted for both his goodness and his faith. As Jesus was careful to point out to the rich young ruler, **"There is none good, but God."** That is to say, if the young man were sincere in labeling him "good", he would also have to acknowledge that he was from God. And so, Paul, who admitted that there was nothing good in himself. Faith also must be from the Holy Spirit Himself. The only true faith is the gift of the Spirit. And thus, Barnabas came to Antioch not just as an emissary of the leaders in Jerusalem, but as one sent from Christ Himself. Only those in tune with the Spirit of Christ can ever truly evaluate what the Spirit is doing. Many times Christians, who for various reasons are out of tune with the Holy Spirit, misjudge what Christ is doing in a life or in a situation. But here in Barnabas is one truly sent by Christ, and truly anointed with His Spirit for the task.

Barnabas' ministry to the new believers was eloquent in its simplicity. He did not complicate things with new regulations and special instructions. Had this been considered an important thing to do, it surely would have been noted here. To him, apparently, the crucial issue was not religious rules, but steadfast interaction with Christ. Whatever his ministry was, a large number were added to the Lord. Further, Barnabas had a most important interaction with Paul. At this point, he was still known as Saul and was waiting in Tarsus for further direction. This direction was provided by Barnabas, who went to Tarsus and brought him back to Antioch.

Apparently, Paul and Barnabas both remained in Antioch for a year, teaching those who came together in the church. It is evident that, contrary to common impressions, Paul was not really engaged continuously in great missionary enterprise. The journeys he made were not all that many, especially by today's standards. A modern evangelist might cover in a week, or a month, much of the territory that Paul covered in his entire ministry. As in Antioch, Paul frequently would remain for a year or two among the believers in a given community, which would not have been large by today's standards. What was important in the ministry of Paul, as he himself expressed continuously, was the glorifying of God by his life or his death. It was not productivity that counted, but fulfilling the purpose of Christ and being thus an expression of His glory in the world. Even his constant struggles were an expression of the glory of Christ, in the steadfastness with which he held to his faith. He, himself, confessed this as he neared death. **"I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith"** (II Timothy 4:7). The victor's crown which he anticipated was not on the basis of productivity but perseverance. As in the matter of Job, few, even of his friends, understood anything at all about his struggle, but God was pleased and Satan was defeated in his attempts to discredit Job's faith. Much of the struggle within the believers is seen by none but God only. But that is enough. Many magnificent vistas of natural beauty have never been and never will be seen by human eyes. Still they exist in their pristine grandeur, expressions of the glory of God, observed by Himself alone. The simple statement that Paul continued a year in Antioch is an important clue in the true understanding of the enigmatic Saul of Tarsus.

It is noted here, in passing, that the disciples were labeled Christians first in Antioch. There has been some debate

over whether this name were given in sarcasm by the godless or as a label inspired by God. The latter is no doubt true. In the first place, the word itself, (*chrematidzo*), translated “called,” carries with it, in its original root, the idea of material needs and negotiations in regard to those needs. It was then broadened to a more abstract idea of needs and instructions and ultimately was used in God’s instructions to man. A notable example is in Hebrews 11, where God is warning Noah about the flood that is to come. The phrase “warned of God” is the same Greek word. Thus, the word was obviously given as a serious identification and not as a frivolous thing.

And now we have an episode involving care of the needy. This is a most important matter. What is the responsibility of Christians toward the poor? The controversy rages continuously in the church and in the world. Agabus, a prophet in Antioch, was given a message by the Holy Spirit regarding a coming famine. The simple response of the believers was, as commonly seen in the New Testament, to give as the Lord had prospered them to a fund which would be sent to the believers in Judea by the hand of Paul and Barnabas. The following points should be noted in the matter:

1. The believers were not insensitive to the material needs of their fellow believers.
2. The special collection, based upon a prophecy, would indicate that there was not a continuous and organized effort to handle the needs of the poor in general. All of the episodes of giving in the Acts and in the Epistles were directed toward believers, and not to the world in general.
3. The giving was based upon the measure of prosperity. There was no effort to equalize the responsibility.

Nor, apparently, was there any pressure to give beyond one’s means.

4. Jesus never saw the mission of the believers to solve the problem of poverty. His express words were, **“The poor ye have with you always.”** If the purpose of Jesus was to solve earthly problems and create a new Eden, He certainly failed. But of course, God’s central purpose is not to recreate Eden on earth, but to deliver the spirit from the prison house of the flesh.
5. The giving in this incident was in response to the Holy Spirit. If one bases one’s giving on the need of the world, the burden would be crushing. If one bases one’s giving on the request of others, one would be swamped. The only way to keep giving consistent and manageable is by responding only to what one senses to be the leading of the Holy Spirit. Organizations fail; gifts go astray; human reason is inadequate; only the Holy Spirit can direct us in meaningful and manageable giving.
6. Giving is an exercise in spiritual growth. God is not poor. He could resolve the poverty problem of the world in one stroke if He wanted to do that. The primary benefit of giving is for growth of the spirit. God allows His children to participate with Him in this matter.
7. Believers ought to take care of believers. God is not in the business of eliminating the consequences of godlessness. Those who trust in God are provided for in God’s own way. David said, **“I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread.”** This might be seen as a callous attitude, but it is no more callous than the parent who allows a child to suffer the consequences of misdeeds. If parents always shield the child from

consequences, the child will be crippled in the ability to cope with life. Responding to the pleas of the godless can only serve to make them less open to the salvation of the spirit, which is what God is after.

8. The New Testament concept of giving is not so much based on the Old Testament law of tithing, but upon the inner workings of the Holy Spirit in the believer. In response to the Spirit, giving might be much more than the tithe, or it might be less. Such giving nourishes both the relationship between the believer and Christ, and between believer and believer.

In summary, this section has dealt with the vital process of the functioning of the believer in the world. The key to the functioning of the believer in the

world is sensitivity to the Holy Spirit within. Whether it is a service to the Lord, or an evaluating of ministries and situations one is involved in, or giving of one's substance, all activities must find their roots in appeal to the Spirit within. This will not be a problem to those who earnestly seek the Lord's guidance. It is only a problem to those who become so enmeshed in the world or in their own desires, that they lose their sensitivity to what the Spirit wants. But wherever one seeks daily to please the Lord, even though there are human inadequacies and mistakes, ultimately the Lord will see to it that such a one knows His will. As Jesus said, **"Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you"** (Matthew 7:7). If you truly want to follow Christ, He will surely see to it that you know where He is going.



# Acts 12:1-5

## TRANSLATION

*At that time Herod the king laid hands upon certain ones from the church. He killed James the brother of John with a sword. And seeing that it was pleasing to the Jews, he purposed to take Peter also (they were the Days of Unleavened Bread [Passover]). Whom also he seized and put in prison, having placed four quaternions [sets of four] of soldiers to guard him, wishing to bring him out to the people after Passover. Peter, then, was kept in prison, and prayer was extended to God by the church for him.*

## COMMENTARY

### “My Thoughts Are Not Your Thoughts . . .” Isaiah 55:6

Who can fathom the ways of God? James is slain by a royal “butcher”; Peter is spared. The church had prayed for Peter; did they neglect James? Were their prayers not effective? While they rejoiced over God’s will for Peter, should they not have rejoiced also over the fate of James? Did God effect His will for Peter but not James? Did He not answer in both cases?

James’ death was by all standards, ignominious. His executioner was an egoistic, conniving murderer from a long line of egoistic, conniving murderers, whose capacity for treachery was equaled only by their capacity for cruelty. The Herodian dynasty retained power by the sheer determination to engage in whatever treacheries, or perfidies, or cruelties were required to retain it. Herod the Great slaughtered Jewish babies in a jealous rage over the birth of Jesus; his son, Antipas, murdered John the Baptist at the request of a lewd dancing girl. And now the grandson, Herod Agrippa, murders James “to please the Jews.” Must God allow his servants to be murdered by godless

rogues? Apparently so. Which of the prophets have not been so humiliated?

And what of James? Was he inferior to Peter? Was there a difference in faith? In piety? In service? Was his work done, or was the work in him finished? James was the brother of John, both original apostles called from their nets to become “fishers of men.” They were bold, stronghearted men who had been dubbed “the sons of thunder.” To become the victim of a rapacious sycophant was the ultimate of indignity, as the beheading of John the Baptist at the request of a dancing girl seemed a cruel mockery of God.

In fact, however, the reverse was true. It was God’s mockery of Satan. **“Do not be afraid of them who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do”** (Luke 12:4). Satan’s business must be performed, not by strong and noble souls, but by rogues and degenerates; by bullies and sadists. Those who through the centuries have butchered the people of God, have

thereby identified themselves with this perfidious parade. No need for a hero to destroy mortal flesh—a dancing girl will do, or a cutthroat, or a psychotic. In allowing His servants through the centuries to be cut down by such, God has made it abundantly clear that “the flesh profits nothing.” The wildflower that turns the wasteland into a glorious garden in the springtime is incinerated by the summer sun “and the place thereof shall know it no more.” More ignominiously, the glorious blossom is often trampled by the boots of the boorish and their fate is mingled with the dirt.

Apparently James had served his purpose. Much evidence indicates that he was regarded more highly than Peter. Certainly he had not been guilty of the heinous betrayal of Jesus, which, despite the forgiving grace of God, had remained an ineradicable scar on the human side of Peter. By all reasonable calculations, Peter should have been the sacrifice.

But God sees things differently than man. Mourn not the dead who die in Christ; mourn rather the living who must bear, as Hamlet puts it, “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” For James, death was a great release. Hamlet (the Shakespearean prince of Denmark) saw death as a fearsome unknown. The suicidal blade was stayed by his realization that—

*“ . . . the fear of something after death—*

*The undiscovered country,*

*From whose bourne*

*no traveler returns,*

*Puzzles the will,*

*And makes us rather bear*

*those ills we have,*

*Than fly to others we know not of.”*

The only reason that the death of James disturbs us is the failure to regard death in a different light than Hamlet. Even Christians, today, often see death as an unfortunate alternative to healing or deliverance. Thus, we mourn for James and rejoice for Peter “How could God do

such a thing?” “How could He allow His servant to be slain?” “How could He allow Christians today to die and not be healed?” Such thinking fails utterly to understand death any differently than the legendary prince of Denmark.

The deepest lesson for us in this entire episode is that God has purposes for each of us that are beyond our understanding. The meaning of our lives is always to be found, not so much in extended years of “useful” service, but in that moment of majesty known to God alone, for which our spirits have blossomed on the earthly wasteland. When that moment has been fulfilled there is no need to suffer longer on the earth.

But what place does prayer have, if the purposes of God are already fixed, as in the case of Peter and James? It must be realized that prayer has a far greater application than merely “getting things from God.” The prayers of God’s people have their essential meaning in participating with Him in His eternal purposes. Prayer is a cyclical process. The Holy Spirit initiates the prayer in us and then wafts it heavenward, where it becomes (according to Revelation 5:8) incense offered continuously to God. Thus our prayers are never lost but remain an eternal “sweet savor” to God. So prayers should never be regarded as “shopping lists” for “getting things from God,” but rather a communion of spirit with Spirit in an eternal sharing with God.

The prayers of the saints for the release of Peter were not of themselves the instruments of that release. His destiny was not in their hands but God’s. They were merely given the privilege of participating with Him. Do you think God’s purposes on earth will fail if humans don’t pray? That makes human beings more important than God. Prayer is not an obligation to insure the success of God’s purposes; it is rather a work of the Holy Spirit in bringing us into unity

of effort with God.

Are you impressed to pray? For persons? For situations? Account it not an obligation, but a glorious privilege. Be not concerned with worthiness, or weakness, or faith. You are not alone; you are joining with God. It is not likely that God would have left Peter in prison just because some of the believers were weak.

But what if the answer does not come? The answer cannot fail to come, as God is God. The problem is acceptance. When we have committed a matter to God, whatever is, is what He wants at the particular time. In the case of both James and Peter, God did what He wanted. James was released from earth, and Peter was released from prison.

But what about individual needs? God deals with individuals on the basis of the need of the spirit, which is His main object. He gives or withholds in our situations as He sees fit. Again, when we have committed a matter to God, whatever is, is what He wants.

But do we not have to ask? Yes indeed. For reasons known to God, He wants us to ask. He does not simply anticipate our desires. James said, "*You have not because you ask not*" (James 4:2).

And what of those who are out of favor? If there is carelessness or disobedience, God may choose to allow the consequences of carelessness to be experienced. But that does not mean He has not heard or answered, nor does it mean that He has abandoned one. The careless and disobedient child of God is just as much a continual object of His care as a careless or disobedient child is a continual object of a parent's care.

So, in the matter of Peter and James, the church prayed and joined with God in the effecting of His purposes, by life and by death. Their prayers were just as much a part of the releasing of the spirit of James from the earth, as they were of releasing Peter from prison for purposes yet unfulfilled in his life.





# Acts 12:6-17

## TRANSLATION

*And when Herod was about to bring him forth, Peter was sleeping that night between two soldiers, bound with two chains; and a guard at the door was keeping the prison. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood by, and a light shined in the cell. And he struck Peter on the side and aroused him, saying, "Rise up quickly." And the chains fell from his hands. And the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Put on your cloak and follow me." And he went out and followed him, and did not know that the thing that was happening through the angel was real, but he thought he was seeing a vision. And they passed through the first prison and the second and came upon the iron gate which leads into the city, which opened to them automatically; and they went out and came to Alley One, and immediately the angel departed from him. And when Peter had come to himself, he said, "Now I know that the Lord really sent His angel and delivered me from the hands of Herod and all the expectations of the people of Judea." And having considered the matter, he came to the house of Mary, where a considerable number were gathered together and were praying. And when he had knocked at the door of the gate, a maiden by the name of Rhoda came to answer. And when she recognized the voice of Peter, she did not open the gate for joy, but ran and declared that Peter was standing at the gate. And some said to her, "You are mad." And she assured them that it was so. And they said, "It is his angel." And Peter remained knocking. But when they opened and saw him, they were amazed. And when he had motioned at them with his hand, they were silent, and he recounted to them how the Lord had brought him out of prison. And he said, "Declare these things to James [brother of Jesus] and to the brethren." And having gone out, he went to another place.*

## COMMENTARY

### Followers of the Amazing Christ—Yet Amazed

One would assume, given the years of personal association with Christ; the spectacles of Pentecost; and the plethora of miraculous events under their own ministry, that the apostles would

consider personal deliverances to be a natural expression of their daily ministry. And perhaps to a lesser degree, one would expect the believers of those incredible days surrounding Pentecost to

be charged with the expectations of equally incredible miracles. One would assume there to be a mood of certainty among the believers in regard to their petitioning of God. But the truth is that in this episode, they were all amazed, including Peter.

What happened? Even today, two thousand years later, there are many groups of believers that would have been shouting their assurances of what God was going to do. Were the believers then less spiritual? Did they have less faith? Were they all “doubting Thomases?” The answer to such questions will provide clues to our own practice of faith in these days.

Suffer a brief detour. It is most important in our study of the Scripture, to recognize the fact that God does not reveal Himself so much in direct theological propositions, but in a great host of clues and cameos and vignettes. A vignette is a segment of the whole—a piece of the puzzle. The word is used in such expressions as “vignettes of life,” by which we mean views of a facet of human experience. The Old Testament is filled with a rich anthology of narratives that supply us with such vignettes, which, like pieces of a puzzle, when put together give us insights into who God is, and how he relates to His creatures. Theological statements about God can never of themselves be adequate, since language in human usage is not that reliable to express divine truth in ultimate terms.

But we do have a reliable communication between God’s Spirit and ours. This is where truth really rests. Although, limited as it is, He does need to make use of our mental equipment as a channel. However, like children, we have to be taught in simple images. Whenever we get too philosophical about God, we find ourselves in the vast muddy shallows of human misapprehension. The truth of this statement is abundantly demonstrated in the multiplicity of

divisions and ideological conflicts that are rampant in the church. It is not that differences of opinion are unallowable—quite the contrary. They are important in the learning process. It is rather that we must be careful how much we rely on the capacity of the human mind to perfectly grasp and express the ultimate truth about God. Whereas we do have absolute truth in our spirits, as surely as we have Christ there, for He is the Truth, our human minds are limited in their ability to express that truth, if not to completely understand it at all. This principle is cogently expressed by Paul, who declares that, “*Now we see through a glass, darkly [in an enigma (puzzle)]; . . . Now we know in part. . .*” (I Corinthians 13:12). If theologians would recognize this and show a greater tolerance for brethren, equally sincere in knowing the truth, there could be a greater unity in the body and, de facto, a far greater impact on the non-believers, who are continually deterred from following Christ by the evident conflicts within the church.

But what has all of this to do with Peter’s release from prison? We are using the incident as a case in point for the discovering of clues to the meaning of our faith. In many respects, we must approach the search for these clues as the archeologist searches for clues to the history of civilization. When the archeologist gets down to the layers of artifacts, he must work very painstakingly, often clearing away the dust from an object with a camel’s hair brush. It is slow and tedious work, but the rewards are outstanding.

And so in researching the truth of the Bible. The author has been studying the Bible for over forty years in the original Greek and Hebrew texts, and with it the corollary disciplines of history and the social sciences, which enable one to put the Scripture in its proper setting. It is often tedious and painstaking to trace the semantics and the historical settings of the text, but the rewards have been

extraordinary in elucidating the meaning of God's message to His people. However, it must be said here that the more knowledge one accumulates, the more one recognizes the limitations of the human mind, and, therefore, the more open to human variables in the process of learning. It does not take a special person to do this—only relentless pursuit of truth.

But back now to our original investigation—clues to the meaning of our faith as found in the episode of Peter's release from prison. The most poignant part of this story is the difference in God's dealings with James and Peter. The most startling is the response of all concerned to the miracle of Peter's release.

It is certainly obvious, as noted in the previous section, that God was fulfilling His own purpose in His action towards each of His servants. The vital clue for us is that God does not always deliver His servants from earthly affliction—even death—on the basis of faith or human conditions. There are those who teach that the only thing that keeps us from being healed or delivered is lack of faith or a sinful condition; that healing and deliverance are guaranteed in the atonement. This does not comport with the Scripture. All the martyrs of history, as well as Paul and Peter himself, give tacit witness that God does not always deliver. May not illnesses which lead to death also be in God's will? The maintaining of personal faith in the midst of illness, is itself a witness to the power of the Spirit within. Jesus, Himself, was obedient even unto death. For one to maintain faith, even unto death, is a declaration to Satan that he will never prevail over the spirits of God's people.

The second great clue is the response of the believers. The sustaining of great feelings of faith has become a sort of "merit badge" among believers, or mark

of "spirituality". But here is a situation in which not only the rank and file of believers were completely surprised at the deliverance of Peter, but also Peter himself. He thought he was dreaming. This is great encouragement to us, because the problem of "feelings of faith" is so rampant among believers. It helps so much to know that even the apostles and the participants in Pentecost were not constant in their human feelings. Apparently no one said, "Hallelujah! We just knew God was going to do it."

At this point it would be important to understand the difference between true faith, which is of the Spirit, and "feelings of faith," which are of the flesh or mind. For the most part, it is assumed that faith means that one has the inner assurance that God is going to respond to a petition in a given way. Thus—"I just know the Lord is going to do this or that." Usually this comes under the heading (unwittingly) of "positive thinking." The advocates of such expressions of confidence are moving close to the realm of "religious science" in one form or another. The constant message of the "religious scientists" is, "Just hold a positive thought." The problem with such thinking is that it is entirely in the flesh or more specifically, the mind, which is a part of the human flesh. "Oh, but I had a revelation." Perhaps, but *caveat emptor*—"let the buyer beware." Hundreds of thousands of revelational claims have been made during the centuries of Christendom. A great number have been misguided. A tragic number have misguided others. It is alright to believe that one has had a "revelation" about one's future or one's petition, but it must always be taken cautiously. And the more so when it involves others. The human mind is so painfully subject to deception. The prophets of old were sometimes deceived. Peter was deceived. Paul may have been in certain personal matters. No human being is above it, however "spiritual." Our great safeguard is not to trust the

mind at all. We must use it as our only vehicle of expression, but we must be careful about the amount of weight we put on it. John said, "Try the spirits." Outside forces, or spirits, can bombard our minds. They will come not with evil countenance, but benevolent. They will appear pious and charitable, but they can deter from God's purpose by alternate suggestions—noble in prospect but contrary to God's will for us. One is often deceived by the very nobility of suggestions or reasonableness of them. It may be reasonable or noble in the flesh, but its ultimate end is to sidetrack us, infinitely more important to Satan than any kind of noble enterprise that we might engage in, in the flesh. Thus, one may be engaged in a certain work or residing in a certain place, having been directed by God. Then a powerful suggestion comes. One is compelled to change course or location. Is it from God?

Beware. Don't go by feelings, however powerful. It is a serious thing to change what God has seemed to direct for our lives. It is always better to wait and to "test the waters" than to move precipitously on the basis of human perceptions.

Again, one may be suffering from some great distress. God has allowed the suffering. One has strong feelings that God is going to deliver. One voices confidence; but deliverance does not come. The loved one dies; the business fails; the job is lost. What has happened? The truth may be that God has allowed the suffering for a purpose. There are many reasons why He may let a job be lost or a business fail, for example, which would ultimately bring about better conditions or the cultivation of the spirit. God's purposes may even be as a witness to Satan, as in the case of Job. He will deliver when and if He is ready. But Satan purposes to promote discouragement and unbelief—yea to destroy our faith, if possible—by the very compelling of assurance that deliverance

must come. Remember James. The truth of the matter is that we can never be absolutely certain what God is going to do. We may have strong feelings about it, and that is perfectly acceptable, as long as we don't put too much weight on our feelings. Some have gone so far out on a limb that if the matter is not resolved as they anticipate, they put their faith in jeopardy, as well as the faith of others.

Many today might have drummed up human feelings and assurance that God must deliver James, for example, or renege on alleged promises, as for example, "*If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of My Father which is in Heaven*" (Mathew 18:19)—a passage often taken out of context, and grossly misapplied. If it be suggested that perhaps people did not approach the deliverance of James with faith or unity, then we must ask, "What about Peter?" The doubt and disunity in the case of Peter was quite evident.

The reality of the matter is that true faith is of the Spirit. Faith is a gift of God to the spirit, as the Holy Spirit is a gift of God. That faith which resides in our spirits may not be fully expressed by surface feelings of confidence, which exist only in the mind. The fact that the believers were praying at all was the demonstration of faith, no matter how they felt about it.

Thus, faith that is of the Spirit—the faith of Christ residing in us—is permanent and changeless. What changes is the way in which we express that faith in our human minds and emotions. In the past, we have used an analogy in the area of flying, which is appropriate here. Faith in the law of aerodynamics, or the capacity of a human machine to fly, is demonstrated by the purchase of an airline ticket and boarding the jet. As far as the feelings are concerned, one may be very uneasy, or even frightened, during the flight, but that does not affect the

function of the plane or the determination of the captain to continue the flight. He does not come back through the cabin to find out how the passengers feel before he takes off. By analogy, our very act of praying is, in a measure, like purchasing the ticket and boarding the craft. God does not have to be assured that all of our feelings are in order before He addresses Himself to the issues for which we are praying. It all depends on how great God is and not on how well we handle our petitioning.

In the matter of Peter and James, the believers were uneasy, if not frightened, and sought help from God, whom they had reason to believe would hear their prayers. God did, of course, respond, and the believers were privileged to join with Him in the executing of His purposes.

The great lesson to be learned here is that one should TRUST IN CHRIST; NOT IN ONE'S FEELING OF FAITH ABOUT HIM. TRUST HIS POWER TO FULFILL HIS PURPOSE; NOT YOUR PERFORMANCE AS A PETITIONER.



# Acts 12:18-25

## TRANSLATION

*And when day had come, there was not a little turmoil among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. And when Herod had sought him and not found him, he examined the guards and commanded that they be taken and punished. And he descended from Judea and passed on to Caesarea.*

*And he [Herod] was enraged against those of Tyre and Sidon; and they came to him with one accord, and having persuaded Blastus the king's chamberlain, they were asking for peace, because their region was sustained from the royal one. And on an appointed day, Herod, arrayed in royal robes, sat upon the judgment seat and gave an oration to them. And the people shouted out, "It is the voice of a God, and not human." And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give the glory to God, and he expired and was eaten by worms.*

*And the word of God grew and multiplied. And Barnabas and Saul returned unto Jerusalem having fulfilled their ministry, and having taken along with them John, who had been called Mark.*

## COMMENTARY

### Another Despot Devoured by Worms

They never learn—these mundane monarchs—blinded by the demonic delusion of their own sovereign and ceaseless self-importance. Herod Agrippa the first, who dared to take the head of God's servant and compounded the insolence with the usurpation of the place of deity, became the victim of the denizens of the clay—the worms—who ultimately preside over all that deign to reject the reality of the spirit realm. If they will not be the subjects of God, they will be, inevitably, the victims of the worms. The earthly power of Herod was manifested in an episode involving the region of Tyre and Sidon. Herod, reveling

in the humiliation of these subject people and regaled in royal robes, made a public speech and was hailed as a god. Accepting this accolade from the people and failing to acknowledge the true God, he was immediately slain and eaten with worms. Today, a few such despots hold the world hostage—egoistic tyrants—oppressors of mankind—whose only goal is avaricious self-ambition and whose only god is the satanic force that brought them to power. When will the people of God learn not to fear them? The mighty Saul quaked before Goliath; Hezekiah, one of the most faithful of God's kings, stripped the temple bare to satisfy



Sennacherib. Today, anxiety stalks the Christian over the great “bear” of the North.

David had the true perspective. With Goliath—*“I will make you a feast of the fowls;”* and in Psalm 2—*“The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against His Anointed, saying, ‘Let us break their bonds asunder and cast away their bonds from us.’ He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh, The Lord shall have them in derision. Then shall He speak unto them in His wrath, and vex them in His sore displeasure”* (2-5). David surely understood that to God, these mighty monarchs were merely children playing games.

Nebuchadnezzar, in the days of Daniel, learned, to his great sorrow, not to trifle with God. But he did learn, after his pride had reduced him to madness—to grazing in the grass with the beasts of the field. *“Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, all whose works are truth, and His ways judgment. And those that walk in pride He is able to abase”* (Daniel 4:37).

The greatest and fiercest despots of all time have gone the way of Herod. The Caesars, Attila the Hun, Genghis Khan, scourge of all Asia; Napoleon Bonaparte, scourge of Europe; Mussolini, Hitler, Tojo—the terrible trio; to say nothing of the Tsars of Russia, and after them the Marxists—Lenin and Stalin, and their nefarious successors, all of whom have fallen victims to the same inexorable fate of those who grovel in the clay and build

their citadels of sand. No earthly monarch, or kingdom, evolved by the “prince of this world” shall ever overcome any citizen of the kingdom of God. The children of God are invincible in the citadel of the Spirit.

*“And the word of God grew and multiplied . . .”* How different the true servant of God! John said, *“He must increase, and I must decrease”* (3:30). Paul said, *“God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of Christ”* (Galatians 6:14). And Peter, shaken to the roots in the sifting of Satan, declared to the people upon the miraculous healing of the lame man at the temple gate—*“Why do you gaze on us, as though by our own power or godliness we have made him to walk?”* (Acts 3:12).

In contrast to the brazen presumption of Herod, Luke (author of Acts) focuses on the Word of God as the vital element that brought growth and expansion to the church, rather than the heroic efforts of the apostles. And how fitting (whether by design or not) that this section should end with the name of Mark, who stumbled and “went not to the work.” In the infinite grace of God, he was picked up by Barnabas and eventually was singled out by Paul, who had been his principal detractor, as one who was “profitable” to him.

The purpose of God’s servants of the earth is not to make themselves great for the glory of God, but to glorify Him in their human weakness. *The vessel must be of clay that the glory may be of God.*

# Acts 13:1-3

## TRANSLATION

*Now there were in the church which was at Antioch, prophets and teachers, namely, Barnabas; and Symeon, called Niger; and Lucius, the Cyrenian; Manaen, raised with Herod the tetrarch; and Saul. And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said to them, “Separate for Me, indeed, Barnabas and Saul unto the work for which I have called them.” Then when they had fasted and prayed, they laid hands on them and let them go.*

## COMMENTARY

### Antioch—Threshold of the Gospel to the Gentiles

Paul and Barnabas were at Antioch. Barnabas had been sent there by the church at Jerusalem, after a large number of Christians had come there in the wake of the persecution that had evolved from the martyrdom of Stephen. And he, in turn, had sent for Paul to help him out. It was an epochal chapter in the history of the church.

Antioch was a Gentile city, the capital of Syria. It had been built around 300 B.C. by Seleucus Nicator, one of the four generals among whom the Alexandrian empire had been divided after the premature death of Alexander the Great. Alexander, a Macedonian who had taken over Greece after its desolation by the Peloponnesian War, was an *afficionado* of Greek culture. In his bid for the world, he had spread the Greek culture, including the language, throughout the Middle East. This Hellenization (after the ancient name of Greece—Hellas) was one of the vital factors in the spread of Christianity, having given to us the language of the New Testament.

Antioch was a coastal city with its port at Seleucia. It had been taken over by

Rome in 65 B.C. and had grown to a population of about half a million by the time Barnabas and Saul were there. It was the locale of the first Gentile church. The believers had been identified by the term “Christian,” first in this city.

In one of those strange ironies of history, the city was named after the father of Seleucus, Antiochus, who was a forbear of the infamous Antiochus Epiphanes, the erstwhile scourge of the Jews. That large colonies of both Jews and Christians developed there was most ironic. But with God, who presides over the course of history, there are no accidents. His purposes are inexorably executed despite all human caprice or design. He even makes “*the wrath of man to praise Him*” (Psalm 76:10). So to Antioch must the Jews go and the Christians, and so must Barnabas and Saul. The Jews that were there were called “Hellenists” (after Hellas, the ancient name of Greece), because they had adopted the Greek language and culture.

And so was Christianity, in God’s purpose and providence, catapulted into

the Gentile world by culture and conflict; emperors and generals; persecutors and prophets and perpetrators of good, as well as evil. And so has the gospel transversed sea and land; continent and hemisphere from north to south; and east to west, to the ultimate frontiers of the Pacific, until the entire inhabited earth (with the exception perhaps of scattered tribes) has felt the impact of the revelation of God to His creatures.

God's time had come, and from the capital of Syria went the gospel to all of Asia Minor, northward (by 1000 A.D.) to the capital of Russia and eastward to India and China.

The call that launched this mighty sweep came not from fleshly recruitments and promotions, but from the voice of the Spirit of God, uttered in the deep throes of faithful hearts "waiting upon God." *"Separate unto me Barnabas and Saul for the work unto which I have called them."*

The cosmopolitan group of prophets and teachers that were assembled there had themselves been drawn together by the Spirit of God. They were from different parts of the world; different cultures; different strata of society. Symeon Niger was black; Lucius was from the Libyan city of Cyrene on the north shore of Africa; Manean was raised with Herod Antipas, who had slain John the Baptist. The Spirit of God had touched their lives—called them together; drew them into a colloquium of fasting and prayer; and impressed them to send forth Barnabas and Saul to pioneer the thrust into Asia Minor.

**Ministering to the Lord and fasting.** *Leitcurgeo* is primarily a service word—usually public, but here attending to Christ in something of an official way, that is, as special leaders. They were focusing on Christ and fasting—called to it by the Spirit Himself. Intercession of this kind is not something one does

lightly, as a fleshly religious exercise. If the Spirit does not draw one to it, it is only an empty gesture.

But what of fasting? Is it a mandate for today? For power in prayer? For obedience? It was quite important in the Old Testament and went hand in hand with sacrifices, holy days and ritual feasts. It was referred to in the Gospels where the Jewish rituals were still in effect. It was practiced by Paul (still observing some Jewish customs), but was not pressed upon the Gentiles as an essential part of prayer or favor with God. Of the many references to fasting in the Bible, most are in the Old Testament. Only a handful are in the New Testament, and most of those are in the Gospels. The criterion for fasting must be an inner compulsion, born of the Holy Spirit. If fasting is used as a device to prove to God one's earnestness, it is only a pose. The Spirit within knows our earnestness. If it be a bartering instrument—to buy favor—it is an insult to God. If it is a matter of obedience, it has never been required.

One who has inner compulsion to fast will find it natural and compelling to do so, as one who is called to some service will find the will and desire to do it. On this basis, it should never be a problem. If the Spirit compels one within, do it! If one is trying to obey a rule, or gain favor, or prove worth, don't do it! It will only be an empty religious gesture.

**The Spirit said unto them.** How did the Spirit speak to them? In a vision? In a dream? In an audible voice? We're not told. But they knew. It is essential to observe that they had been "**ministering to the Lord.**" Their focus had been on Him. Guidance does not come in a vacuum. God speaks to those who listen to Him. If one spends more time listening to the world, or friends, or oneself, the ear will not be tuned to Christ. If one's essential purposes in life are self-directed and focused on the flesh,

the ear will be dulled to the “still small voice of the Spirit.” But if one is in the habit of waiting on the Lord and focusing on Him and His purposes, then there will be a familiar ring to the ideas that come to one, especially in prayer. In fact, one who waits on the Lord and whose purposes are in tune with Him, will find important ideas coming at any time—in the car, at work, at rest, in a meeting. The secret is no secret at all. It’s as old as Christ Himself—“*If any man will to do His will, he shall know. . .*” (John 7:17).

The expression “waiting on the Lord” really means to trust Him or put one’s

expectation or hope in Him. It is not so much a matter of feeling faith or confidence, as it is simply putting it in His hands and assuming that He will let one know what His will is when the time comes. One may be uncertain in the flesh, or uneasy, or doubtful, but the fact that one has put it in the Lord’s hands is what counts, and not feelings one has about putting it in the Lord’s hands.

The proof that God had spoken was the effectiveness of the ministry that ensued. The door was opened to the whole of the Gentile world.



# Acts 13:4-12

## TRANSLATION

*And they [Barnabas and Saul], having been sent out by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia, and thence sailed unto Cyprus. And when they had come to Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they had John as an attendant. And having crossed the entire island unto Paphos, they found a certain man, a magus [sorcerer], a false prophet, a Jew by the name of Bar-Jesus, who was with the proconsul—Sergius Paulus, a man of discernment. This man, having called Barnabas and Saul, sought earnestly to hear the word of God. But Elymas (for thus is his name by interpretation) the magus resisted them, seeking to turn the proconsul from the faith. And Saul, who is also Paul, filled with the Spirit, gazed on him and said, “O full of all guile and all recklessness, son of the devil, enemy of all righteousness, you will not cease, will you, turning [ones] away from the true way of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind, not seeing the sun for a time.” And immediately there fell upon him a mist and darkness, and he went about seeking someone to lead him by the hand. Then the proconsul, seeing what had happened, believed, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord.*

## COMMENTARY

### Mission Launched—Enemy Immediately Encountered

Sent out by the Holy Spirit, Barnabas and Paul went down to the seaport of Seleucia and sailed for Cyprus, an island off the coast of Syria, under Roman rule.

In Salamis, their first stop, they focused on the synagogues. That there was more than one synagogue indicated a fairly large colony of Jews. Going first to the synagogue would be a pattern of Paul's future ministry. The gospel was proclaimed; the word of God was heard; nothing of note is recorded. The pair moved on.

Across the island at Paphos came the

crucial encounter. Paphos was the Roman capital of the island. Here was their first challenge—a sagacious governor, open to the gospel; and a treacherous old sorcerer, Elymas the magus. A perverted Jew, he was a false prophet and an agent of the devil. Paul opposed him head-to-head and reduced him to a helpless blind man looking for a guide. It was the kind of power ploy reminiscent of Jesus—the direct assault. No endless vigils or pious exercises, it was a confrontation between a man of God and a child of the devil. Such a confrontation should never be tried by any but those truly sent by God. Many

self-styled agents of Christ have really gone out in the flesh, recruited by zealous but misguided religious organizations (who think that the need is the call) and have come to grief on the rocky shoals of humanistic inadequacy. None but Christ can confront Satan effectively and none but the genuinely “sent” can be the channel of His power. That Paul and Barnabas were genuinely sent is evidenced by the effect. Satan was silenced; Sergius Paulus was saved.

The confrontation was a crucial test of the call. That it occurred at the beginning of the mission gave the kind of confirmation needed to span the rapids and ravines of discouragement that would cause Paul, at one point, to cry out “*O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from this body of death?*”

Following the principle of interpretation we have already established—to make much of what God makes much of—the incident of Elymas was most important. In the record of Paul’s visit to Paphos, fifty percent of the story is taken up with Elymas the sorcerer. He would represent the enemy whom Paul would encounter in bitter conflict throughout his earthly sojourn. At the end of his life, a remarkable record of achievement behind him, his only thought was that he had “*fought a good fight; finished the course; kept the faith.*” He saw his life not so much in terms of productivity, but running the course God had set for him.

In this incident on Cyprus, we have insights into the conflict between the servant of God and the archenemy—Satan. We have before us the whole story—the call; the conquest; the conqueror. It was a test of the call and the called alike. It was essential that Paul know the nature of his call, as well as the source of his power. If one has gone out in the flesh, that is, responding to human motivation and rationale, one

may confront the enemy without sufficient power to prevail.

But how does one know? We have some clues here. A group of men of God in prayer were given the assignment to pass on to Paul and Barnabas. The call came from God, but through anointed men of authority. A genuine call will be confirmed by other men of divine authority. But Paul and Barnabas also, apparently sensed the moving of the Spirit. They went out without question. A genuine call will be sensed in one’s spirit, but not necessarily felt in the flesh. Often when one is simply anxious to “get going for God” without a specific focus, one may be merely expressing human emotion. Crusaders are legion in the world. Many who are zealous to the point of laying down their lives are not involved with Christ at all, but with human causes. Feelings are totally unreliable. Paul said, “*The love of Christ constrains [presses] me.*” It was not love for Christ as a reason, but the love of Christ, Himself, in the spirit of Paul that drove him on. When one is genuinely called, one will know beyond all human feelings. There will be no guessing. The Spirit has ways of letting us know, assuredly.

The conquest was a clear-cut case of satanic opposition. Paul had a clear-cut mandate to speak in the name of Christ. Opposition is not always that clear-cut. Fellow believers may oppose us in the flesh. Human circumstances may hinder and delay. Our task is to press through in spite of all. But here, Satan has exposed himself in all fury. Paul knows it and acts accordingly in a boldness born of the Spirit, he challenges the enemy in the name of Christ and prevails.

If a call is genuine, the work will be effective. Effectiveness, however, is not to be measured in quantity, but quality. Even if the ministry be only to a handful, if the voice of the true Shepherd comes through, the sheep will hear it and

respond. But here again one must be cautious. Leaders with “charisma” are also legion in the world with multitudes of the misguided ready to follow. But their allegiance is often motivated by the flesh and responded to by human emotion. The true sheep who are looking for the true Shepherd will find Him through the true servant of God. The genuineness will be reflected not in allegiance to the servant, but a perception of Christ through the messenger and allegiance to Christ Himself. Nor can circumstances be a reliable guide, although there may be confirming factors of what is already perceived. Circumstances can be very confusing. We may think we are doing right because everything is going well, only to find a sudden reversal. Satan may try to deter us by hard circumstances or lead us astray by the sidetracking effects of too much affluence. So neither poverty nor riches are a safe guide to what God wants. Often the greatest spiritual blessings come during the most trying circumstances. If all factors seem to point to a given decision, one makes it, then everything seems to go wrong, stay with the original decision. If God had wanted to use circumstances as a guide, they would have happened before the decision and not afterward. Such an insight will avoid

much confusion. We must give God the liberty of dealing with us through circumstances, without assuming them to be a test of His presence or will. In fact, hard circumstances may be the very indication of God’s favor—as Satan seeks to hinder us from doing what God wants. If all the evidences lead to the conclusion that one is doing the Lord’s will, one should never let circumstances, however severe, deter one from continuing.

But a word about power as an evidence of the call. In this particular case, power was manifested in a dramatic episode. But that is not the only evidence of power. As Jesus indicated, there are “greater works” than the outward acts. There is the work of the Holy Spirit within. The servant of God who stirs the inner spirit and brings life out of death is expressing the power of God as much as the apostles who occasionally brought life to the physically dead.

Paul and Barnabas, sent by the Holy Spirit, were confirmed in their mission by the manifestation of power in dealing with the agent of Satan and also the seeking sinner. *A SERVANT OF GOD, ON A MISSION OF GOD, WILL HAVE THE POWER OF GOD TO DO THE WILL OF GOD.*





# Acts 13:13-25

## TRANSLATION

*And having sailed from Paphos, they who were with Paul came unto Perga of Pamphylia; and John separated from them and returned to Jerusalem. Then having passed from Perga, they approached Antioch of Pisidia, and they entered the synagogue on the day of the Sabbath and sat down. And after the reading of the Law and the Prophets, the president of the synagogue sent to them, saying, “Men, brethren, if there is among you a word of encouragement to the people, speak.” And Paul arose, motioned with his hand and said, “Men, Israelites, and Godfearers — The God of this people Israel chose our fathers, and lifted His people up in their sojourn in the land of Egypt, and with an upraised [stretched out] arm, led them out of it. And for about forty years of time He put up with them in the wilderness. And having dispossessed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed the land to them by lot. And after these things, for about four hundred and fifty years, He gave them judges, until Samuel the prophet. And thence they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul, son of Kish—a man of the tribe of Benjamin—for forty years. And having removed Saul, He raised up David as a king for them, concerning whom also He said, ‘I have found David the son of Jesse, a man in accord with My own heart, who will do all My will.’ From the seed of this one, according to His promise, God brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, after John had proclaimed, before His coming, the baptism of repentance to His people, Israel. And as John was fulfilling his course, he was saying, ‘Whom do you think me to be? I am not He. But behold, there is coming after me, One the laces of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.’”*

## COMMENTARY

### **To the Jews of Pisidia—God is Longsuffering to His Rebel People**

From Paphos to Pisidia (a small Roman province on the mountainous southern coast of Asia Minor) others have joined Paul and Barnabas; John Mark has gone home; and the leadership of the mission has now shifted to Paul. They touch the coast at Perga of Pamphylia and pass on to Antioch of Pisidia (also

named for the father of Seleucus Nicator). Here, entering the synagogue, and having been invited to speak by the presiding elder, Paul delivers a landmark address to the colony of Jews.

As indicated on a number of occasions, Paul’s commission had been primarily to

the Gentiles. However, it is obvious that he, like God, had a strong concern for his people, and like God, bore with them in their constant rejection of the truth. At one point he cries out—*“I would even be accursed myself, if it would help my people!”* Once again, in the synagogue Paul delivers an impassioned plea: *“You are God’s chosen people. He delivered you from Egypt; bore with your perversity across the wilderness; established you in the land and gave you the king you desired. That king having failed, He raised up another—David—through whose seed came the promised Messiah—Jesus, whom you rejected and slew (as he will later say).”*

**David . . . a man in accord with my own heart.** This statement about David is not Paul’s, but God’s. It is remarkable—no, amazing—in view of David’s personal failures. But it provides an invaluable insight into God’s attitude towards His creatures—especially His great longsuffering towards His own people, Israel.

The life and triumphs and misadventures of David are as widely known as any figure’s in history. He has been a primary subject in history and the arts for nearly three thousand years. Perhaps his popularity is due in part, at least, to his “humanness.” We are comfortable with David, because he seems to have a touch with earth as well as heaven; with his own fellow-humans as well as with God. Jesus had this touch, but on a divine level and without sin. That puts Him in a separate category. David participated in our own human inadequacies and weaknesses. At the same time, he was the great example of God’s forgiving grace. He seemed to maintain a closeness to God very like that of the New Testament believer—a oneness born of the Holy Spirit. Such an experience was certainly unique in the centuries prior to the advent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

In the Old Testament era, the Holy Spirit was *with* God’s people, but not *in* them. It was something of a caretaker relationship. The Jews were no less the people of God, but did not possess the inner strength and motivation provided by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Instead, such strength as was exhibited by them was a gift of God for each particular occasion. As they met the crises, God gave them the strength.

If David, so long before the coming of the Holy Spirit, could experience the continual grace and forgiveness of God, how much more we, born again of the Holy Spirit, can experience the ceaseless energy of the Spirit within. It is thus that Christ can say *“I will never leave you nor forsake you”* (Hebrews 13:5).

But how do we know Christ has forgiven us, or is with us? Because we want Him to be. If we want His presence, it is obvious that He is there, else we would not care. If we care about His forgiveness, it is because His Spirit bids us ask.

**A man in accord with God’s heart (*kata ten kardian*).** David thought as God thought. He had God’s view of the world—those who are for Him and those who are against Him; the realm of the Spirit versus the realm of the flesh. David fought many battles in which there was much of human suffering, but the ultimate objective, even for the enemies of God, was to show the need of seeking the glory of God, rather than the glory of man. And David was a man in harmony with God, not for his piety or perfection of the flesh, but for his constant concern to follow Him; and not for his flawlessness, but for his faith. David is the great example in Romans 4, of the one *“whose faith was accounted as righteousness; whose iniquity was covered; and to whom the Lord did not impute sin”* (see Psalm 51). David sensed his forgiveness. In Psalm 34 (written after Psalm 51), David acknowledges

what he had sought in Psalm 51—*“The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart, and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit”* (v. 18).

For the believer, the very desire for forgiveness, then, is the proof of God’s willingness to forgive. The continuing desire for the presence of Christ is the continuing evidence of His presence within. We have His irrevocable promise in Jude 24—*“Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy.”* In all of our human frailties and failures, we are yet in harmony with God if we desire to

glorify Him. And He promises, therefore, to bring us through this life, not chargeable for our human weakness. Remember—*WE ARE NOT FLAWLESS, BUT FAULTLESS. WE ARE ACCEPTED FOR OUR FAITH, NOT OUR FLAWLESSNESS.*

Through the flawed, but forgiven and faultless David, came Jesus the Messiah. Born of Mary, through the touch of the Holy Spirit, Jesus had the lineage of David through Joseph, but not the genetic heritage. He was both flawless and faultless. In this respect, Jesus was our Savior, but not our example. David was our example, but not our savior.



# Acts 13:26-31

## TRANSLATION

*Men, brethren, children of the lineage of Abraham, and the God-fearers among you, the word of this salvation was sent out to us. But they who dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, having been ignorant of this [word] and the voices of the Prophets, which are read every Sabbath, and having condemned [Jesus] they fulfilled [it]. And not having found any charges worthy of death, they asked Pilate to slay Him. And as they completed all the things which were written concerning Him, they took Him down from the tree [cross beam] and placed Him in a tomb. But God raised Him from the dead; who [Jesus] appeared over many days to those who went up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, which ones are His witnesses to the people.*

## COMMENTARY

### God Gave His People a Savior, Whom They Rejected

The message of Paul was the message of Stephen, which was, in fact, the message of Jesus. God had chosen Israel as His special people; cared for them; and given them a land. But they steadily rebelled against Him; turned away from Him to idols; and sought their own independent earthly course. For such human rebellion and failure, nothing short of a heaven-sent redemption would do. And so came Jesus to rescue His people from the satanic pit of delusion into which they had fallen. Their response to this supreme expression of divine grace was the most vehement rebellion of all. They crucified the very Son of God who had come to save them. But without His sacrificial death, they could not have been saved. They were the obvious subjects of Jesus' parable about the rebel vinedressers—"This is the heir. Come let us kill him." The Pharisees—more agents of Satan than priests of God—led the people in their misguided rejection of Jesus and stirred them up in a mass hysteria of violence against the flawless

Lamb of God.

**They completed all the things that were written concerning Him.** The Pharisees, perverse prophets of Satan behind a mask of piety, did the bidding of their master in the humiliating and slaying of Jesus. But their dastardly deed merely fulfilled the divine purpose, "who maketh the wrath of men to praise Him" (Psalm 76:10).

The priests, who should have been expert in the Word of God, were abysmally ignorant of it and of the voices of the prophets, even though they were read every Sabbath day in the synagogue. They were ignorant, of course, because judicially blinded to the truth—something of which they had received countless warnings from the prophets, whom they had rejected. According to Jesus, they were "blind leaders of the blind." Moreover, they were harbingers of death—whitewashed tombs full of death and decay. The people, in Jesus' view,

were more to be pitied than condemned. **“And Jesus, seeing the multitudes, was moved with compassion concerning them, because they were beat down and pursued, as sheep without a shepherd”** (Matthew 9:36) (Author’s translation). The leaders were not even poor shepherds; they were not shepherds at all.

Their ignorance trapped them into being the prime executors of the Divine will. Had they known the meaning of Jesus’ crucifixion and its death knell for their master—Satan—they would not have done it. Paul said as much to the Corinthians—*“But we speak the wisdom of God . . . which none of the rulers of this world knew; for if they had known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory”* (I Corinthians 2:8). Jesus had to be executed if He would be the sacrificial lamb, but who would do it? A faithful priest? One of the people? It had to be a priest. A faithful one would recoil in horror at the thought. The Pharisees, though faithless priests, were priests nonetheless, officially.

They had asked Pilate to execute Jesus, but Pilate wanted no part of it. He washed his hands of the matter and said, “See ye to it.” The Pharisees took full responsibility—**“His blood be on us and on our children.”** God remembered. The priests were neither faultless nor blameless. They knew full well what they were doing. In vain did God ask them to confess and seek forgiveness. But, even today, centuries of the gospel with its complete recounting of the deed have brought only denial. It is not that God wants the confession for the sake of condemnation, but only for the opportunity of forgiveness and cleansing. *“For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved”* (John 3:17).

A parent may acquire indebtedness which, in the years to come even after the death of the parent, will be charged against the estate. The debt must be paid. A benefactor may step forward to pay it, but the estate must acknowledge the debt before it can be cancelled. No one blames the children, however nefarious the debt may be (as for example, a tax-evasion penalty). At Pentecost, Peter required from the Jews, the baptism of repentance before salvation. That was the acknowledgement of the debt of their fathers. It was not the baptism which followed salvation, as practiced by the church, nor was it required of the Gentiles (Cornelius’ household, e.g.). This has caused much confusion in the church when it is taken as a condition of receiving a special “infilling” or “baptism” of the Holy Spirit. The Jewish people could not receive the Holy Spirit until they acknowledged the guilt of their fathers. The Gentiles had no such condition. Nor have the Jews today, once the guilt had been confessed and forgiven.

Pilate’s refusal to find Christ guilty or to take part has signaled to the world, for all time, the ultimate innocence of Jesus. Roman law was the standard of the known world. To this day, no one accuses Jesus of criminal action. There is no pall of sullied reputation hanging over Him. Whatever one may think of Jesus—misguided, megalomaniac, or the true Son of God, no one seriously wonders if He, after all, had committed some perfidious crime. Rome, through Pilate, had pronounced Him *“a just man.”* In Pilate’s own words—*“I find no fault in Him”* (Luke 23:4). The world has generally accepted that judgment. It was His own people who rejected Him first. John tells us, *“He came unto His own, and His own received Him not. But as many as received Him, to them gave He the power [authority] to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name”* (John 1:11,12).

# Acts 13: 32-41

## TRANSLATION

*And we have proclaimed the good tidings to you—the promise which was made to our fathers—that this [promise] God has fulfilled to us their children, when He raised up Jesus, as also it is written in the second Psalm, “Thou art My Son; today I have begotten Thee.” And because He raised Him from the dead, He is no longer going to return unto corruption; and thus He said, “I will give to you the sure mercies of David.” Wherefore also He says in another place, “Thou wilt not allow Thy Holy One to see corruption.” For David, having served his own generation by the will of God, slept, and was added to his fathers and saw corruption; but He whom God raised did not see corruption. Let it be known to you, therefore, men, brethren, that through this One forgiveness of sins has been proclaimed to you for all those things from which you were not able to be justified by the law of Moses. By this One, everyone who believes is justified. Take heed therefore, lest that which was spoken by the prophets come upon you:*

*Behold ye despisers,  
And marvel also ye destroyers,  
Because I am working a work in your day,  
A work which ye will in no way believe,  
If anyone should relate it to you fully.*

## COMMENTARY

### God Fulfilled His Promise and Secured Forgiveness for His People

Amazing beyond all human comprehension, yet now so commonplace as to recede behind the facade of earthly occupation, the promise of divine restoration is once again set before the Jews. Paul calls it the “evangel” (*evangelion*), The Greek word often translated “gospel” or “good tidings” really meant to the Greeks “a victory proclamation” and not just “good news.” It was the promise of a Savior—complete deliverance for the people of God. The

law had provided a sort of “scaffolding”—a temporary structure—to secure the salvation of God’s people until the coming of Christ would bring eternal life to the spirit.

But why had they, so far, been unimpressed? They had crucified Jesus and rejected His messengers. Did they not believe God? What could be greater than salvation, redemption, forgiveness of sins, fellowship with God? Apparently



an earthly kingdom. They rejected Jesus because He did not deliver them from Rome and secure their earthly “real estate.” Jesus had said, “*My kingdom is not of this world.*” The people responded—“Then you are not our king”—and they hung Him on the cross. But in the inexorable purposes of God, the very perfidy of Satan became the instrument of salvation. Satan was merely the “executioner”.

In that crucifixion, the age-old promise was fulfilled as spoken by Isaiah, the prophet—“*By His stripes we are healed*” (53:5)—and echoed by John the Baptist—“*Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*” (John 1:29). A forgiveness was secured for them beyond the capacity of the law. But there was more to salvation than death for sin. There was the resurrection, providing new life in the spirit. “*The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord*” (Romans 6:23). To the seeking Pharisee, Nicodemus, Jesus had said, “*You must be born again.*” Neither the keeping of the law, nor the offering of sacrifice would fulfill God’s purpose. He wanted to give to the people the same Spirit of life which He Himself possessed. That would take a miracle from God, not merely a religious commitment from man.

And the miracle came in the resurrection of Jesus and in the gift of His life to everyone who believes. To become a part of His kingdom requires a new nature—not just a *forgiven* one. Without this new nature, no amount of sacrifice or penance or absolution could possibly equip one to be part of the family of God.

Paul uses an unusual passage from the Old Testament as a prophetic utterance in regard to the resurrection: “*Thou art My Son, today I have begotten Thee*” (Psalm 2:7). In context, we are being given a brief glimpse into the fulfillment of God’s purposes for the people of earth. The

nations (*Goyim*) are in tumult. The people have been exercising emptiness. The rulers are set against God in scheming defiance and against His Anointed One. The time comes for God to move. He derides the futile efforts of the cosmic despots. All of their combined powers and plottings are ludicrous before the Master of the universe. He sets up His own King on His holy hill of Zion. He declares to Him—“*Thou art My Son; today I have begotten Thee.*” But in what sense “begotten?” Obviously, not birth. God is addressing the Son as an adult. Paul says it had to do with the resurrection. The Hebrew *yalad*, and its Greek equivalent *gennaō*, allow the meaning of “producing”, not necessarily in the sense of “giving birth.” Jesus had already been born. He had lived His life on the earth; He had been opposed by the same powers that had set themselves against God. Their final stroke against Him was to crucify Him. Paul said to the Corinthians that if the rulers of this world had known who He was, they would not have crucified “*The Lord of glory.*” Then came the resurrection, and Jesus emerged in the full authority of His Sonship—Lord of life and death; executor of all God’s plans and purposes for mankind, including the complete vanquishing of all God’s enemies. They would become a footstool for the feet of Christ.

So Psalm 2 is a pivotal Psalm in the redemptive process, referring not to the entrance of Jesus upon the earth, but the fulfillment of His Sonship in the resurrection, as Paul seems to indicate. The rulers have had their day. The people have languished in the void of empty human aspirations. Now the King of Kings comes forth—the eternal Son of God—to utterly vanquish Satan and his earthly emissaries.

But only in the resurrection was the promise of restoration fulfilled. It was God’s ultimate purpose to lift His

creatures into a new kind of life—the eternal life of the Spirit. It were hardly worth the death of His Son to recover a material possession. That the earthly possession will be recovered, ultimately, seems evident from many otherwise inexplicable passages, but only as an adjunct to the spiritual redemption. The earth, so exquisitely crafted as a part of the Creator’s handiwork, is not to be rudely reduced to cosmic ash, as some seem to think. Whatever the ravages of its hapless battering by man and the devil, it is to be restored in its pristine magnificence for purposes known to God and God alone. But long before the physical restoration must come the spiritual, and that is what the resurrection is all about, and the Sonship. The Sonship of God was the essence of the Godhead projected into the world of His creatures. The vehicle of the projected essence or Spirit was Jesus—crucified by the creatures in ultimate rebellion and raised again by the Creator in ultimate omnipotence.

Once again, Paul uses an unusual text from the prophecy of Isaiah, further establishing the resurrection life of Christ—*“I will give you the sure mercies of David.”* In context, Isaiah has extended God’s invitation to His people to return to him from their idolatrous apostasy—*“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters and drink. . . Incline your ear and come unto Me. Hear and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David”* (Isaiah 55:1-3).

But what are the sure mercies of David? And why are they identified with the resurrection of Christ? It goes back to a promise of God made to David through Nathan, the prophet—*“And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever”* (II Samuel 7:16). But how was this to be? Was David to live forever? No, indeed. Paul is careful to

point out that David had served his own generation and expired—“saw corruption.” But whence would come the “mercies of David” promised centuries after his death? Paul gives the solution. Christ, born of the lineage of David, would never see corruption. And through Him would come the “everlasting covenant.” But what are the “sure mercies of David?” Again we must go back to the words of Nathan the prophet. *“Now therefore, so shalt thou say unto My servant David, ‘Thus says the Lord of hosts, ‘I took you from the sheepcote, from following the sheep, to be ruler over My people, over Israel. And I was with you wherever you have gone, and have cut off all your enemies out of your sight, and have made you a great name, like unto the name of the great men that are on the earth. Moreover I will appoint a place for My people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own and move no more; neither shall the children of wickedness afflict them any more, as beforetime”* (II Samuel 7:8-10). (Compare also Psalm 89:20-29). The word “mercies” used in Isaiah 55 is *chesed*—“kindness.” It is the outward expression of the inner quality of grace—*chanan*. For a further discussion of the subject, see the author’s commentary on the Gospel of John, chapter 5 (lesson 21). David was the recipient of limitless grace. Though he had sinned grievously before the Lord, yet was his heart submissive and his devotion boundless. His remorse touched the heart of God. As was observed in a previous section, in spite of his sins, God found David to be “a man after His heart”. He became, thus, a type of fallen man whose failures can never overwhelm the grace of God. As Paul said to the Romans, *“Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound [super-abound]”* (Romans 5:20).

The New Covenant promised to Israel in Isaiah 55 was fulfilled in Christ and came to its ultimate completion in the resurrection of Jesus, who would now

bring to reality this age old promise. As the sins of Israel were universal, so the forgiveness. They could now in the New Covenant be forgiven for all the things they were not able to be forgiven for under the law. There was, for example, no provision for a sacrifice for many sins, such as adultery. Thus David said in his plea for mercy, *“Thou desirest not sacrifice, else would I give it”* (Psalm 51:16). It is the desire of God to bring the whole world to confession of sin, not to condemn them, but that He may forgive them. God has concluded all under sin that He may have mercy upon all. *“The Scripture has concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe”* (Galatians 3:22). Jesus Himself expresses it, *“For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved”* (John 3:17).

So in the face of such marvelous promises, why the resistance by the people of God? John says of Christ the Logos—*He came unto His own, but His*

*own received Him not”* (John 1:11). Paul provides the answer from the prophets—spiritual blindness brought about by persistent rebellion. *“I am working a work in your days which you will no way believe if anyone would relate it to you fully”* (Habakkuk 1:5). But was there then no hope for the Jews? Yes, indeed—hope for any who turn to Christ. *“As many as received Him, to them gave He the power [authority] to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name”* (John 1:12). But those who reject Christ will be in the same position of judgment as their rebel forebears. One day Israel will be saved as a nation (see Romans 11:25-36). But meanwhile, as far as individuals are concerned, everyone is free to come to Christ—Jew or Gentile—and join in the family of the New Covenant. Allegiance to the Old Covenant will not avail. Only new life in Christ. And so, Jesus’ words to Nicodemus—*“Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God”* (John 3:3).

# Acts 13:42-52

## TRANSLATION

*And as they were going out [of the synagogue], they were encouraging [Paul] to speak to them these words on the following Sabbath. And when he had departed from the synagogue, many of the Jews and of the devout proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who were speaking to them, persuading them to continue in the grace of God. And on the ensuing Sabbath, nearly all the city came together to hear the word of the Lord. And the Jews, seeing the crowd, were full of envy and were blaspheming, contradicting the things spoken by Paul. But Paul and Barnabas spoke boldly and said, "It was necessary to speak the word of God to you first; but since you have refused Him and judged yourselves not worthy of eternal life, behold we are turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord gave us charge."*

*"I have appointed thee a light unto the Gentiles,  
to the end that thou shouldst be for salvation unto the ends of the earth."*

*And the Gentiles, hearing, were rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord. And as many as believed were appointed unto eternal life. And the word of the Lord was dispersed through all the region. But the Jews stirred up pious women of influence and chief men of the city and raised up a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and cast them out from their region. And they shook off the dust from their feet and went unto Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and the Holy Spirit.*

## COMMENTARY

### Of Persevering Grace and Persistent Rejection

As with Jesus, the common people heard Paul gladly. Many of them followed him out of the synagogue and urged him to tell them more. Finally almost the entire city came together to hear the wondrous word of the Lord.

Of course, the Jews (especially the leaders) were full of envy and malice. Their barren and burdensome religious

regimentation had produced nothing but grinding bondage to empty religious forms. Their resistance to the message of Paul was regarded as blasphemous. Paul was not merely a philosopher or religionist throwing out sage aphorisms to be picked at by godless theologians. He was the agent of Christ, communicating the eternal truth of God. In a confidence and boldness born of the Spirit, Paul

pierced the heart of his detractors, as Stephen had done. “You have refused Christ and judged yourselves as unworthy of eternal life. You had your chance. We are turning to the Gentiles as we were commissioned to do.”

In his next quotation from the Old Testament, Paul identifies himself as one with Christ in the bringing of light and life to the Gentiles. The prophecies of the Old Testament are as clear regarding the ultimate restoration of the Gentiles, as of the Jews. David the prophet and king speaks pointedly of the place of the Gentiles in the final scenarios of God’s redemptive purpose—“*Princes shall come out of Egypt: Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands to God. Sing unto God, ye kingdoms of the earth; O sing praises unto the Lord*” (Psalm 68:31,32). In context, the setting of the passage is the restoration of worship to the temple of Jerusalem. God has come in His Spirit to His holy hill of Zion; the Jews have recovered their zeal to worship Yahweh, now the resurrected Messiah; and the Gentiles join in universal adoration of the true King of Kings.

The Gentiles rejoice in the news of their inclusion in the redemptive purpose of

God and express in large numbers their acceptance of Christ. “*As many as believed were appointed unto eternal life.*” The Greek word translated “appointed” is from *tasso*—“to be set in orderly array.” The Gentiles were fitted into the place that was awaiting them in the universal plan of God.

But the envious Jewish leaders stirred up influential people against Paul and Barnabas, and, as with Jesus, spearheaded a wholesale revolt and threw Paul and Barnabas out of the city. And the response of the apostles? They shook the dust of the city off their feet and rejoiced in their sharing of suffering with the Son of God. They were again filled with the Spirit—not in some renewal of Pentecostal power—but simply in the exhilaration that comes with the focus upon the astounding truth that the Spirit of Christ actually dwells in the hearts of men, and the fiercest of battles with the enemy are met unfailingly with the power and grace of Christ. The proclamation Paul had declared to Jew and Gentile is the victory song of the Lamb, who shall never be overwhelmed by Satan.

# Acts 14:1-7

## TRANSLATION

*And in Iconium, it occurred that they [Paul and Barnabas] entered the synagogue of the Jews and spoke in such a way that a large number believed, both of Jews and Greeks. But the Jews who were unpersuaded stirred up and disaffected the minds of the Gentiles against the brethren. Nevertheless, they [Paul and Barnabas] remained for some time and spoke boldly concerning the Lord, who was bearing witness to the word of His grace, granting signs and wonders to take place through their hands. But the multitude of the city was divided, and some were with the Jews, and some were with the apostles. But when there came a threat of violence by both the Gentiles and the Jews, with their rulers, to outrage and stone them, they became aware of it and fled into the cities of Lycaonia—Lystra and Derbe, and the surrounding regions. And there they were proclaiming the gospel.*

## COMMENTARY

### **Further Encounters With the Jews—The Persuaded and the Unpersuaded**

Rejected ultimately by the Jews of Antioch of Pisidia, Paul and Barnabas moved on to the cities of Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. These were Roman provincial colonies on the road from Antioch to the East. Not greatly significant in the process of history, as were places like Antioch and Galatia, they were, nevertheless, important to God as every human being is important to an equal degree in the eyes of Him who is “*no respecter of persons.*” Many a servant of God has labored for a lifetime in small out-of-the-way tribes and villages, unknown, unsung, and yet in the eyes of God, equally glorious to Him as the most widely known proclaimers of the gospel with impressive numbers of followers. Throughout Asia Minor, there were similar populations of Jews and Gentiles. The Jews had their synagogues, and

Gentiles, from time to time, joined with them in worship. Paul and Barnabas driven from Antioch of Pisidia by the very Jews to whom they had brought the message of Messianic deliverance, went directly to the synagogue in Iconium, where they boldly confronted again the apostate people of God, from whom they had received continuously the rejection and hubris that had been meted out alike to all the prophets of God from Moses to the Messiah Himself.

As before, in every city, there were many, both of Jews and Gentiles, who believed, and many who did not, who rose up in violent opposition. These were described as the “unpersuaded” (from *apeitho*). The city was divided. Some were persuaded and some were not. Wherever the Gospel went, the cities fell into the categories of

the persuaded and the unpersuaded. And so in the world today. Historians and sociologists have a multitude of neat categories by which they distinguish between one human being and another, or one segment of society and another. In God's eyes, there are *only* two—the believer and the unbeliever; the persuaded and the unpersuaded. Peter told the Jews in Jerusalem that the Holy Spirit would be given to all “who were the persuaded—(from *peitho*)” (Acts 5:32). (Not a distinction between obedient and disobedient Christians, but between believers and unbelievers.)

There is so much stress in today's world, even among Christians, on “making something of oneself.” Parents are often proud of the young person who is an achiever, whatever the spiritual state, and troubled about the young person who is less successful, even though that one may be seeking to follow Christ by not focusing on worldly success. Jesus was clear in His attitude toward this—“*What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul*” (Mark 8:36).

As always, the “unpersuaded” stirred up trouble. Nevertheless, Paul and Barnabas remained for some time “*speaking boldly concerning the Lord.*” And as He had promised the disciples, there were “signs following.” The Word was confirmed by miracles through the hands of Paul and Barnabas. It must be noted here that the Lord Himself was actually doing the miracles through the apostles. It was not that the apostles had the power to use as they chose—a most important distinction. Many “bill” themselves as “faith healers.” Even though a verbal credit may be given to the Lord, all too often the individual is the focus of attention, as possessing the power, and not as a mere channel through which the power of God is expressed. There is a misuse of the

concept of the gift of healing, as though it were something resident within the individual. If God chooses to heal, there will be healing; if He chooses for His own reasons, not to heal, there will be no healing. So much is placed on the human side—faith, worthiness, will—that there can be very little confidence in one's touch with God.

The healings that took place were for signs to confirm the message of the apostles and not for any other reasons. Believers today, who have the Word of God already confirmed, are dealt with on an entirely different basis in the matter of healing. The word throughout the New Testament is that believers suffer with Christ. “*For even hereunto were you called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example that you should follow His steps*” (I Peter 2:21). And again in 4:1—“*Forasmuch then as Christ has suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves likewise with the same mind: for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased [had a rest] from sin.*” We are obviously in a different phase from the days when the authority of the apostles had to be confirmed without a biblical revelation by which they could be tested. In the post-biblical era (after the New Testament was completed), the emphasis would appear to be on the growth of the believers through suffering. In fact, as Paul left the brethren upon returning to Antioch after a mission replete with the miraculous, he encouraged the brethren in the faith and warned them that “*through much affliction [tribulation, pressure] they must enter the kingdom of God*” (Acts 14:22). It is not to say that healings do not take place among the believers, but rather they must be seen in the light of divine purpose for the individual and not as an inevitable response to effectual prayer. To see it otherwise would be to challenge the effectiveness of countless numbers of God's saints and servants through the

ages (including Paul, himself) who were not healed or delivered from physical afflictions. God is glorified through the sufferings of His people, even though those sufferings might be unto death. In fact, Jesus regarded death as a way of glorifying God. *“This He said, signifying by what death he [Peter] should glorify God”* (John 21:19).

Many a Christian today has been tormented over this issue—why was I not able to have healing for myself? My loved one? Where have I failed? If God’s grace to us is based on our own worthiness, or faith, or will, we are all sunk. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead in the midst of a crowd of doubting Jews, including Mary and Martha, His close friends. Nor did He ever refuse to help an individual because of unworthiness or weakness of faith, although He often challenged them on both issues. (The

Capernaum episode was not simply weakness of faith, but rejection *en masse* by the community).

The threat of violence by the “unpersuaded” Jews and Gentiles stirred Paul and Barnabas to leave the city for other regions. It was not that they were cowardly, but that they were led by the Spirit through circumstances to move on to other cities. It was the issue of “fight or flight” as a response to trouble. Sometimes the disciples accepted persecution and martyrdom. Sometimes they were led to move on. Christians today must face the same question, especially in countries where violence is rife, *“Let each be persuaded in his own mind.”* There is no universal rule. But one thing is certain—the Spirit will make it clear—not in hypothetical conjectures, nor anxious wonder, but in guidance in the actual moment of need.





# Acts 14:8-20

## TRANSLATION

*And a certain man in Lystra, impotent in his feet, who had never walked was sitting, lame from his mother's womb. This one heard Paul speaking, who gazed on him, and beholding that he had faith to be saved, he said with a great voice, "Rise up erect upon your feet." And he leaped up and walked. And the crowd, seeing what Paul did, lifted up their voice in Lycaonese saying, "The gods have become like men and descended to us." And they were calling Barnabas, Zeus [Jupiter] and Paul, Hermes [Mercury], since he was the one communicating the word. And the priest of Zeus, who was before the city, brought bulls and wreaths to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the people. And the apostles, Barnabas and Paul, tore their garments and ran among the crowd, crying out and saying, "People, why do you do these things? We also are men of like feelings as you, proclaiming the tidings to you that you should turn from these vain things to the living God, who made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all the things that are in them, who also in generations gone by permitted all the Gentiles to go their own way. And indeed did not Himself leave you without a witness of good works, giving to you rain from heaven, and fruit-bearing seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness." And saying these things, they could hardly restrain them from sacrificing to them.*

*And Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and persuaded the crowd, and having stoned Paul they dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. And the disciples surrounded him, and he rose up and entered the city. And the next day he went out with Barnabas unto Derbe.*

## COMMENTARY

### Lystra—From Objects of Worship to Objects of Hate

The fickle finger of human vacillation etched its message in stone, deep upon the brow of Paul. When he had offered healing—a fleshly benefit—he was received as a god, but the flesh is a wasteland of avarice and self-interest. The miracle of the lame man was readily

submerged in the satanic flood of venom that poured forth from the “unpersuaded” Jews of Antioch and Iconium, who pursued Paul and Barnabas with murderous fury.

That it was satanic was obvious. Differences within the Jewish religious

community have always brought conflict, often barriers and bitterness, but wheresoever the name of Jesus arose, there was a demonic determination to expunge Him and His followers from the face of the earth. Paul knew well this manic obsession. Now he would himself bear its fury.

Immediately upon their entry into Lystra, Paul and Barnabas had encountered a lame man, a victim of their archenemy, Satan—the evil genius who had turned the garden of God into a wilderness of wretchedness and death. In a stroke of divine power, sorrow was turned into rejoicing, and Paul served notice on his enemy that his power was no match for God's.

**Beholding that he had faith to be saved . . .** Whence came the faith? He had heard Paul speak, probably for the first time; had no tradition of healing to follow; had no opportunity for the development of personal feelings of confidence that healing was even possible. His faith was obviously a gift from God, as all effective faith must be and as the New Testament constantly affirms. Even for Jesus, *“the power of God must be present to heal”* (Luke 5:17). Paul constantly insisted that there was nothing in himself that would give to him power with God. In Philippians 3, he clearly confesses that nothing of his own religious pedigree or practices, impeccable as they were, had anything to do with the working of the Spirit within. To try to “work up” a feeling of confidence that God is going to do a certain thing at a certain time, or in a certain way is futile, if not an exercise in human presumption. If faith is not present for a certain thing, it is usually not because of human failure, nor doubt that God would be capable of doing it, but rather the lack of conviction that it is what God wants or is going to do in the present situation. This conviction is something God must give when He is ready to do so.

The power Paul expressed was not a residual thing within himself, but a flow of divine energy through him when it was God's purpose to do so. The faith the lame

man exhibited was a gift from God at a time when He wanted to demonstrate His power and affirms the authority of the apostles.

It was the cycle exhibited when the Holy Spirit directs the prayer and responds to the prayer He directs. As Paul so clearly explains in Roman 8:26—*“Likewise also the Spirit helpeth our infirmities [weaknesses]. For we know not what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.”* The Greek text is more vivid. The word, “helpeth,” is the Greek word *sunantilambanetai*, which means “to lay hold of with us, in our stead.” We participate only in sharing our burdens with Him. We are still involved, but He carries the weight. In the promise in John 14—*“If you ask anything in My name, I will do it”* (v. 14)—we have this cycle. To ask in the name of Christ means, of course, to be His agent in the asking. The Spirit lays a prayer on our hearts; we offer it to God; He responds according to His purpose. If we ask on our own and then invoke the name of Christ, it is like a forgery. Christ has not authorized the use of His name. But how do we know the prayer has been initiated by the Spirit? We will ask in faith. Because with the prayer He initiates, comes also the faith to receive the answer and the sense that it is God's answer, even if not as we might have expected or hoped for.

It is most important to understand, however, that the faith God gives is a flow between His Spirit and ours, and may not be accompanied by the emotions or feelings of confidence in our own human minds. We may still be uncertain about what God is going to do right up to the last, but that has little to do with the process of faith flowing between our spirit and God's. The faith that God gives us is the effective vehicle through which God functions in us. Without such faith it is impossible to interact with Him, just

as it would be impossible for a light to go on without some kind of electric energy flowing between it and the activating source. Paul makes a point of the fact that the offerings of the Jews in their state of apostasy were of no value whatever because they were not offered with faith, that is, they had no effective vehicle of interaction with God.

So then the Spirit directs the prayer, gives the faith to offer it, and then brings it before God or makes intercession for us—literally “meets God on our behalf.” *With unutterable groanings*—literally, “inward breathings.” That is, the Spirit and the Father communicate in a direct exchange that does not need the cumbersome vehicle of human words. All of this takes place within us and may have little outward manifestation in feelings or audible expressions.

That God has heard is manifested rather in inner peace, when such peace is not blocked out of our minds by human rationalizations and faulty expectations. Remember—when we have committed a matter to God, whatever is, is what He wants. Our sense of inner peace is often hindered by preconceived ideas about what God ought to do.

But back to Paul. The lame man had faith because it was given him in the hour. There was no indication that he had made a previous commitment to Christ, or had any special piety, or worthiness, or even fervency of prayer. He received a touch of faith: Paul was the channel; Christ the giver of grace. With very few (or perhaps none) of those mentioned in Scripture as recipients of healing was there any indication of special piety or worthiness. There was nothing but the will of God extending grace for His own purposes. If one goes on the basis on one’s own worthiness, one will never have confidence or be at peace. When Christ is ready to use one, or minister to one, He will do it despite one’s human inadequacy

**To be saved.** The Greek word is *sothenai*. The common translation—“healed”—is not adequate. It was not just a matter of physical recovery. That would have left him with the pain of darkness greater than the physical suffering. The very faith of God generated within him would indeed, as the text suggests, deliver his whole person—spirit as well as body. This was not necessarily true of all cases of healing but was a point of special emphasis here.

**The gods . . . have descended to us.** The miracle electrified the crowd. So convinced were they that Barnabas and Paul were deities that they were going to offer sacrifices to them. Zeus was superseded only by Uranus in the Greek pantheon of gods. The Roman counterpart was Jupiter. Hermes, or Mercury, was the messenger of communication from the deities. Even Paul’s dramatic rejection of the sacrifice hardly restrained the people.

**Then came the Jews . . .** suddenly the storm hit. Adoration turned to fury. In one sentence, the calm turns to catastrophe, “*And having persuaded the crowd, they stoned Paul and dragged him from the city.*” Miracles never were an adequate basis of belief in God. Nor were they ever intended to be. In Jesus’ story of the rich man and Lazarus, Abraham told the rich man, who wanted someone to go back and warn his family, “*If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded [from *peitho*, as in Acts 5:32] though one rose from the dead*” (Luke 16:31). But did not John say that the miracles were written that they might believe? Believe, yes, but believe what? That Jesus was the Son of God—the true Messiah. The miracles of Jesus were never performed to prove the existence of God. They were for a confirmation to the Jews who already believed in God, that Jesus was indeed His Son.

Those who demand a special miracle from God—“so they can believe”—will never be persuaded by that miracle, but will invariably find a way to deny it. So, the miracle performed by Paul on the lame man fulfilled God’s own purpose of confirming the authority of the apostles, but to the “unpersuaded” it had no more effect than a carnival trick.

Whether Paul was really dead, or only assumed to be dead, is not clear. No effort was made by the apostles who

stood around, to perform a miracle. It does not even suggest that they prayed for him. But if he were dead, the same power that raised up the lame man could have raised up Paul. And it was entirely possible that Paul had died and saw some of the visions he later records. In either case, Paul was restored by the hand of God, with no apparent involvement by the disciples, who were not described as standing around in a prayer circle, but just “standing around”.

# Acts 14:21-22

## TRANSLATION

*And having preached the gospel in that city [Derbe], and having made a considerable number of disciples, they returned unto Lystra and unto Iconium and unto Antioch, meanwhile establishing the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to persevere in the faith, and that through many afflictions we must enter into the kingdom of God.*

## COMMENTARY

### Establishing and Edifying the Body of Believers

Paul and Barnabas went about their appointed task—establishing the community of believers from place to place. On to Derbe; back to Lystra and Iconium; and then to return to Antioch.

They went as they had been called; and they went with faith and vigor; and they went effectively—in the power of God. They went, not reluctantly with obligation, attempting to pay for their redemption. They went joyously and eagerly in spite of the multitude of afflictions which they suffered in the going. They went as unto death. In those days it was no light matter to fly in the face of the entrenched Jewish hierarchy. They went because God had called them; and having called them, empowered them and filled them with a heart for the task.

And as they went they made disciples—a considerable number of them. The Greek word is *matheteuo*, which means, literally, “to make learners”—something more than simply “transmitting knowledge.” The Greek word for “teaching”, in that sense, is *didasko*. Both words are used in the so-called “Great Commission”—“**making**

**disciples (*matheteuo*) . . . teaching them (*didasko*) to observe.”**

It is tempting to assume that Paul was setting a pattern for every believer to follow. In fact, Matthew 28:19 seems to teach that very thing—“*Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature, teaching them [**matheteuo**, making disciples], and baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*” But to whom was Jesus saying this? To all believers? Not according to the previous verse—“*And the eleven went into Galilee, unto the mountain which Jesus had appointed to them. . .and Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, ‘**Go ye into all the world**. . .’*” There is a use of the word “disciple” which is applied generally to all the followers of Christ, and there is a usage which was specifically applied to the twelve whom Jesus had called to be the foundation of the church, or the *ecclesia*. In this sense, the word is comparable to “apostle”, which can also be used in either the broader or narrower sense. Although “apostle”, even in its broadest sense, is used only of a special gift and not of the believers in general.

It is important to give attention to these two words because much confusion exists in the church over the present exercise of these functions. It is most essential to differentiate between that which is a special gift; and a special group; and a general designation. All believers are disciples in the sense of being followers of Christ, and therefore learners, but only the original twelve were disciples in the specialized sense. It was this group that Jesus was addressing in Matthew 28:19 (Judas having now been lost). At that point they represented the leadership (and the only leadership) who were charged with the task of building the body of believers (*ekklesia*), making disciples, baptizing and teaching. The famous “keys of the kingdom” designating their leadership, were given not only to Peter, but to all of the twelve (Judas having been later replaced by Matthias). Obviously they would pass the charge on to successive leaders, but nowhere is it indicated that every Christian would have such gifts. In fact, quite the contrary. In I Corinthians 12, Paul specifically states that all do not have the same gifts—“Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers?” The making of disciples (learners) involves teaching. It involves vocal gifts not possessed by all. It must be noted in passing, that the expression at the end of the chapter, translated “best gifts” is the Greek word *meidzōna* and means “greater.” The sentence should be translated— “*But be devoted to the greater gifts*” and really goes with chapter 13, where Paul discusses the superiority of *agape* love. Paul certainly would not have been suggesting that any of the gifts would be greater than another—a concept which he has denounced in the preceding verses. That one believer should be regarded as greater than another is a human folly that Jesus put to rest in no uncertain terms when it arose among the disciples.

There will never again be a disciple in the sense of the original twelve, but the kind of leadership required to make

other disciples certainly would be perpetuated. Similarly, the word “apostle” refers to the original twelve plus Paul, who claimed the title because of the vision of Jesus he had on the Damascus road (with perhaps others not specifically recounted). In I Corinthians 9, Paul defends his right to be called an apostle on that basis. He was obviously referring to a select group and not the more general gift of apostleship. There will never again be such a group who not only were builders of the *ekklesia* but direct oracles of Christ in the New Testament revelation. If indeed there have been those since then who have received revelations and visions, it would be exceedingly presumptuous for such ones to attach to their revelations the same import and certainty that attended the writers of the New Testament. Such claims are made today, but have invariably led to great deception and error. It is one thing to make a personal claim to special visitations from the Spirit. It is quite another to pass these on as the certain word of Christ to others. There is no way whatsoever that others can verify the claim. Even so-called miracles are produced in numberless abundance by all claimants to special powers in every quarter of the cultic and occultic, and have been since the beginning of mankind (the magicians of Egypt, for example). That is not to discount all special experiences between God and His people, but only to question the validity of accepting such claims as the basis of truth and action for others. There has never been a time in history when there have not been a host of claimants to such revelations and a host of gullible followers to give their claims a vehicle for poisoning the minds of others.

There is only one safe haven—the thorough knowledge of the written revelation—the Bible. There is no need for private revelations. They only serve as a substitute for the arduous task of mastering the original revelation. It is much easier to claim a personal word

from God than to master the ones He has already given.

There is, on the other hand, a special gift of apostleship. The word *apostolos* means “a sent one.” It was the gift of the pioneer—the vanguard of the evangel, if you will. Paul went about establishing communities of believers in unevangelized areas, like some of the modern missionaries (not making congregations by exploiting the existing ones). He specifically stated that he was not building on the foundations of others (Romans 15:20). The category of “apostle” can be applied in a broader sense than the original twelve, but never universally to all believers, as in the case of “disciples.”

Now, who is charged with the task of “making disciples?” First of all, it was the “eleven” of Matthew 28:18. But who then? Those who were charged also with teaching and baptizing—the leaders to whom the “baton” would be passed from age to age. Why not all believers? Paul answers—“*Are all teachers?*” “Discipling” involves teaching. It is one thing to give a witness to God’s grace; it is quite another to take on pupils (whether one or many) as *matheteuo* requires. The potentials of misleading the pupils are enormous, if the task is done universally by amateurs or those not gifted. Furthermore, the burden of guilt laid upon those who are not gifted is unbearable. Leaders who assume that all believers should have their gift are precisely in the place of the Pharisees who laid upon others “burdens grievous to be borne” (Matthew 23:4). It is so easy to tell others what to do. If the leader has a gift of teaching or discipling, let him exercise his gift, but let him not presume to insist that others must have his gift. It is monstrous for leaders to assume that their services are performed because they are more dedicated, and that if the people were as dedicated as they, they would be doing the same thing. Paul responds to such ones in I Corinthians 4:7—“*What hast thou that*

*thou hast not received* [as a gift]. *And why dost thou boast as though thou hadst not received it?*” Let the leaders beware lest they become judges rather than comforters; “cattle drovers” rather than shepherds; dispensers of law rather than ministers of grace.

But what then is the obligation of the believer? There is none. What? No obligation? No, not an obligation—an exercise of a gift of the Spirit. What gift? The gift the Holy Spirit gives to each one. Paul had his gift of apostleship. The Spirit exercised that gift through him. Paul said, “*The love of Christ compels me* [presses me]” (II Corinthians 5:14). He did not say love for Christ, but the love of Christ—Christ’s love within him reaching out through him to others; not his love for Christ providing a compelling motive, but the Holy Spirit within compelling him—expressing the love of Christ to others, in spite of the unreliable expressions and feelings of human love for Christ. It was not so much what Paul saw of the world’s need, but what Christ saw, and gifted him to be a channel beyond all human capacity, to touch the world with a shaft of His power and glory.

If we serve Christ out of a human sense of obligation, we are assuming that there is a price for redemption—but then it is not free. We are again under the law. We do not owe Christ anything for our salvation. Not because His sacrifice was not of infinite value, but because it was priceless and we are bankrupt. We do not owe, because we cannot pay. Thus, we serve Him as a gift and not an obligation. If we press upon believers the requirement that they must try to pay for their salvation—an impossible task—we rob them of the joy of simply giving Christ a gift—the gift of one’s life, poured out for Him. If God gives us an assignment, He will also give us the gift and the desire to do it. If we are serving because of obligation, we are probably serving out of a fleshly religious duty. If



“making disciples” or teaching does not come naturally, then it is not something one is gifted to do. Any service that is unnatural or burdensome is likely to be from human persuasion and not from Christ.

So Paul and Barnabas went about “making disciples.” They were exercising the gifts God had given them and not establishing a pattern for all believers to follow.

**Establishing the souls of the disciples and encouraging them . . .**

“Establishing” is from the Greek word for “settling down.” They were giving them a footing. **Souls** (*psuche*) is a Hebraism—the equivalent of *nephesh* which refers to life, but more than animal life. It means the whole person as an intelligent being created in the image of God. **Encouraging**—not “exhorting” as many translate it. It is the same word as the word for the Holy Spirit—*paraclete*, Comforter—“one called alongside to help.” Words of instruction, like words of consolation, ought to come not with the harshness of the “cattle prod”, but the gentle firmness of the shepherd’s crook. The leaders of God’s people are shepherds, not cattle drovers. The more appropriate word for *parakaleo*, instead of “exhort” is “encourage,” from the French word for heart—*cour*—*en-cour-age*, to “enhearten.” Even the words of instruction and sometimes warning can be given in an encouraging, and not discouraging way. The difference between human criticism and the instruction or

warning of the Spirit is that human criticism brings discouragement, while the chastening of the Holy Spirit brings penitence, in a context of love and mercy.

**Through many afflictions we must enter the kingdom of God.**

“Affliction”—*thlipsis*—means, basically, “pressures.” The word “tribulation” tends to give the impression of persecutions as Christian martyrs. *Thlipsis* really has to do with the daily pressures that Satan brings upon us to turn us away from Christ. Satan attacks us in many areas—health, human relationships, money, temptations in earthly desires. Job was an excellent example of a child of God battered by Satan for purposes he did not understand. For Job it was a test of faith and not a lack of faith (as many would have us believe today).

It is a monstrous thing for Christian leaders (who ought to know better) to add to the burden of the suffering saints, by suggesting that their suffering or that of their loved ones is the result of some failure on their part. Such purveyors of error are more like the Pharisee than the shepherd, putting on the believers “burdens grievous to be borne.” The word of Jesus was—“*Come unto Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest*” (Matthew 11:28). And Paul said, “*Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory*” (II Corinthians 4:17).

# Acts 14:23-28

## TRANSLATION

*And having ordained for them elders in each fellowship [ekklesia], and having prayed with fasting, they [Paul and Barnabas] entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had believed. And having passed through Pisidia, they came unto Pamphylia. And having spoken the word in Perga, they descended into Attalia. And from there they sailed unto Antioch, where they had been committed [originally] by the grace of God unto the work which they had fulfilled. And when they had arrived and had gathered together the fellowship [ekklesia], they declared to them what things God had done with them, and that He had opened to the Gentiles the door of faith.*

## COMMENTARY

### Establishing the Body (Part II)

As Paul and Barnabas went, they established fellowships of believers. The English text refers to these as “churches,” although the Greek word *ekklesia* means simply “called out ones.” The emphasis of *ekklesia* is on persons, whereas the emphasis of the English word “church” seems to move inevitably toward the idea of a thing—an organization, or club, or association, or even a building.

Fundamentally the *ekklesia* is a family unity—a group of persons integrally related to God and to one another through the power of the Holy Spirit. The *ekklesia* was never intended to be the legal entity that Israel was as a highly structured, albeit divinely ordered, national entity. It was precisely because the Holy Spirit had not yet come that the legal structure was necessary. The *ekklesia* of the New Testament is an altogether different order. It is a living entity—a body, a bride, a family of the children of God. To reduce it to an organization would be like organizing a

family and electing officers. The persisting of the effort through the centuries to develop such organizations, bespeaks the failure to grasp the implications of the familial nature of the believers on earth, as it is expressed by the word *ekklesia*. We are not a religious group, but an integral part of God. Anyone who identifies with Christ as Savior is *de facto* a part of the *ekklesia*. The *ekklesia* is “called out” of the world—the fleshly realm—to be a part of the kingdom of God, which is spirit in nature. The word “church”, as it appears in the English versions of the Bible, is an Anglo-Saxon word (*circe*), derived ultimately from the Greek word *kuriakos*—“pertaining to the Lord.” *Kuriakos* is never used as a synonym for *ekklesia*. It is used of **things** that pertain to the Lord rather than **people**—“The Lord’s Supper,” the Lord’s Day, for example.

The shift from *ekklesia* to *kuriakos* was a most unfortunate one. *Ekklesia* is the only word in the New Testament ever used of the body of believers as the

specially ordained people of God. It is, in the New Testament, what the term “Israel” was in the Old Testament. *Kuriakos*, or church, obscures the idea of the living organism of the family with a word which allows the intrusion of a large number of organizational elements. The church becomes a thing instead of a family even if the “thing” does pertain to the Lord. One goes to the “Lord’s house” on the “Lord’s day” to contribute the “Lord’s money” to the “Lord’s work.” Of course, it follows that one must organize and elect officers to administer “the Lord’s business”—to care for the “Lord’s building” and handle the “Lord’s money” to do “the Lord’s work.” So inevitably one is occupied with the organization, and the program becomes the central focus. And then, of course, the only people of importance are those contributing measurably to the organization. Moreover, the “Lord’s work” becomes whatever programs may promote the organization (with the assumption perforce that there is a direct ratio between the size of the organization and the favor of the Lord).

The word *ekklesia* is used in two ways in the New Testament—the body of believers at large, and the individual segments of the body, meeting in various places. **Never** is the word used of a building or an organization, nor does it ever imply that there could be only one such meeting in a given city. **A meeting of the *ekklesia* is a meeting of the *ekklesia*.** Wherever there are Christians meeting together, there is a meeting of the *ekklesia*. Nor is it ever necessary to have an organized structure at all. In fact, there may not be much interaction between the various groups. Travel and communication being what they were in those days, it was not even practical for there to be much interaction. There is no indication in the New Testament that physical unity has anything to do with spiritual unity. When one receives the

Spirit of Christ, one becomes a part of the *ekklesia*. Whenever such ones come together there is a meeting of the *ekklesia*.

How one meets with other members of the *ekklesia* is important, but not crucial. Paul tells Timothy many things about how he should conduct himself with reference to the *ekklesia*, but never suggested that he should be sure that there is only one official meeting in every city. If that concept were important there ought to have been some specific point of it. The unity of the *ekklesia* is a spiritual unity and not a physical one. To insist on physical unity—that is to say that everyone must meet in the same place, or the same way, or under the same *egis*—destroys the spiritual unity. Remember again—**a meeting of the *ekklesia* is a meeting of the *ekklesia***—wherever, whenever or however. Here the spiritual unity prevails. One can be a member officially of a given church and not be a member of the *ekklesia*, but one can never be a member of the *ekklesia* without being a part of the body of Christ, by His Spirit. Wherever the requirements of membership in a particular group differ from the requirements of membership in the body of Christ, or the *ekklesia*, that group must be seen as something other than the *ekklesia*. It is not necessarily wrong for Christian people to organize and meet in a special way, but it must always be identified as something **containing** members of the *ekklesia*, but not one and the same as the *ekklesia*. So Paul, addressing the *ekklesia* in Corinth, for example, was addressing all believers in Corinth, whatever the particular meetings they were attending. The meetings in homes, common in the early church, could not possibly have accommodated all believers in that particular city.

So what Paul was doing throughout Asia Minor was bringing people to Christ, and as they came to Christ they

were made members of the *ekklesia* by the Holy Spirit.

**And having ordained for them elders in every *ekklesia* . . .** As Paul went, he left leaders in charge. They were called “elders.” The Greek word *presbuteros* simply signifies age. It is the comparative form of the word *presbus*—“old.” How old? What other qualifications? We are not told. The passages in Timothy that refer to leadership are for specific offices that had emerged—the bishop or overseer, and the deacon or server. The elder was, of course, a familiar figure to the Jewish communities as well as the entire East. Age was venerated in the governing structure of society. Obviously, those whom Paul selected were men of wisdom and stature, whom he trusted to lead the believers in their daily pilgrimage on earth. What is significant is that this was apparently the extent of the requirements in the governance of the individual fellowships. In this respect, in communities or villages where there is no pastor, or specially gifted one, the older ones of the group can be leaders of the fellowship. Beyond this governmental necessity was a group of gifts which functioned under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the edifying and enrichment of the life of the believers—teachers, prophets, evangelists and helpers of various kinds. What is missing in the discussion of the functioning of the body of believers is a rigid set of regulations. The obvious implication is that the body of believers is an organism, needing guidance, but not an organization with a highly structured political system.

Furthermore, the lack of specific instructions indicates that as an organism there must be allowance for growth and for the flexibility to change its structure as the need arises. Obviously, the needs of one group would differ considerably from the needs of another. Also obviously, the needs of the

*ekklesia* in the twentieth century are different than those of the first century. The important thing is that the meaning of the *ekklesia* as family be preserved and that methods and structures do not become the focal point—that expansion and preservation of the organization does not obscure or choke out the simplicity and vitality of the spiritual realities of the familial nature of the body of Christ.

In the highly complex social order of today’s world, sometimes the requirements of civil government necessitate certain organizational instruments in order to function. And with the vastness of the field and the work, “*para ecclesiastical*” organizations have arisen, which serve the body but are other than the individual group meetings. Their organizational aspects are more a matter of expedience. But the fellowship of believers itself need not go to this extent merely to experience the body life, which involves prayer and fellowship and ministry to one another. This is the true body life. As it pleases the Head of the body, He will elect to provide for such fellowships gifts of the Spirit, but those gifts may not always be available at all times to every fellowship.

Paul went among the *ekklesia*, as did other apostles and prophets and teachers, edifying the body and sharing with them the truth of God. This is what Paul was doing in Asia Minor—going from *ekklesia* to *ekklesia* as the Lord directed, edifying and encouraging them in the Lord.

**Appointing.** The word used here means to “lay hands on.” It is the essence of the word “ordain.” In some circles, the word “ordain” is despised. That is because of ignorance of the word. It is true that the trappings that go along with ordination sometimes obscure its vital meaning and that it is administered by men, but all ordinations in the New Testament were administered by men, who in turn, were agents of Christ. Timothy was instructed

to make use of the gifts that were given to him “by the laying on of hands.” There is no place in the church for self-styled leaders. Always in the New Testament there was a sharing of ministry and an authentication of ministry by the established leadership. Someone in a position of legitimate authority must concur with the individual’s own assessment that He is indeed called of God. History is full of the tragedies of self-styled leaders, answerable to no one but themselves and an *unverifiable* assumption that God has called them. Paul was unique. He received his authority from God Himself, as a genuine apostle (not the apostolic gift) in the tradition of the original twelve. And he was charged with writing the bulk of the New Testament revelation. To use him as a model of one’s own independent calling is presumptuous as well as extremely perilous to the body of believers. For one to say, “I don’t need to be ordained”, is to say, “I don’t need the rest of the body.” While the ordination certificate is a minor thing, the concurrence of the anointed leadership of

the body is indispensable for the continuity of the divine communication to the people of God.

**He opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.**

Paul and Barnabas passed through a region of villages, simple, sometimes backward, not significant in the history of the church, but needing the message of God, nevertheless. And they were not excluded. When Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, they gathered together the assembly that had first ordained them and declared to them the great news that God had indeed opened the door to the Gentile world. And that simple beginning would unleash the dynamic of a work of God that would sweep across the continents of Eurasia and the Americas and finally touch the shores of the Pacific, long before the emergence of the modern media. The stepping stones from East to West would be simple groups of believers—the *ekklesia*—gathering in the name of Christ to pray the word of God across the face of the earth.

# Acts 15:1-5

## TRANSLATION

*And certain ones came down from the Jews and were teaching the brethren that, "Unless you are circumcised according to the rite of Moses, you cannot be saved." And when no small dissension and conflict arose with them in respect to Paul and Barnabas, they arranged for Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them to go up to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem concerning this dispute. When therefore they had been sent forth by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, recounting to them the conversion of the Gentiles, and bringing about great joy to all the brethren. And when they had arrived in Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared the things which God had done with them. But certain of those who had become believers, who were from the sect of the Pharisees rose up, saying that it was necessary for them to circumcise them and to charge them to keep the law of Moses.*

## COMMENTARY

### In the Midst of Triumph—Trouble

Paul was God's appointed apostle to the Gentiles. To this end he was born, according to God's decree (Galatians 1:15,16), and to this end he had poured out his life, according to his own commitment (Romans 15:15,16). And to this end he had traversed the rugged terrain of Asia Minor, covered the Greek peninsula and sailed the Mediterranean Sea. As he had been relentless in his pursuit of the "hated" Christian, so now he was relentless in his determination to add to their ranks—to spread the name of Christ, whom once he had despised, from Jerusalem to Rome.

And he was eminently successful. Compelled by the love of Christ (rather than the mandate of man) he had been crisscrossing Asia Minor—Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Antioch of Pisidia—as the

champion of Jesus the Christ, the Messenger of God to the world. And when he returned to Antioch and recounted his success among the Gentiles, he **"brought about great joy among the brethren."**

And then came trouble. It came in the form of Jewish believers who were still connected with the sect of the Pharisees. They were his fellow believers and his fellow countrymen, but they came now to Antioch—to the matrix of his missionary enterprise—and sowed dissension and confusion among the believers.

Tragic as was the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees—the Messiah and the religious bigots who sought his death—perhaps more tragic was the conflict between the followers of Christ who had

been liberated from the law by His own sacrifice and the Jewish believers who would put them back again under the yoke of bondage. Such dissension would hurt immeasurably the effort of the followers of Christ to liberate a world caught in the throes of sin and destruction. If the Christians are always in conflict with one another, who will take them seriously? As Paul put it to the Corinthians—*“If the trumpet shall give an uncertain sound, who will prepare himself to battle?”* (I Cor. 14:8).

At issue here was the teaching of these “Pharisees” or “Judaizers,” as they were called, that the law of Moses was still valid—that while one may accept Jesus as the Messiah, one is still obligated to keep the law of Moses. The Pharisees were in constant conflict with Jesus Himself, who tried to show them that His coming abrogated the law of Moses. The law merely provided a temporary structure within which mankind could relate to God until His own Holy Spirit would come to occupy their spirits and write the law on their heart rather than on “tables of stone.” It was not that the law was unsound, but rather that it was temporary. Jesus put it this way—“You cannot put new wine in old wine skins.” Paul used the figure of the “pedagogue.” He said that the law was like a tutor or “governess” until the child would reach the age of maturity. In his letter to the people of Galatia, he said that even though a child might be the heir of the entire estate, he was still subject to his teachers, though he might be “lord of all.” Just so, those who have received the Spirit of Christ no longer need the law as a set of rules, since it is now implanted in their hearts.

**“Unless you are circumcised, you cannot be saved.”** The issue of circumcision raised here by the Jews, was only a facet of this much larger issue of law versus grace. Circumcision was, of course, the rite established by Moses of cutting off the foreskins of the males to

establish their identity with God. Paul said that this identity was now established by the receiving of the Holy Spirit. *“Neither circumcision availeth anything nor uncircumcision, but faith working through love”* (Galatians 5:6). He urged the Galatians to *“stand fast in the liberty with which Christ had made them free, and be not again entangled in the yoke of bondage”* (5:1). In Paul’s mind, the sacrifice of Christ was useless, if one were still under the law of Moses.

Receiving the Spirit of Christ within makes one a member of His family, with all the rights and privileges of such a relationship. One is not a servant in the home. While certain obligations accrue to family membership, they are not the conditions of membership. The Pharisees were trying to make keeping the law a condition of family membership. In so doing, they were destroying the whole reason for the coming of Christ.

But that was only the beginning of conflict within the body of Christ. Paul would face it throughout his entire ministry. From that day to this, such conflict has been a curse upon the church. But what is the reason for it? Why does not Christ give a clearer revelation of the truth? The answer is that the revelation is clear enough, but the human element enters in. In the first place, there is a good deal of carelessness in the mastering of that revelation. Self-styled teachers flood the church with misunderstanding and misapplications of the truth. As long as unqualified teachers are permitted free course among the body of believers, there will always be confusion. In the second place, there is too much of the human element—too much teaching and practice based upon fleshly experiences rather than upon the Word of God. We have absolute truth in our spirits, because Christ is in our spirits. But the human mind is limited in its expression of that truth. The mind is too easily misled and confused. The antidote for that is the mastery of the

Scripture and the reliance on the Holy Spirit for the teaching of it. There is confusion and error when we place human experience over the Word of God. In the third place, there are large numbers of unscrupulous and ambitious opportunists who seek to create “empires” of their own. They are not so much interested in presenting the truth of Christ as they are in the exercise of power. In time they receive their just retribution, but meanwhile many people are injured by them. The secret of their success is the threat of penalty and the appeal to that element of selfish interest which is the essence of fallen human nature. The promises of personal superiority—perfectionism, to be above the rest—are all self-oriented and strike a responsive chord in the human heart. Paul says, *“It is necessary that there be heresies [factions, contentions] among you, that the approved may be manifest”* (I Corinthians 11:19). There is great conflict within the church over fleshly achievement versus the focus on

dependence on the Holy Spirit. When we give up the right to personal happiness and seek instead the purpose of God for our lives, we will be less vulnerable to these religious opportunists.

**They were bringing about great joy to all the brethren.** In the wake of the legalist controversy, Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem to put the matter before the apostles and elders there. On the way, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria where they related to the believers the success of their work among the Gentiles. This brought great joy to their hearts. One of the evidences of the presence of the Holy Spirit within us is the response to other fellow human beings who receive help from Christ. It is the same word and the same spirit expressed by Christ on His way to the cross—*“These things have I spoken unto you, that My joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full”* (John 15:11).





# Acts 15:6-11

## TRANSLATION

*The apostles and elders gathered together to look into this matter. And a great deal of controversy having taken place, Peter rose up and said to them, "Men, brethren, you know that from the beginning of days God chose from among you, that through my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, having given to them the Holy Spirit, even as to all of us. And He made no difference between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you tempt God to lay upon the necks of the disciples a yoke which neither we nor our fathers were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of our Lord Jesus we are saved in the same way as those."*

## COMMENTARY

### New Wineskins for New Wine

Jesus had sought earnestly to prepare his people for the dramatic change that was to take place in their relationship to God. The prophets had promised a new heart for the people of God. The stony heart which was the petrified result of centuries of disobedience and rebellion was about to be replaced with a heart of flesh. *"A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you. And I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you shall keep My judgments and do them"* (Ezekiel 36:26,27). The heart of flesh, of course, means a heart that is vital and pliable. God would put His own Spirit within their spirits and their relationship to Him would be based upon a change of nature—a partaking of the very divine nature of God Himself. They would be members of His family and

restored to the original design and purpose of God in the beginning of creation, before the Fall would divest the creature of His immortal nature.

This change of nature would usher in a whole new order of things. If the purpose of the law of Moses had been to reveal to fallen human minds the will and purpose of God, at the same time it would show that human nature, limited by the Fall, would not be able to fulfill that purpose without God's help. God had made provisions for human weakness in a system of sacrifices and ceremonies and rituals that would keep His people always mindful of their dependency upon Him. But in the new order of things, when the very Spirit of God would be implanted within the heart of man, these religious devices would no longer be necessary. Of course, the sacrifice of Christ would be the all inclusive

substitute for animal sacrifices. Now, under the new order or covenant, the old covenant was invalid. It was not merely that certain sections of it were voided, but the entire covenant became obsolete. Jesus sought to prepare His people for this change in the use of many parables, metaphors, symbols and allegories. One of the metaphors that He used was wine and wineskins. As the wine ages there is always expansion. New wineskins would expand with the wine, but old wineskins would not have the resilience and would burst. The new covenant needed a whole new structure. The framework that served the old covenant well, would not do for the new one. The old covenant was based on endless restrictions. The new covenant was couched in freedom. The law would be written on the heart and not on stone tablets as was the law of Moses.

The Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day, were vehemently opposed to this new teaching. As the custodians of the law, they wielded a great deal of power. To set the people free from the bondage of the law was to set them free from their despotic rule. At one point Jesus said to them that they would traverse sea and land to make one convert and when they had gained him, they made him two-fold more the child of hell than they themselves were.

Jesus had come specifically to deliver the people of God from the bondage of the law. It had only been a temporary system and now needed to be replaced. There had been many statements by the prophets of old to this effect. The Messiah—the Christ—was to be the Deliverer. The Pharisees wanted deliverance, but only deliverance from Rome—their political enemy. They looked for their Messiah to throw off the tyranny of their Roman conquerors. They did not know that in doing so they actually performed the very sacrifice that proved to be their own undoing. The death of Christ would pave the way for the new covenant.

This is the backdrop against which the events of chapter 15 must be understood. The central issue was the place of the law in the new covenant. Many of the Jewish believers had difficulty accepting the new freedom. After all, the law had been their life and that of their forebears for centuries. They found it hard to believe that they were freed from the entire system. They had accepted the sacrifice of Christ, which ended their own responsibility of sacrifice. It seemed too good to be true; they were insecure in it. Among the traditions that they had difficulty giving up was the separation between Jew and Gentile. They had been forbidden to eat with them. In fact, they had not even considered the Gentiles to be worthy of salvation. Now they are disturbed at the idea of Gentiles being saved and granted the filling of the Holy Spirit even as they.

**From the beginning of days God chose . . .** Peter's vision on the rooftop of Simon the tanner (chapter 10) had confirmed the matter to the satisfaction of the leaders of the Christian community. He had been a chosen vessel of God for the task. And such was his respect among the leaders, and such the confirming power of the Holy Spirit that the believers accepted him as God's appointed messenger.

**Beginning** (*archaios*—from *archo*, begin). Whether Luke meant the beginning of the advent of the Holy Spirit, or the beginning of the apostle's life, or the beginning of the world is not clear. Jeremiah had been called before he was in the womb (Jeremiah 1:5); Paul had been separated from his mother's womb (Galatians 1:15). In any case it was part of God's preordained plan. Nor did the other disciples challenge that fact. They gave him a hearing.

**A yoke which neither we nor our fathers were able to bear.** He gave them a stinging rebuke. “Why do you tempt God to lay a yoke on their necks? And what’s more, we couldn’t even bear it ourselves.” There’s nothing so ludicrous or ridiculous as the self-righteous setting standards for others. (Paul speaks very clearly on the subject in Romans 14.)

**Saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus.** This key concept by Peter is the essence of the new covenant. Paul expresses it succinctly to the Ephesians—“*By grace are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast*” (2:8). In one way or

another, this concept is presented in almost every book of the New Testament. In fact, it is the underlying theme of the whole Bible. God’s creation had been corrupted by disobedience. Human beings, originally possessing God’s Spirit and His immortality, lost both. Both are restored in the sacrifice of Christ to all who come to Him. Jew and Gentile alike receive the Spirit of God and His immortality, not by earning it, but by asking for it.

Peter makes this plain to the assembly of believers gathered to debate the question and sets the standard for the rest of the New Testament.



# Acts 15:12-21

## TRANSLATION

*And all the multitude kept silence and were hearing Barnabas and Paul recounting the signs and wonders which God had done among the Gentiles through them. And when they had become silent, James answered and said, “Men, brethren, hear me: Simeon [Peter] recounted even how at the first God made a visit to take from the Gentiles a people for His name. And with this, the words of the prophets agree.*

*‘After these things I will return, and will rebuild the dwelling place of David, which has fallen down; and the ruins of it I will rebuild, and I will restore it; so that the remainder of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who are summoned with My name upon them said the Lord, who does all these things.’*

*[Which words of the prophets] have been known from of old. Therefore my judgment is that we not harass those from the Gentiles who have turned to God, but that we write to them to abstain from the defilement of idols, and from perversion, and from things slain without bloodshed, and from the blood itself. For Moses has had from old times, those who from city to city preach him in the synagogues, reading on every Sabbath.”*

## COMMENTARY

### **Not for Jews Only—Not for Bondage.**

The time had come. The grace of God would cover the earth as the “waters cover the sea.” The door was opened wide to the Gentiles. The Word of God was no longer for the Jews only. And that was the cause of the furor that rocked the Jewish leaders. To them, the Gentiles had been but dogs—unfit for the kingdom of God. But then, of course, the Jews were dogs to the Gentiles. Shylock, the famous usurer of Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* mocks Antonio who comes to borrow money. “Hath a dog monies? Is it possible a cur can lend

three thousand ducats?” So breaking down the “wall of partition” between Jew and Gentile was indeed only possible by the strong intervention of God.

To Paul and Barnabas, God had given the ministry of reconciliation among the Gentiles and with it the gift of “miracles” essential to validate the message. Who would believe them? They had as yet no New Testament revelation with which to challenge the Torah—the Old Testament—which had been the sacred writ of the Jews for fifteen hundred

years. It was understandable that they would be skeptical. There was no other way to confirm the word of the apostles except with “signs following.”

And that, of course, is the essential significance of the “miracles.” It is most important to understand that a miracle is a “sign” (*semeion*). In modern usage it has come to mean any extraordinary act of God. But that is where confusion sets in, since it is assumed by many that what God did in the early church as a confirmation of the revelation of a new covenant should be repeated today. The Jews were “seeking signs.” God gave them. Jesus was confirmed by these signs as the true Messiah who was prophesied in the Old Testament (John 20:30,31). Even to the Gentiles, the miracles were intended not to make a better life for a few people, but to confirm that the message of the gospel was unique and not just more of the philosophical “wool-gathering” so common to the Greek sophists.

Today the whole realm of the pursuit and promotion of “miracles” is so rampant with charlatany and deception that even the sincere believers find it all but impossible to take seriously the claims of so-called “divine healing.” Nor have the gimmicks even among the more well known purveyors of miracles gone unexposed.

The more valid question is not, “Does God still perform miracles or signs today?” but rather, “Does He do extraordinary things for people today?” The answer to that is of course a resounding “**Yes!**”—when it fits His purposes to do so. But on what basis does He give His assistance? Is it to everyone or anyone who claims a promise or professes faith? That was not true even in the Bible—Old or New Testaments. Providential events abound, but so also do the incidents where God chose not to deliver. Job, of course, is a classic example in the Old Testament, where

God had a purpose for not bringing about deliverance. Right at the start, he lost all of his children in a tragic fire—an irreconcilable loss. He was delivered from some of his afflictions at the end, but not before years of intense suffering. In the New Testament, Paul is a classic example. He was denied deliverance and offered, instead, grace to bear the affliction. Hebrews 11 speaks of those who were not delivered as well as those who were. If we were to assume that so-called “miracles” were the right and obligation of all Christians under all conditions, and that the lack of such miracles is based upon human failure of some kind, the bulk of Christendom would be under indictment. The percentage of those who do not get such deliverance is far greater than those who do. The tragedy is that those who do not get deliverance are often denied the comfort they need, as was Job, on the basis of an assumption that it is somehow their own fault. Purveyors of “miracles” often have little patience with the suffering, since they are presumed to be “substandard.” A common conviction among such is that the only reason people are not healed is either sin or unbelief or unwillingness. (In the case of a child, they would put the onus on the parents.) This assumption is as faulty as the assumption that Christ wants to make a nice life for all of His children. There are many passages of Scripture that indicate that suffering on the earth is a part of our fellowship with Christ and His eternal purposes. “*For even hereunto were you called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example that you should follow in His steps*” (I Peter 2:21). (See also Philippians 1:29 and 3:10; Romans 8:17; II Timothy 1:12.)

The Lord is with us unceasingly in our spirits, giving fleshly deliverance where it suits His purpose, and giving grace always. It is important and proper to pray for the Lord’s assistance. But it must be left in His hands to do what He

thinks best. If we try to apply the experiences of the apostles to the believers in general, we will foster confusion, guilt and discouragement. If we put our affairs in the hands of Christ to do what He wants, we will have perpetual peace.

**A people for His name . . .** With unmistakable mandate, God revealed to the apostles that the Gentiles were included in the new covenant—that He would take from them, as from the Jews, a people for His name. Peter had arisen in the assembly and shared his vision and conviction about the matter. Paul gave his confirming testimony. And then James, who seemed to be a leader in the group, lent his own weight to the newly established concept. Further, he drew upon the prophets to establish the point.

**I will rebuild the dwelling place of David**—not “tabernacle” which would imply something akin to Moses’ structure in the wilderness, but “habitation” (*shakan*) which would no doubt refer to Jerusalem, primarily.

**So that the remainder of mankind may seek the Lord.** This would refer to the Gentiles—all people who are not Jews. In the Old Testament they were referred to as the *Goyim*. From every quarter of the earth; from every tribe and tongue and nation, God will bring forth His people. The salvation of mankind, while not universal, will be nevertheless massive and sweeping.

Obviously the restoration of Jerusalem had more far-reaching implications than an earthly habitation for the people of God. David had been given an everlasting throne. Christ was the heir to it. In the book of Revelation we are told that the ultimate purpose of God was that He would dwell with His people and they would dwell with Him—the mutual dwelling place. And so John 14—“We will come unto Him and make our abode with Him.” The “mansions” (as some

translations)—*monai*—are not material but personal—the family of God dwelling together forever.

True to the prophecy, Jerusalem was restored physically after the exile, but James is not thinking of buildings; he is thinking of the people of God. The coming of Christ in spiritual restoration meant salvation for the Gentiles—the remainder of mankind.

**All who are summoned with my name upon them.** “Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord [Jew or Gentile] shall be saved” (Acts 2:21)

**My judgment is that we not harass those from the Gentiles . . .** James offered his counsel in the matter before the body of believers which was considering the relationship between the Gentiles and the law of Moses. The words of both Peter and Paul had been powerful appeals to the assembly that they should regard the Gentiles as having been received by God on an equal footing with the Jews. James makes a rather startling statement—“We should not harass the Gentiles who have turned to God.” “Trouble” (as in some translations) is not strong enough. The Greek word is *enochleo*, which is from a root meaning “crowd.” It might almost have the sense of “crushing” or “overwhelming.” James did not see it as simply a troublesome thing. He saw it as something that would crush them. Peter had made a strong statement to the effect that what they were now laying upon the Gentiles was something that they had not been able to handle themselves. James joins him in that charge.

However there were some things that James felt were important cautions. **Defilement of Idols.** Idolatry had been so corrupting and devastating to the people of God that he felt he must give them a special warning about it. **Sexual perversion.** The word “fornication”, as in many translations, is inadequate and



misleading. The English word “fornication” may imply some single act of indiscretion—not acceptable, but hardly something for which a special warning would have to be issued. The Greek word used here is *porneia*, which has its roots in the word for “harlot.” It refers more to sexual abuses. It is not so much a matter of two people in love making a mistake, as it is the misuse of sex as an instrument of bestial gratification. **Things slain without bloodshed.** It was not the “strangling” itself (as in some translations) but rather that in the strangling process the beast is slain without the purifying draining of the blood. Blood is a corrupting thing. A wound that does not bleed runs a greater risk of infection. But whether or not this was a dietary matter or had a spiritual implication is not clear. In any case it was more important than might be obvious to us today and so required some special instruction. **And from the blood itself.** Drinking the blood of an animal was not only common in those days but is still widely practiced. For obvious reasons (and even more so today) it is extremely risky. One must conclude, however, that it also had a spiritual significance, no doubt connected with the meaning of blood in the atonement. In the Old Testament system of sacrifice, the blood was quite sacred and was used to sprinkle the altar in the Holy of Holies for the remission of sin. Of course, the blood of Christ in the New Testament would be even more sacred.

**For Moses has had . . . those who from city to city preach him . . .** The purpose of this statement, coming at this point, may be to imply that knowledge of these matters as outlined by James, would be general knowledge, even among the Gentiles.

The conflict between law and grace runs throughout the entire Bible. The subject was dealt with at length in the author’s commentary on John—chapter 5. Even in the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai, there was the strong evidence of the grace and mercy of God. As Moses was receiving the tablets of stone (for the second time), the historian records the following—“*And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. . .’*” (Exodus 34:6,7). For God to have communicated with His creatures at all is an act of grace. For Him to have given a code of ethics to live by was perhaps even more gracious, since its sole intent was to help mankind fulfill the noble destiny that God had in mind for them from His original creation. The making of a new covenant invalidated the old one, but did not imply that it had not been good or just. Nor did it imply that God had set aside His moral standards. What it did do was to free mankind from the responsibility of keeping the law as a basis for salvation, which, according to the apostles in this chapter, the people of God had been unable to do. The Council had come together in Jerusalem to decide the extent to which the old law might still have application in the new era. Peter spoke of the right of the Gentiles to salvation on an equal basis with the Jews. Paul and Barnabas gave testimony to God’s work through them among the Gentiles. James concluded that putting the Gentiles under the law of Moses would be an unacceptable burden to them. We will next hear the conclusions of the Council itself.

# Acts 15:22-35

## TRANSLATION

*Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with all the church, to elect men from among them and send them unto Antioch with Paul and Barnabas—Jude who was called Barsabas, and Silas, men who were leaders among the brethren—and to write a letter by hand as follows: “The apostles, and the elder brethren, to those brethren who are of the Gentiles throughout Antioch, and Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings. Since we heard that certain of us came and troubled you with words that unsettled your souls, which ones we did not direct to do so, it seemed good to us, being of one mind, to elect men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have dedicated their souls on behalf of the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Jude and Silas with them, proclaiming by word of mouth, the same thing. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than the necessary things—to abstain from idols, and from blood, and from bloodless killing [of animals], and from perversion, from which things, if you keep yourselves, you will do well. Farewell.”*

*They, then, having been sent off, went down to Antioch and gathered together the group and delivered the letter to them. And when they had read it, they rejoiced at the encouragement. And Jude and Silas, being also prophets themselves, encouraged the brethren and strengthened them with many words. And having spent some time there, they were sent away with peace from the brethren, to those who had sent them. But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and proclaiming the word of the Lord, with others also.*

## COMMENTARY

### The Council Concur—Harmony Prevails

Peter and Paul and James—recognized leaders in the fledgling church—have made their statements to the Council. They were in complete agreement with one another as befits spokesmen for God, who have been genuinely ordained by Him. These men were not enterprising

empire builders nor self-seeking demagogues nor professional promoters, enamored with the challenge of motivating the masses. They were responsible men of God, whose chief purpose was to relay to mankind, as faithfully as possible, the unalloyed word

of God. With this simple and sincere effort, God was apparently well pleased. He had therefore communicated His will in the matter through them to the people, and, as we would expect from dedicated instruments and a divine communicator, the word was effective and well received by the people.

The Council, composed of apostles and elders, and, apparently, the whole body of believers there assembled, were in harmony in regard to the matter and agreed to send a letter to that effect by the hand of Paul and Barnabas and others of the leadership, to the believers in Antioch to be disseminated throughout all the province of Syria (of which Antioch was the capital) and also of Cilicia.

These two provinces—Syria and Cilicia—would cover the entire coastal region of the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea, from the southern borders of Palestine through half the southern coastal region of Asia Minor. It would have been the entire area throughout which the early church had its first expansion.

**Certain of us came and troubled you.** True to those who take seriously the responsibility of their leadership, the apostles and elders did not distance themselves from the problem. Nor did they deny that it had been a troublesome thing to the Gentile believers. They had been thrown into confusion by these faulty teachers, who had not been authorized by the leadership in Jerusalem. There were many false teachers going about in those days, as there are today. How were they to be controlled? That problem has plagued the church since its inception. A great number of unqualified teachers today throw the entire church into confusion and dissension. The Council made it plain in their letter that they had not authorized these men to teach. In those days that was extremely important. A

totally new order of things was being established. The age-old traditions were being replaced by a new covenant. And yet, there was not a written revelation to go by. The Holy Spirit had given the revelation to the apostles and confirmed their communication of it by various miracles as Jesus' own ministry had been so validated. They now became the resource of truth in the presentation of the new covenant. Later it would be written down and succeeding generations could use it as a test for truth. Then, without such a written revelation, it was necessary for all who went out to present the message to have the blessing of the original apostles. Such a blessing was conveyed by the laying on of hands, a practice known as ordination. Even today it is important that those who claim to be teachers and leaders in the church should have the concurrence of other leaders that they are indeed qualified. It is much like the licensing of people in the medical and legal professions. Unfortunately there are not strong enough controls when it comes to the clergy. A very large number of religious quacks has turned the church into something of a religious "carnival." Such teachers, with neither qualifications nor calling from God, have caused great confusion and dissension in the church, as well as much damage to individuals. Everyone wants to be a teacher. Unfortunately, the less knowledgeable one is, the more eager one is to express one's opinion. James said in his own epistle, "There are too many of you acting as teachers and you will receive the greater condemnation." It is as essential to screen "quack" teachers and leaders in the church as it is to screen those in the medical profession—perhaps more so since the eternal soul is at stake.

**It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.** When sincere men of God seek the mind of God on behalf of the people of God, there is bound to be unity. The Holy Spirit was both invoked and heeded in this crucial matter as befits responsible leaders. Much of the

dissension and disunity in the church today is a result of irresponsible leadership. There are the empire builders who are concerned with successful enterprises. But the people often get lost in the pursuit of progress. And there are the demagogues—those who are enamoured with the challenge of influencing and controlling people. Then there are the visionaries—so anxious to get a special revelation from God that they are easily deceived by Satan with bizarre notions with which they lead the people who are gullible enough to follow them into egregious errors. But even among those who are sincerely seeking to serve, there are the unqualified—either averse to the rigors of education or so eager to “get going for God” that they fail to realize the seriousness of going out unprepared. The vital question raised by this conflict in the early church: Why is there so much confusion and dissension in the church? Why can there not be unity today as there was in the resolving of this council at Jerusalem? One of the problems is lack of qualified leadership. Whereas in the early church the truth came by revelation to some of the apostles. Today we have a written revelation. It is incumbent upon the leadership to master that revelation. Why then do those who presume to be leaders and teachers go out without such a mastery? In part, it is due to lack of respect for the Bible—the erroneous thought that “anyone who can read can interpret the Bible.” In part it is due to lack of respect for the people—indifference to the seriousness of misleading them. In part it is due to lack of respect for the calling—“any kind of training will do.” There is a different kind of training needed by the leaders in today’s world—much more extensive. The early apostles and leaders of the church got their knowledge directly from the Holy Spirit, as, for example, the apostle Paul in Arabia. There was no New Testament to refer to. The New Testament message of grace could not be put in the old structure of the law and so

the whole system had to be changed. The New Testament was given through anointed and appointed instruments such as Paul and Peter and James, who provided us with a written record of that revelation. Now, having that revelation in hand, it is incumbent upon the modern leader of God’s people to master the revelation already given.

The problem of legalism was resolved here at the council in Jerusalem. The understanding of that problem and its solution is already given in the Scripture. Without the mastery of the Scripture, one will be struggling with a problem already resolved. But the mastery of the Bible is not so simple. We are two thousand years away from its original writing. The *Koiné* Greek in which it was written is not a common language today. It must be mastered with great effort. Of course, Paul already knew the *koiné* Greek. In addition the history and culture of the times must be mastered. Nor indeed was the vast amount of technical and scientific data available to him, which today gives us much enlightenment in the application of the Scripture. Today, all of these things must be taken into account if one is serious about conveying the truth of the Word of God to the people. A large number of forces are affecting the people of God in today’s world. The leadership must be prepared to guide them by using the Scripture realistically in the handling of these forces.

The effort to circumvent such training by direct appeal to the Holy Spirit has obviously failed. The great confusion in the church is ample evidence that the Holy Spirit is not giving such direct revelations. Why should He? He has already given us the revelation in a written form. Ignorance of the Bible and obstinacy in that ignorance accounts for a great deal of confusion and dissension in the body of Christ. Of course, there is conflict of opinion even among the so-called scholars. But this can be

accounted for by the limitations of the human mind to adequately express truth that is divine in nature. In this respect it is important for the leadership to recognize such limitations and be tolerant of these variables. The above discussion has been in response to the very difficult question raised by the council of Jerusalem—Why is the body of believers, supposedly guided by God, so full of confusion and conflict? The council in Jerusalem was in complete unity in the handling of a very serious conflict. Where is that unity today? Has the Holy Spirit failed us or have we failed to pay attention to what He has already given us in the written revelation of God? Has empire building and demagoguery obscured the simple reality of nourishing the people of God on the Word of God?

None of the above comments supply ultimate answers. They have only raised questions that ought to be seriously considered by those who aspire to be or presume to be the leaders and shepherds of the people of God. There is one consolation amidst all the confusion—our salvation is based upon the sacrifice of Christ and not upon theological knowledge. Salvation is secured in the accepting of Christ and not in all of the theological implications of that acceptance. Apart from the Holy Spirit, we could not even accept God's offer of salvation. The evidence of the Holy Spirit within us is not theological knowledge or being right about everything, but the very desire to have Christ within us.

**When they had read it they rejoiced at the encouragement.** The word “encouragement”—sometimes translated “consolation”—is the same one that is used for the Holy Spirit as our “Comforter” (*paraclete*). The meaning is “one called alongside to help.” Our word “comforter” is from the Latin and is from the same root as the word “fortress.” We are comforted by the Holy Spirit, in the sense that He represents our fortress in this hostile world—preserving us for eternity. So the Gentile believers were encouraged or comforted by the letter that released them from the bondage of the obligations of the old Mosaic system.

**And Jude and Silas . . . encouraged the brethren . . .** not “exhorted” as some translations. It is the same word as in the previous verse—*parakaleo* — “to comfort” or “encourage.” Jude and Silas did not come clear from Jerusalem to deliver the people from the bondage of the law, only to lay more charges upon them. Usually, throughout the New Testament, the word “exhort” can be replaced by the word “encourage.”

**They were sent away with peace.** The end result of one of the most serious conflicts in the early church was peace and harmony—the obvious effect of a genuine appeal to the Holy Spirit, void of human opportunism, demagoguery and irresponsibility.

# Acts 15:36-41

## TRANSLATION

*And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we have proclaimed the word of the Lord—how they do." And Barnabas wanted to take with them also John, who was called Mark. But Paul did not consider it fitting that the one who departed from them in Pamphylia, and did not go with them to the work, that they should take this one with them. And there was a great conflict so that they separated from one another. And Barnabas took Mark and sailed up to Cypress; but Paul chose Silas and went out, having been committed to the grace of the Lord by the brethren. And they were going through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.*

## COMMENTARY

### Trouble Between the Leaders

We have observed trouble between the people and careless teachers. Now we have trouble between two very dedicated and sincere leaders. How can this be? The situation poses an extremely difficult and important question. If Barnabas and Paul, so recently anointed and ordained by the body of believers in Antioch, could come into conflict, how much more the leaders of today? But should it be today? Should it have been then? Was the episode somehow permitted by God for some particular purpose? Was the Holy Spirit guiding Paul? Or was He guiding Barnabas? Barnabas seemed to express an attitude more consistent with the grace of God—to overlook human failure and give the young man another chance. However, Paul and Silas received the blessing of the group and were the focus of the rest of the missionary activity discussed in the book of Acts. Barnabas fades from view and is not heard of in the rest of the Bible. If that were the end of the matter, we would assume that Paul

had made the sounder choice. The matter gets complicated when we find later on in Paul's letters to Timothy, which were at the end of Paul's life, that he asks for John Mark, whom he describes as being profitable to him. Had Barnabas not picked him up at this point, perhaps he would have fallen by the wayside. What principles can we derive from this unfortunate episode of conflict between two dedicated leaders?

Perhaps a clue to the way in which God functions with the people of earth may be found in the age-old story of Joseph, the favored son of Jacob by his favored wife, Rachel. In a completely reprehensible episode, Joseph's brethren, in a fit of vicious and malicious jealousy, sold Joseph as a slave to a caravan of Midianite traders. Nor can we really excuse Joseph from some culpability in the way in which he had boldly prated about dreams of superiority over his brethren. But as the story goes, Joseph

rose to power in Egypt in a role comparable to prime minister. Eventually, when his brethren had come to Egypt for grain, Joseph made himself known to them and made the following statement: “Ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good . . . to save much people alive.” It was not that God had any part whatsoever in the jealous rage of the brethren, nor had He induced in Joseph the boastful prating. He merely functioned within the framework of human frailty to accomplish a divine purpose. This is admittedly a rather extreme example, but it points out the fact that human attitudes in a given situation do not necessarily coincide with what it is that God is doing.

In the incident with Barnabas and Paul, it was not so much that God did not have a purpose in their separation, as it was that they could have separated in a more congenial attitude, recognizing that God might indeed have something different in mind for Barnabas at this time. John Mark could have been a continual problem to Paul, not apparently hardy enough to handle the rigors of the mission. But if Barnabas felt constrained to work with John Mark that, too, could have been a valid point and something directed by the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, Paul’s unwillingness to work with John Mark would indicate that the Holy Spirit had not directed him to do so. If God has a task for us to do, He gives the capacity as well as the compelling. Human sympathy is not a reliable guide to action. What may appear to be a humanitarian thing to do is not always what God has given us to do. Obviously, Barnabas was successful in his work with John Mark. Paul may not have been.

The attitudes of the two men in the dissension between them was not exemplary. Nor does the Bible ever indicate that its chief characters were always above reproach. The fact that God’s appointed leaders had their human

frailties is a source of comfort to all of us. In II Corinthians 12, Paul admits to human weakness and prays for deliverance from it. But God responds that His strength is made perfect in weakness. That is, that the use of human servants, weak in the flesh, gives Him opportunity to express His own strength through them. In II Corinthians 4, Paul confesses that the glory of God is expressed through “earthen vessels.” The vessel must be of clay that the glory may be of God.

The episode was duly recorded, but no indication that the conflict itself was anything more than a fleshly reaction to that which was ultimately seen to be part of the divine purpose. There is no indication that the decision of Barnabas was any less directed than that of Paul. When later the results of the work of Barnabas with John Mark were eminently successful, and Paul himself was benefited, he might have had to do some humble retracting.

Much dissension in the church might be avoided if the leaders would recognize that God has more than one way of doing things. Of course, doing things contrary to sound principles is something else. The end does not justify the means, as some seem to believe. Had John Mark been guilty of some indiscretion or sin, it would have been altogether different. His only offense was that he was not yet ready for the task. Perhaps the mistake was in taking him along in the first place.

So differences among the leadership regarding methods and practices are a continual problem. It is important to sort out whether these differences are a matter of principle or practice. Paul speaks to this matter pointedly in Romans 14—some see things one way; some see things another. “Let each one be persuaded in his own mind.” But that has to do with practices and preferences—not principles or precepts.

We have to make many choices in the daily routine of things as well as in the tasks we have been given to do where there are no expressed guidelines in the Bible. Large organizational structures, for example, are commonplace today in the process of missionary endeavor, which were unheard of and unnecessary in Paul's day. While such organizations may seem incongruous with matters of the Spirit, there is no biblical injunction against them. Whether or not one develops such organizations is a matter of practice rather than principle. However, the way such organizations handle the Lord's people may be contrary to the spirit of the New Testament. The use of leverage—any efforts to manipulate and exploit the people of God would, indeed, be contrary to the attitudes of Christ. It is essential that the leaders of the church regard themselves as shepherds of the Lord's sheep and treat them with care. Else they may find themselves to be false shepherds, who, like the shepherds of John 10 might be found to be "hirelings, who care not for the sheep." Conflicts among leaders which eventuate in hurting the sheep will be subject to divine judgment.

When a conflict arises among the leadership, the central issue is whether or not there is a violation of principles or a mishandling of the sheep. If it is only a matter of method or practice, one has a right to disagree with it, but not to stand in judgment. Who knows what, for that person in that situation, is the right thing to do? It is between the Lord and His servant. In the matter of Barnabas and Paul, it is reasonable to assume that they were both right. The problem was not with the decisions that they each made but the spirit in which they made them. What they each did turned out ultimately for the best. God's hand was certainly with Paul and Silas. And apparently the decision of Barnabas was most beneficial to John Mark.

In summary, we can set forth the following principles:

1. The issue must be decided in terms of principle and not practice.
2. If it is a matter of principle, we must determine whether or not there are alternate interpretations of the Bible in the matter.
3. If there is a variant interpretation, we may disagree but we must be reserved in judgment.
4. If it is a matter of practice or method only, we have a right to disagree but no right to enter into judgment.
5. Where God's people are concerned, the focus must always be on the welfare of the sheep and not the personal persuasions and prejudices of the shepherd.

Paul and Barnabas each made decisions that turned out to be sound. Their attitudes in the decisionmaking may have been questionable, but that is quite common in all human efforts to execute divine purposes. Apparently, neither Paul nor Barnabas met with divine displeasure.

In a sense, all of us human beings are like children living in a cosmic sandbox. Many of the conflicts we have in the Christian community are akin to "squabbles in the sandbox." In I Corinthians 13, Paul reminds us that as long as we are on the earth we are like children who see things obscurely. In this respect we will be like children until we finally reach our ultimate glorification. As far as our spirits are concerned, we are urged to grow in the Lord. As far as our flesh is concerned, we may often act like children. Wise parents do not try to intervene every time there is a spat among the children. It is possible that God allows things among His children that we feel ought to be "taken care of."



God seems to preside over the “cosmic sandbox” with a good deal of patience and tolerance. It would be well for the church to follow His lead.

Why should there be conflict among the leaders? Because of the frailty of human flesh. How should we regard such conflicts? If there is an expressed

principle involved, we must stand on the side of right. If it is only a matter of method or practice, we must exercise grace and tolerance. It is not so much the conflict that is important as it is our attitudes in response to the conflicts. It is not so much the decisions that we make as it is the spirit in which we make them.

# Acts 16:1-8

## TRANSLATION

*And they came to Derbe and to Lystra. And behold, a certain disciple was there, by the name of Timothy, son of a woman who was a Jewess—a believer—and his father was a Greek, who had a good report by the brethren in Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted this one to go with him. And he took him and circumcised him on account of the Jews who were in that place, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. And as they were passing through the cities, they delivered to them to keep, the decrees which had been decided by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. The churches then were being strengthened in the faith and were multiplying in number daily.*

*And they passed through Phrygia and the Galatian region, having been restrained by the Holy Spirit from speaking the word in Asia; and having gone byway of Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them. And having passed by Mysia, they descended into Troas.*

## COMMENTARY

### The Making and Directing of God's Servants

Paul returned to the churches that had been established in Asia Minor. He took with him Silas and a young Greek from Lystra, by the name of Timothy. Timothy's mother was a Jewess who had become a believer. His father was a Greek—well known in the community. Timothy became a most effective assistant to Paul—unwavering in his faith and faithfulness. He came out of the city of Lystra where Paul had been worshipped and then stoned by the fickle mob. It may be said that Timothy was the fragrant extract distilled from Paul's agony in that city.

Because the issue of circumcision and the law was so controversial, Paul had

Timothy circumcised. It may have appeared to be a compromise, but Paul had a more vital mission than a constant confrontation over this issue. Timothy's father was apparently widely enough known throughout Asia Minor that Timothy's Greek heritage would be common knowledge. The only Gentiles that would ever be allowed in the temple (beyond the court of the Gentiles) would be those that were considered "proselytes" who had joined the Jewish religion by observing the rite of circumcision. Some Gentiles—called "God-fearers"—had accepted the Jewish beliefs, but had not been circumcised, and were therefore not full-fledged members of the Jewish community.

Timothy was of this latter group, but without being circumcised, would have been hindered in his ministry among the Jews. It was not that Paul was acknowledging the need of circumcision, but rather removing a needless barrier to their work.

Later on, it did become an issue, and Paul was charged with taking a Gentile into the temple. The charge was, of course, groundless, because Timothy had indeed been circumcised. Observing the culture and customs of given societies to whom one has been called to minister is essential if one is to be effective with that particular group. (This, of course, would exclude any customs or practices that would be in direct violation of one's conscience as a believer.) It is possible to lose the battle while bickering over trivia.

And as they went from city to city where churches had been established, Paul passed along to them the recent decisions of the council at Jerusalem. But more than that, the churches were strengthened in the faith and multiplied in number. Sometimes individual efforts in the ministry may seem quite meager, and weighed against the rapid spread of the gospel in the early church, one may become impatient. But looking at the world-wide expansion of Christianity, the growth has been phenomenal. From the small number of disciples (one hundred-twenty) gathered in the upper room at Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, the message of salvation had been spread over the whole earth "from pole to pole and sea to sea" and over the centuries has reached literally billions of people. In terms of human capacities, the task would have been impossible. In fact, Jesus said, "*Without Me, you can do nothing.*" The power in anyone's ministry belongs to the Holy Spirit and not to the individual. From the "steward" is required faithfulness to the task

committed to him. The results must be left in the hands of God.

**They were restrained by the Holy Spirit . . .** Paul and his cohorts headed for Asia, but they were restrained; they tried for Bithynia and the Spirit did not permit them. Clearly the Holy Spirit was in charge. And how else could divine purposes be served? The task of recovering a shattered world, devastated by physical and spiritual forces, is overwhelming to the limited human capacity. The thought that God could trust fallen humans to devise systems and programs for the recovery of their world is absurd. If the human mind has been tethered by the chains of mortality and sin, how can it be relied upon to devise its own methods of release. God alone knows how to free the world from bondage. Those who assist Him in the task must get their instructions from Him. Human reason is not adequate either for the nature of one's service or the methods. Dealing with spiritual issues cannot be done by generalized methods or systems. Nor can the place of one's service be determined by facts and figures—where is the greatest need?

By human calculation, Asia should have been the logical next step for Paul. As of that point it would have been totally untouched by the gospel. But the Holy Spirit did not allow Paul to go there. Later, Paul went to Athens and delivered one address. Athens was a vital cultural center of the Western world. Our own civilization has its roots in ancient Athenian culture. It would have seemed logical to make a major effort in that city, but Paul moved on. Nor was any significant effort made at that time by any of the other apostles. This, of course, points up one major principle of the early expansion of Christianity. The Holy Spirit had to be the prime source of direction in the accomplishing of the gargantuan task of recovering a lost world.

# Acts 16:9-10

## TRANSLATION

*And there appeared a vision to Paul by night—a certain man of Macedonia was standing and urging him, saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” And as he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.*

## COMMENTARY

### The Gospel Goes to the Greeks

**Come over to Macedonia and help us.** Frustrated in his original plans, Paul and his cohorts went down to the coastal town of Troas. Across the Aegean Sea was the Greek peninsula—matrix of Western culture. The city of Troas, some ten miles from the ruins of ancient Troy, and a Roman colony, was one of the most important cities of Asia Minor. Interestingly enough, Paul had no compunction to stay there and minister. Instead, he awaited further orders. They came in the form of a vision. A man from Macedonia appeared in the vision and asked Paul to come over and help them.

Macedonia had been the kingdom of Philip, father of the famous (or infamous) Alexander the Great. In the fourth century B.C., Alexander, an *afficionado* of Greek culture (tutored by the great philosopher Aristotle), invaded Athens, weakened by the war with Sparta and was victorious. From that point he entered into an ambitious project to spread the Greek culture throughout the East. He crisscrossed the Middle East from Greece to Egypt and from the Mediterranean to the Indus River. Throughout this vast area he established numerous cities on the pattern of the Greek city state or *polis* (hence such

names as Heliopolis and Neapolis). With the Greek culture he also spread the Greek language, which then became the common language of business throughout the Middle East. It was a master stroke in the accomplishment of the divine purpose. The Greek language, highly complex and capable of fine nuances of thought was the language chosen by God for the writing of the New Testament. Alexander died in 323 B.C.—three centuries before the coming of Christ. But his conquests paved the way for God’s revelation to mankind in a vehicle that could preserve it for all generations and ultimately spread it to the ends of the earth.

Now Paul, standing on the eastern shores of the Aegean Sea, will set his face toward the cradle of that great historical epoch. In his hands, the Greek culture would become the instrument by which the message of God for mankind would be carried throughout the world.

**Concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.** To Paul, the Macedonian vision was conclusive. The Greek word for “conclude”—*sumbibadzo*—could be freely translated “putting it all together.” How thoroughly

did Paul trust the vision? Enough to alter the course of his life by it. How could he know? Visions and revelations were common to Paul and to the other apostles at that time. Are such visions valid for us today? Not as likely. And why is that? Because we are not in the same position that they were, since they did not have the written revelation of the New Testament which we possess. Theirs was the task of building the church and conveying to the world the new order of things under Christ and ushered in by the Holy Spirit. The Old Testament Scriptures would not be adequate for the new relationship between God and His people in restoring to them His own spirit nature forfeited at the Fall. The revelations of God to the apostles would become, in fact, the collected writings known as the New Testament, which would then become the guideposts for all time to the new relationship between God and His people.

But what of visions and revelations today? Are they valid? How do we determine whether or not they are valid? The major problem is that there has been such a great cacophony of sounds and voices down through the centuries, each making claims to genuineness and yet constantly in conflict with one another, that it is almost impossible to sort out the true from the false. Claims to special visitations from the deities have been made by countless religious groups of many different persuasions. Standing in contradiction to one another, they cannot all be right. But how could one possibly tell the difference? Often such groups have little connection with Christ or the New Testament. The large number and variety of this steady stream of claims, makes all of them suspect. Contrary to the situation today, where visions and revelations run rampant, the number of claims in Paul's day was limited.

But how does one know what is genuine and what is not? There will be a Spirit-given response to a Spirit-given vision.

At the council of Jerusalem Peter stood up and recounted the vision which God had given to him on the rooftop regarding the Gentiles. The Spirit who gave the vision to him gave also the response among the people. His message was received and even James, who was obviously a leader of the council, concurred with Peter and decided that God had also included the Gentiles in salvation, which was the substance of Peter's vision. In the body of believers today, there is a great deal of "game-playing" in regard to visions and revelations, but there is also very little effectiveness and very little confidence in the claims. If God has a message for His people, it will be presented with effectiveness, and through the Holy Spirit, the people will know. It is not so much that God is unable to give such revelations today, but given the broad amount of skepticism, it is obvious that He doesn't seem to function in that way.

Of course, many will say that lack of such experiences is due to the failure of the Lord's people. Such ones will say that the body of believers has been deteriorating in faith and practice. God is unable to work in the same way today, according to such, because the church is unworthy of receiving it. The fact of the matter is that the church is more vigorous today than it ever was. The expansion of the kingdom of God has been phenomenal, as predicted by Jesus in His parables. Missionary endeavor has covered the earth. To say that the body of believers have become progressively weak is to deny the power of the Holy Spirit. Without Him, the church would be nothing anyway. Paul makes it very clear that he has no confidence in his flesh, and yet he was one of the great missionaries of all time. The Holy Spirit, who brought order out of chaos in the origin of the universe, can certainly be trusted to maintain His own people. The truth of the matter is that if we were to be transported back to the New Testament era, we would find the church

in a far weaker condition than it is today. I'm afraid we would be extremely disappointed. A few of the leaders stand out and are noted in the Scripture and in early literature, but by and large the mainstream of believers in the first century was very much like the mainstream of believers in the twentieth century, but probably far less informed and far less vigorous; and indeed far less ubiquitous—far less mobile and scattered about the world.

So it is really not so much a question of spirituality or piety or worthiness. The question about God's use of visions and revelations in these days is not can He, or should He; but does He? After all, the gifts of the Holy Spirit are, in fact, gifts and not something to be striven for. The gift depends upon the will of the giver. According to the plain teaching of Scripture, the flesh is not ever worthy of the gift or capable of achieving it on the basis of merit. As Paul said to the Corinthians—"What have you that you have not received [as a gift]" (I Cor. 4:7). Most of the leaders of the Bible were chosen before they ever could have merited such a choice—many of them before they were even in their mother's womb. Paul was touched by God on his way to "murdering" Christians. Matthew was chosen while he was serving the Roman government as a tax gatherer and a traitor to his own people. The Lord's people are no better or no worse today than they ever were, in terms of the human factor. "It is not by power nor by might but by my Spirit," said the Lord. If God wanted to give visions and revelations today, as He did in the days when He was building the church, He could certainly do so. To limit Him to the weak and beggarly elements of human worthiness or achievements, would be to deny His power to save the world. To Paul He said, "*My strength is made*

*perfect in weakness*" (II Cor. 12:9). Often in the church today, the appeal is to become strong so that the Lord can use one.

For reasons known only to Himself, God has not chosen to function, by and large, through visions and revelations in the body of believers today. The evidence that He is not doing so lies in the very confusion and ineffectiveness of the episodes of alleged divine visitation. The realm of visions and revelations is in total confusion and disarray, while believers continue to trifle with the power of the Holy Spirit as though the gifts were sort of "party favors," doled out as prizes for "gamesmanship"—for chancing upon just the right combination of deeds and works to bring about a response from the Deity; or just the right amount of fleshly effort to be holy enough or good enough to receive the gifts.

The Spirit of God is the most formidable force in the universe—presiding over its early formation and bringing order out of chaos; and life out of death. Every ounce of energy in the limitless universe is the effect of the Spirit of God forming and commanding its molecular structure. To assume that His activities among the people of God are based upon some human equation is utterly absurd. If God wishes to give visions and revelations, He will do so. But know this, if He is the Author of such, He will bring with it the power to receive it. Peter's vision concerning the Gentiles was received because it was genuinely from the Holy Spirit. Paul's vision of the Macedonian across the Aegean Sea was received because it was genuinely from God, and God gave him the grace to receive it. If visions were given today, know this, that the recipient and all who are involved in it will have no question about its origin.