

Shepherding Notes

Acts

By *Dillon McKeon*

Still Working

The book of Acts really is just a continuation of the witness and story that Luke documents of the gospel spreading. Luke refers to his Gospel account as what Jesus "began both to do and teach" (vs. 1). He is implying that Christ is continuing to act and teach. On the cross, Jesus' redemptive work was completed as He said, "It is finished" (John 19:30). Now, seated on the throne in glory having ascended into heaven in verse 9, Jesus is working through His Spirit: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (vs. 8) The book of Acts is a documentation and witness of the beginning of that gospel spreading to the end of the earth. It should encourage our hearts today to know that Jesus is still working, advancing, and building His kingdom, of which the gates of hell will not prevail. (Matthew 16:18)

Kingdom Minded

In verse 3 it says, "He presented himself alive to them after His suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God." After Jesus' resurrection and before His ascension, for forty days He appeared before many and spoke about His Kingdom. "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." After Jesus' resurrection, what did He speak about most? He spoke about His kingdom. That should tell us something about what we should meditate on and talk about and seek after. Matthew 6:33 says, "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."

Working While We Wait

In this chapter, Jesus promises the Holy Spirit. What were the disciples doing as they waited for the promised Spirit? They were not passively doing nothing, but instead devoted themselves to prayer meetings: "All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer." (vs. 16) They were also submitting themselves to the Scriptures and applying the Word of God to organize and order the church by replacing Judas Iscariot with Matthias according to God's will. What are we waiting for today? We are awaiting not the promised Holy Spirit — because He has already come to dwell within our hearts — but the second coming of the Lord. This is a good example of how believers

should wait for the coming of Christ: by devoting ourselves to prayer, loving and submitting to the Word, and applying it to our lives and the church as we live it out in faith.

A verse that comes to mind is Hebrews 10:24–25: "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." As the Day of the Lord draws near, how should we spend our time? Just like the apostles and disciples were doing in Acts 1: meeting with each other and stirring each other up to love and good works by being in the Word and in prayer together.

Witnesses

Christ describes the mission of the church in the phrase "my witnesses" (vs. 8). Witnesses do not invent their own message but faithfully declare what they know to be true and what they have seen. The witness of the church did not end with the apostles in Acts but will continue to the ends of the earth, because God's plan is to bring this message of the gospel and redemption to all nations. Only when the last elect from all tribes and tongues are brought in through the Word by the means of Christ's witnesses will the end come.

"Let us work together while we wait for the blessed appearance of our Lord — devoted to prayer, to the gathering of the saints, and to applying the Word of God to our lives."

The Work of the Triune God

We see the obvious work of the Triune God at every important point of history: creation, the incarnation, the resurrection, and in chapter 2 of Acts, we see it again at one of the most pivotal and explosive moments in all of human history — Pentecost. At Pentecost we see the Triune God at work as the Father exalts the Son (vs. 33), Christ pouring out His Spirit (vs. 33), and the Spirit testifying of Christ (vs. 31). We also see the Holy Spirit filling the hearts of believers and empowering them (vs. 1-4), while the Lord added to the church (vs. 47). Praise God that He works in harmony with Himself and every person of the Trinity is at work in His plan of redemption.

God's Sovereignty and Man's Responsibility

Most of chapter 2 is a well-structured sermon, inspired by the Holy Spirit and delivered through an emboldened Peter with conviction. We see his introduction in verses 14-15, his text in verses 17-21, a crescendo in verse 21, the gospel in verses 22-24, his supporting texts with cross references in verses 25-28 and 34-35, and in verses 29-34 he is asserting that what he is telling the crowd, the whole Bible is saying the same thing. He then gives a bottom-line conclusion in verse 36: "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." He closes with a word of application to "repent and be baptized." For those whom God has called to teach and preach, this is a great example and structure of a masterful sermon that the Lord used mightily.

In verses 22-24, Peter describes the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. One key verse to notice here is verse 23: "this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." Peter clearly points out that the death of Jesus was according to the sovereign will and definite plan of the Father, but also lays the blame for it on those who are listening. This is the idea of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility — twin truths that coexist even if the full interplay remains mysterious to us.

God is sovereign over all. He orchestrates all things that come to pass. Yet He also tells us that He is neither the author nor the approver of sin. God ordains the ends of all things as well as the means of those ends — our works, our deeds, what we do, what we say, what we believe, and the ends of those things. As Paul says in Philippians, "Work out your own

salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." (Philippians 2:12–13) We are not robots or automatons, but responsible creatures who make moral choices. At the same time, praise God that His redemptive plan is according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of a sovereign God.

True Repentance

A turning away from sin — biblical repentance — and a crying out to God for mercy (vs. 37–38) is the only proper response to the preaching of the Word of God. God is mighty to save, and the word of God driving into the heart of unbelievers by the Holy Spirit converted about 3,000 unbelievers on that day. He cut the people of Jerusalem to the heart and transformed a cowardly Peter into a bold preacher. After Pentecost, the church faithfully and fervently worshipped the Lord in fear and reverence, committing themselves to the apostles' Word, to fellowship, and to prayer (vs. 42). As you read the qualities and character of these believers in the early church, ask yourself whether these describe you.

"Praise God that He works in harmony with Himself, and that every person of the Trinity is at work in His plan of redemption."

After around 3,000 souls were added to their number at the end of Acts 2, it might have been easy for the apostles and the church to feel overwhelmed, or maybe to cultivate a club-like atmosphere and think "us four and no more." But they did not. The new life they had in Christ, and what they experienced under the Holy Spirit, was so explosive and expansive that they had to spread it out. In Acts 3, we see the Spirit-filled church moving out into the world with healing power and the preaching of the gospel.

Beautiful Indeed

Even though the Bible calls Christians to show generosity to the poor, the preaching of the gospel and the transformation it brings must always be central to the life of the church. God granted the apostle Peter power, and he used this miracle as an opportunity to declare the power of the name of Jesus — not just to heal the sick but as the Son of God in whom we must place our faith. It is proper that this miracle took place at the gate called Beautiful, for it reveals the loveliness of the Savior as He takes hopeless and helpless sinners and restores them to strength, joy, and praise.

Those looking on were filled with wonder and amazement. One of the most joyful things as a believer is to see those lost sheep come to Christ and be saved. That is a work of God greater than the lame beggar's feet and ankles being made strong, because that person has gone from death to new life and their hopeless heart is now filled with the life of God. If God allows you to see someone you know become born again, you should be filled with wonder and amazement — especially remembering that we ourselves were more hopeless and helpless than this lame beggar, and God had mercy and demonstrated His power through us.

Transformative Power of the Great Physician

God's transformative power is quite a remarkable thing, even in the life of Peter. Verse 4 says, "And Peter directed his gaze at him, as did John, and said, 'Look at us.'" It reminds me of another look — when Peter denied Christ at His trial in Luke 22:60–61 and the Lord turned and looked at Peter. Peter went from locking eyes with the Lord as he denied Him, to locking eyes with those in need of Christ and extending God's blessing and power to those people. Transformative power — in the life of Peter, in the life of this lame beggar, and in our lives indeed. There is no power like the power of God. "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other." (Isaiah 45:22)

Luke, the author of Acts, was a doctor by trade. Sometimes we miss the drama and significance of miracles like this one because we do not allow our imaginations to realize that it happened instantly. The text says "and leaping up, he stood and began to walk." In a mixture of unbelievable joy, he began hopping around the temple, leaping and praising the Lord. The believer who has been changed instantly from death to life has much reason for their soul to leap with joy.

Rejoice, Again I Say Rejoice

How did the lame beggar respond to the miracle and healing power he experienced? He followed the apostles, leaped for joy, went to the temple, and praised the God of his salvation. And in a similar way, that is how we should act if we have tasted and seen that the Lord is good and found Him to be gracious to us. We will follow the Great Physician who has healed us, rejoice in His salvation, delight to praise Him in the congregation of His people, and tell — with our voices and by the holiness of our walk — of His grace. As Paul expressed it in Philippians 4:4: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice."

"You can only give what is truly yours. If Christ lives in you and you are His, you can impart the truth of the gospel. The Spirit-filled church overflows with joy, and like a banner lifted high, draws the world to the Savior."

Blessed Are the Persecuted

The book of Acts records the soul-winning zeal of the early disciples to fulfill the Great Commission. While boldly preaching Christ and Him crucified, they announced to the world that there is salvation in no other name. They filled Jerusalem and the surrounding regions with their witness for Christ and turned the world upside down with the gospel. What is one of the means by which that gospel spreads? Persecution. In this chapter we see that the sovereignty of God and the power of His work are greater than the opposition of man.

Salvation in No One Else

The apostles were technically giving a defense to the Sanhedrin, but actually Peter proceeds to preach the gospel to the authorities, citing a well-known Old Testament scripture: Psalm 118:22 — "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." This verse was used by Jesus Himself at the end of the Parable of the Vineyard in Mark 12. Jesus and Peter's meaning here is that the builders are the leaders of the Jewish nation who refused to acknowledge Jesus as their Messiah, but the stone which they thought was meaningless has now received from God the place of honor as their cornerstone. Jesus is the name above every name and the only name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

They Had Been with Jesus

Look at the boldness of Peter — the certainty of his words and countenance as He confesses Christ. Sometime just weeks earlier, a little girl accused Peter of being with Jesus and Peter was shaking in his boots, vehemently denying Christ. How did Peter go from denying Christ just weeks earlier to speaking with such conviction? He saw the risen Christ, He was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he "had been with Jesus." The effect of being with Jesus on John and Peter was that they knew how to articulate the Word of God in an effective, bold, and persuasive way. These were fishermen and uneducated men. But just like Christ did, they spoke with authority — and that authority was not their own, but God's.

And even though the apostles stood strong in the face of intimidation by the Sanhedrin, they still felt the need to pray to God to grant them "boldness" in verse 29. They knew

they could not move forward in their own strength or on their past experiences. They understood their need to draw strength and boldness from God to continue to do the work of the ministry. Earlier they quoted Psalm 2 in their prayer (vs. 25–26), showing us the connection between the means of grace: prayer and Bible reading. These men were still spending time with Jesus and dependent on Him.

"Can others smell the 'aroma of Christ' upon you by your walk, your holiness, and boldness? The authorities could tell that Peter and John had spent time with Jesus."

Anatomy of Spiritual Deception

Plato said "The worst of all deceptions is self-deception." He is not far from the truth. But spiritual deception is far worse than all other kinds of deception because of its consequences on the body of Christ.

Back in chapter 4, a man named Barnabas ("Son of Encouragement") sold his real estate and gave the proceeds to the apostles for distribution to the needy. Ananias and Sapphira witnessed Barnabas' generous act and saw the great respect it drew from fellow believers. So they too wanted to sell their property and give it to the church. However, they kept part of the price for their own use. Ananias brought the balance to the apostles to be used for the church but lied about it being the total purchase price. This wasn't just a miscalculation but premeditated deception.

Why did Ananias and Sapphira deceive the church? Perhaps they craved the recognition and attention of the leadership and other members. Most likely, when they saw Barnabas' great generosity, they genuinely wanted to follow suit — however, their hearts were divided and their motivations were mixed. When they had the money in hand, they could not live up to their intention. Ananias' sin was not a casual deception. He faked a deeper spiritual commitment than he had. We can share Ananias' sin when we try to make others think we are more spiritual than we are — when a preacher urges his people toward deeper devotion implying his life is an example when in actuality he knows it is not, he is repeating Ananias' sin. When we lie to fellow believers, we are not lying to them but to the Lord.

Impact on the Body

The story of Ananias and Sapphira is to the book of Acts what the story of Achan is to the book of Joshua. In both stories, an act of spiritual deceit interrupts the progress of the people of God. Just like Achan's sin hurt Israel, when we deceive fellow brothers and sisters, it also hurts the body. God in His wisdom used this to cause "a great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things." (vs. 11) Many in the church searched their souls and were in awe of the God who is a consuming fire.

The Lord takes our sin seriously. This was a pivotal time in church history. The gospel was beginning its advance in the young church, and for Ananias and Sapphira's sin of

deceit and hypocrisy to go unchallenged would have been directly opposed to that advance. Spiritual deception poisons our relationships within the church. Ephesians 4:25 says: "Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another."

"Our bodies can only be healthy and function correctly when each part passes the truth of how it is doing to the brain. The same is true in the body of Christ."

Widows in Need

In the early days of the church, the number of the disciples were multiplying, and a complaint arose between the Jewish Christians and the Hellenistic Jewish Christians about the distribution of care for widows. Even as the church was in its infancy, it did not take long for divisions and partiality to arise. Usually, when a man or woman's spouse passes away, everyone mourns with them and displays compassion at first, but eventually their whole life changes. Widows and widowers experience a kind of loneliness that many people cannot understand. Every church has its proportionate number of those who have lost their husbands and wives. We must continue to remember those dear saints and visit them, pray for them, and encourage them. James wrote, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world." (James 1:27)

The Importance of Deacons

Paul Washer talks about the significance of this event:

"Do you know what was the greatest and most dangerous moment in the History of the church? It was a group of widows in Acts chapter 6 – when the ministers of the gospel could have laid aside the ministry of the word and prayer to do something marvelously important: the caring for widows. But they assigned it to godly men and they kept on with the word. This is why deacons are so important." – Paul Washer

Deacons are servant helpers who work together with the spiritual leaders of the church. A deacon is one of the greatest honors and responsibilities that a church member could be appointed and asked to fulfill. Acts 6 clearly states that the seven chosen were to be "of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom." These men weren't chosen because they were skilled in any particular job, but because of their character and faithfulness. The work of deacons is indispensable — they are administrators, repairing the church buildings, tackling special projects, caring for practical needs of those in the church, and much more. I thank God for faithful deacons who give themselves freely to these servant tasks and ministries. They make it possible for pastors and elders to study the Word of God and preach it, which is what God's people need most.

The Kingdom Growing

In verse 7 we see that the Kingdom of God is advancing, the number of disciples "multiplied greatly in Jerusalem," and it also says "a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith." These priests served and ministered in the temple, dealing daily with the types and shadows of the old sanctuary and the old covenant. They saw the physical veil which had been torn in two, and now the spiritual veil over their hearts had also been torn in two, because by faith they had submitted to the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ. There are people in our lives who are opposed to the gospel, but we cannot think they are too far from the grace and power of God. We can't count them out and shy away from sharing the good news with them or forget to pray for them.

"The enemy attacks us with distractions because he knows we will be less effective if we are preoccupied with many other things. We need wisdom from God to discern His calling for us and devote ourselves to what is most important."

Stephen on Trial

Luke tells us that one of the seven deacons set apart for ministry was Stephen. Clearly Stephen was not only gifted in service, but the man could preach as well. Stephen was doing marvelous things in the midst of the people, but a group from the Greek-speaking community raised opposition against his teaching. They entered a dispute with him, and Luke tells us they were not able to resist his wisdom or the spirit by which he spoke. When they could not best his arguments, they turned to dishonesty and found some willing to bear false witness, dragging him to the council.

Stephen's Sermon

Stephen knew his Bible and knew his history. Boldly standing before the Council, he walked through the Scriptures to pull down the three pillars of popular Judaism. They thought that God was surely with them because they had the promised land, the law, and the temple — but these were structures of false confidence. Stephen starts off by showing that God blessed Abraham, Jacob and his twelve sons, and Moses outside of the Holy Land. Holy ground is wherever God meets His people, not just inside the borders of Palestine. He then shows that the Jews in Moses' day rejected both Moses and the Law anyway (vs. 39–40). And he directs them to their last false security — the temple — by quoting Isaiah 66:1–2: the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands.

Stephen closes his sermon by aiming directly at the heart (vs. 51–53), essentially saying: "You hard-hearted people — you must be born again! You have sinned and you need a Savior!"

A Good Death

Stephen died as he had lived: a man after God's own heart. He died as Christ had died. Jonathan Edwards, dying from smallpox, told his daughter good-bye and said, "Where is Jesus, my never-failing friend?" John Knox uttered these piercing words and then died: "Live in Christ, die in Christ, and the flesh need not fear death." As both Christ and Stephen were dying, grace, supplication, and forgiveness for their enemies were pouring forth from their lips.

The Scriptures regularly picture Jesus as seated in heaven, but on this occasion He was "standing at the right hand of God." Christ came to His feet in approval and with arms open to welcome this first martyr home to Himself. And who was at his trial? The witnesses laid their garments at the feet of young Saul. Don't you think that when Jesus told Saul on the road to Damascus "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" that he recalled Stephen — and those other believers who did not fear, who stood firm, and gave a reason for the hope within them? And Saul became Paul, and went on to become the greatest Christian, writing most of the New Testament. So who might come into the kingdom because you did not fear, because you stood for Jesus and gave a reason for the hope that is in you?

"Death will ultimately reveal what each of us is. Stephen lived his last hours as Christ would and did. God, help us to live, walk, speak, and die in a faithful way, honoring Christ."

You Mean It for Our Good and for Your Glory

Throughout history there have been many enemies of the church who tried to snuff out the gospel. In the 1700s, Voltaire, a French philosopher of the Enlightenment Era, used to say concerning Christ: "Curse the wretch. In twenty years Christianity will be no more. My single hand shall destroy the edifice it took twelve apostles to rear." Saul of Tarsus seemed to share the same sentiments as he was the primary agent in a campaign to terrify and arrest Christians in their homes and send them off to prison.

The persecution that people like Saul meant for evil, God meant for good, and used it to spread the gospel far and wide — to Samaria and to Ethiopia. The persecution and dispersion also brought about a fulfillment of the Lord's commission to His disciples in chapter 1:8: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." As these Christians fled and spread out, they also spread the love and good news of Jesus Christ. As I think about the Puritans and other parts of church history, if it weren't for persecution, we might not have heard the gospel ourselves.

Simon the Magician

Even though the gospel was spreading in Samaria and many were saved, Simon the magician shows that not every seeming conversion is real. Simon misunderstood the way the Spirit operates and had no conception of God's free grace, thinking that you can buy it along with the power of the Holy Spirit. It is important that we "test the spirits" and use wisdom and judgment to determine if someone is producing spiritual fruit as evidence of belief and repentance.

A Name Better Than Sons and Daughters

The prophecy which the eunuch was reading had just recently been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. What was unclear shortly beforehand has now been made clear through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus alone offered up His life as an offering for sin and justified many by bearing their iniquities, exactly as Isaiah prophesied in Isaiah 53. Beginning with this scripture, Philip told him the good news about Jesus. (vs. 35) How good is the providence of God in the circumstances by which we come to hear and believe the gospel.

This eunuch would have no children of his own, but he had many spiritual children — the fruit of his evangelism. Church tradition says that the Ethiopian eunuch evangelized by Philip in Acts 8 spread the gospel as he returned to Africa. Church fathers as early as Irenaeus in A.D. 180 mention the eunuch evangelizing his homeland. Isaiah 56:3–5 had promised: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off."

"There are spiritual children to be had and guided, and there is an everlasting name to be received from the good Lord — better than sons and daughters."

He Makes His Enemies His Friends

We should be greatly encouraged by the truthfulness of the gospel because of the account of Saul's conversion. What else other than a genuine encounter with the Lord of glory would turn Saul from persecutor of the faith to champion of the faith? He had the letters from the synagogues in his hand, granting him full authority to arrest any belonging to the Way. Completing the mission would only advance his career and further prove his zeal. What would sway him from that mission? Only Jesus.

We can agree with the 18th century English statesman George Lyttelton, who said: "The conversion and apostleship of Paul alone, duly considered, was of itself a demonstration sufficient to prove Christianity to be a divine revelation." Shortly after his encounter with the risen Christ, Paul is preaching Jesus as the Son of God in the synagogues of Damascus. He had a much greater commission, issued by a greater authority than the Jewish high priest.

Only the power of God makes His enemies His friends. We were once enemies and rebels of God, refusing to have Christ as Lord over us. It was only the "hound of heaven" who sought us on our road to hell, and the power of God who removed the scales from our own eyes, and the grace of God that turned us into friends of God. Praise God for His marvelous and matchless grace.

How Much He Must Suffer for the Sake of My Name

Paul was a chosen vessel specifically used by God to suffer for the name of Christ (vs. 16). You may not become a martyr, or be shipwrecked, or be stoned or imprisoned — but how willing are you to suffer insult or mocking or anger in order to make known the glory of Jesus Christ to others? It is important to remember that when you are being persecuted or ridiculed, they are not primarily persecuting you but Jesus. Christ didn't say to Saul, "Why are you persecuting my followers?" He correctly identified the persecution as being directed at Jesus Himself. John 15:18–20 says: "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you."

"Only the power of God makes His enemies His friends. We were once enemies and rebels of God — it was the grace of God that turned us into friends of God. Praise God for His marvelous and matchless grace."

The Dividing Wall

In this chapter we start to see what has been God's plan from the beginning, realized: the dividing wall of separation between Jew and Gentile has been dissolved. Paul elaborates on this in Ephesians 2:12–14: "Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility." Both Jew and Gentile have access in one Spirit to the Father. Gentiles are no longer strangers and aliens, but citizens built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.

Softening Peter's Heart

God was working on Peter's heart — changing his biases, softening his heart toward the Gentiles. Peter had stayed with Simon the tanner, whose trade made him ostracized by the Jews. However, Peter met a tanner who loved Jesus and was willing to associate with him. God was working in Peter's prideful and impulsive heart. God softens his heart further by revealing a vision starting in verse 9. Among the variety of animals Peter saw were ones that were forbidden and non-kosher. Since Peter had never eaten anything that was not kosher, he found the picture revolting. Even after God saves us, He has a way of softening our prejudices.

What About People?

The point of the vision was not just to change dietary restrictions. This is about people. The four corners of the sheet in the vision point to the four corners of a compass — north, south, east, and west — and all the millions of people that would fall under those compass points. We see shortly after this vision that Peter is sharing the gospel with Gentiles, because what God has made clean, do not call common. God shows no partiality.

It has been commonly said that the most segregated hour of the week in America is 9:00 am on a Sunday. Our prejudices extend beyond skin color or ethnic background — we can have prejudices against people of opposing political affiliations, denominations, and age

groups. The danger of these prejudices is that we only try to win over people of our own kind. But Peter and those with him were amazed that the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentiles, those who were unlike them. The dividing wall of hostility has been broken down. We must love our neighbor as ourselves.

"God changed Peter's heart, and God can change our hearts too. Do we see those around us — even those very much unlike us — as potential heirs of grace?"

What's in a Name?

The name "Christians" was first used of believers and disciples in Antioch (vs. 26). Antioch was the first Gentile church — the third largest city in the world in the first century, behind Rome and Alexandria. Antioch was famous for its chariot racing and for having a reputation of sensuality, immorality, and the pursuit of pleasure. It was the Las Vegas of the ancient Near East.

Why were the believers first called Christians in Antioch? In verses 19–20 we see that those scattered because of persecution came to Antioch, and some of those believers spoke the gospel only with fellow Jews, while others — unnamed men of Cyprus and Cyrene — spoke the gospel to the Greek-speaking people and other groups. They had no official direction from the apostles and were not officially sent out. Antioch was evangelized not by the apostles, but by average members of Christ's body who had a burning love for Christ. The result of their labor was that "the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord" (vs. 21). The work of the ministry is not just for the apostles, the pastors, and the elders — God gave the church those people "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ." (Ephesians 4:12)

The work of the Lord in the lives of the saints in Antioch was so powerful that the people there looked for a new name to call believers. Barnabas visited and saw "the grace of God" in the work there (vs. 23). The Jews would never have named believers "Christians" because Christ is the Greek word for Messiah — but to the Greek-speaking pagans of Antioch, the term Christos was simply the name of a man of whom these people were always talking. He was always on their lips. The term "Christian" expresses the close relationship between Christ — which means "Anointed One" — and His people who share His anointing in the Holy Spirit. More than anything, Jesus ought to be what characterizes us. He is our core identity.

"The immoral people of Antioch saw that something was different — that these people were distinctly of Christ. The name of Christ was always on their lips and permeated their whole life. More than anything, Jesus ought to be what characterizes us."

Earnest Prayer

In chapter 12, Herod kills James and arrests Peter because it pleased the Jews. The believers must have felt quite helpless — John would have been deeply saddened since in the gospels we always see James and John together, the "Sons of Thunder." Additionally, Peter was arrested during the Passover week, the same week Christ had been murdered. Their apparent weakness was highlighted by the fact that all they could do was pray: "earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church" (vs. 5).

Sometimes Christians today feel the same way about situations we face: losing a job, cancer in a loved one, rebellious children who are drifting away from the things of God. The saints cast Peter and themselves before God in "earnest prayer." The Greek word translated "earnest" comes originally from a word that means "to stretch" or "to strain." They were straining in prayer, praying with agony. Jesus commands us to continually ask, seek, and knock for our requests, not doubting but anticipating that God will hear our prayers. The Lord teaches us to be like the persistent widow, steadfast and straining in our prayers. The answer to their prayers was standing right outside the door! We should think and believe what Ephesians 3:20 says: "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us."

The Diet of Worms

Luke tells us later in the chapter what became of Herod Agrippa. After making a speech, all those who were trying to get on Herod's good side praised him and flattered him saying "The voice of a god, and not of a man!" Herod did not rebuke them, nor did he give God the glory. He swelled up with pride — and so God made his belly swell up as well. An angel of the Lord made a severe pain in his belly, and he died. Truly God will not share His glory with another (Isaiah 42:8). How true it is that God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Even though their deaths are in the same chapter, how different were the deaths of James and Herod! In one moment James went from prison to heaven. In one moment, Herod went from his earthly glory to an everlasting prison in hell.

"Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. Prayer to God is the conduit to God's grace and power into our lives – even prayer answered faster than we expect."

Are You Hungry?

When the people of Cyprus heard the gospel and the message of justification by faith alone, the people begged that these things might be told to them the next Sabbath. They wanted to hear the message preached again. Author David Platt describes a series of classes he taught to Christians in a mission field in Asia. The people were so hungry for the Word that they took two weeks off from their farms to hear him teach 8–12 hours a day for ten days. They said, "We have never learned any of this truth before, and we want to learn more." After teaching the Old Testament, some from the group said, "You have not taught us the New Testament. We would like to learn the New Testament today." For the next eleven hours he walked them from Matthew to Revelation.

It is a fair question to ask whether we really hunger and thirst for God's Word. We often ingest many hours of entertainment, yet it is difficult to spend even half an hour in the Word of God for many professing Christians. Psalm 63:1 says: "O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water." Would that verse describe your hunger for God?

Predetermined Appointment

Verse 48 says, "And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed." This is a clear indicator of God's sovereign election. God appointed His elect unto eternal life before the foundation of the world. Every chosen and elected human will surely believe and be saved. The commentator F.F. Bruce writes, "Appointed is used in some ancient documents in the sense of 'to inscribe' or 'to enroll.'" Those who believe have been enrolled by God among His elect.

A.W. Pink writes: "Here we learn four things: First, that believing is the consequence and not the cause of God's decree. Second, that a limited number only are 'ordained to eternal life,' for if all men without exception were thus ordained by God, then the words 'as many as' are a meaningless qualification. Third, that this 'ordination' of God is not to mere external privileges but to 'eternal life,' not to service but to salvation itself. Fourth, that all — 'as many as,' not one less — who are thus ordained by God to eternal life will most certainly believe." Praise God that He elects us, saves those whom He elects, and they will certainly believe.

"We should never tire of the old gospel and always have a fresh view of the Old Rugged Cross. May the precious gospel not become rusty to us – it is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe."

Through Many Dangers, Toils, and Snares

Consider the incredible bravery and boldness of Paul and Barnabas. Acts 14 shows us the consistently courageous attitude of the apostles in their loyalty to Christ through thick and thin. Their courage is a model for us. Chapter 14 shows Paul and Barnabas completing their first missionary journey, traveling through Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, and returning to their home base in Antioch.

This chapter accounts for part of Paul's first missionary journey, and along the way Paul is stoned and believed to have been killed by his persecutors. Take a good look at Paul returning to Lystra, heavily bruised and gashed from being stoned. It is from that mouth that we hear: "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." (vs. 22)

Continue in the faith, press on through tribulations and toils and dangers, because our God is worth it, and we are almost home. I have family members that live in Charlotte, N.C. That is usually a 12-hour drive from Long Island, N.Y. The last leg of the drive home is the most difficult part — going through the Cross Bronx Expressway. Usually there is tremendous traffic, but that is also the indicator that I am almost home. It is very much like this Christian life. We have many toils, dangers, and tribulations, especially as Christians, but we are almost home. God is calling us to be faithful, to not stop but press on, and to continue in the faith. Let us not be surprised by these tribulations, but instead be strengthened.

"Remain faithful: we are not running a hundred-yard dash but a marathon. Even so, every difficulty and tribulation is a sign that we are almost home."

The Judaizer Heresy

The early church not only wrestled with persecution but also with doctrinal division and strife. The Jerusalem Council was a pivotal moment in the history of the church. The direction of the church could have been altered to return to the bondage of tradition, or to be placed back under the law rather than grace. The issue brought before the Council was that some from among the Jews — Judaizers — saw the Gentile conversions as insufficient for entry into the family of believers and that, in addition to faith, circumcision was a necessary condition for salvation. With so many Gentiles being evangelized in Antioch, Cyprus, and Asia Minor, some of the more conservative Jewish Christians feared that Christian moral standards would be weakened, so their solution was to impose circumcision and an obligation to keep the Mosaic law.

Faith Alone, or Faith Plus Something Else?

Are believers justified by faith alone, or is it faith plus something else? In the sixteenth century, Martin Luther said that the doctrine of justification is the article upon which the church stands or falls. Calvin said that justification by faith alone is the hinge upon which everything turns. But by no means was it a new battle — Paul and the early church faced that same battle in the first century with the Judaizers.

Circumcision was the sign of the old covenant. God had given the Law as a schoolmaster to lead them to Christ by demonstrating at every turn that they were sinners in need of mercy (Galatians 3:23–25). Ultimately, the error of these Judaizers was that they were saying the atonement of Jesus was not good enough. Jesus submitted to the law and became a curse for us by hanging on the cross. In bearing our sin, He bore the curse of the Old Testament law — what we couldn't fulfill, but Jesus did. Jesus' perfect righteousness is placed upon us, while our falling short of the law and sin is placed on Him. Praise God that the council answered the question definitively against the Judaizers. The just shall live by faith alone.

Disagreements and Discussion

This council also set precedent for future councils when an issue of doctrine was brought to question. We can learn important principles from how the Jerusalem church responded.

- First, the leaders of the church met together to discuss the matter. They did not let this issue sit and fester.

- Second, their discussion was God-centered and God-exalting. Together they looked to His will and bowed to His providence.

- Third, they discussed the Holy Scriptures, basing their decision on the teaching in the Word of God. (vs. 16–17)

- Fourth, they guided their decision by the principles of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, not through bondage to human traditions of old covenant ceremonies.

- Fifth, no one man decided what the church would do; though Peter and James had more authority than the others, the church sought a plurality of voices and unity of mind.

"The just shall live by faith alone. The good news of Jesus cannot be reduced to a list of do's and don'ts, and the atonement of Christ cannot be supplemented by any human tradition."

Joy and Hope in Times of Trial

In the beginning of Acts 16, Paul comes back to Lystra and meets Timothy. Lystra was where Paul had earlier been stoned and left for dead. Paul was probably reflecting on the misery of the stoning and the recent separation from Barnabas — both experiences had brought Paul disappointment and pain. But now God brings Timothy into Paul's life. This was the beginning of a beautiful friendship and fellowship in the gospel. In 1 Corinthians 4:17, Paul even calls Timothy his son and his "beloved and faithful child." God loves to bring joy and hope in times of trial.

Two Very Different Circumstances

Lydia and the Philippian Jailer were converted under very different circumstances. With the earthquake and the ready sword, the conversion of the Philippian Jailer was dramatic and forceful — but this conversion was no less productive of true faith and joy than that of Lydia, who simply heard the Word and the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. God's actions in bringing people to Christ are different for each person, but true, saving grace always shows itself in faith and love that God Himself works in the hearts of sinners. Both responded with the desire to make a public profession of faith in baptism. Both responded with fruit of the Spirit and of repentance: a generous heart of hospitality, and the Philippian Jailer with great joy.

It is important to remember that some people come to faith as children, raised in Christian homes from a young age, and some people are saved like Paul — with a road-to-Damascus-like conversion. People's experiences of conversion have different circumstances, but a true conversion will produce true spiritual fruit.

"Imagine the drama of the Philippian Jailer. When those around you go through life's drama and trauma, they will often come to you who know the Lord. Will you be ready with the truth and hope of the gospel?"

Busy About His Father's Business

We see Paul being very active in ministry and not being slothful in zeal. In Thessalonica he preached three Sabbath days, reasoning with them from the Scriptures. In Berea they were examining the Scriptures daily as Paul was there teaching, and in Athens Paul reasoned in the synagogue and in the marketplace every day. Paul was about His Father's business and He was imitating Christ, who tirelessly taught and preached about the Kingdom of God. In Colossians he tells us the main thrust: "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me." (Colossians 1:28-29) The apostle balances work ethic with God's enabling power: even though our work is laborious, Jesus' power is limitless.

Expository Listening

The Bereans were commended because when they received the word, they received it with eagerness, "examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so" (vs. 11). One of the great sins of those who attend churches today is the dispassionate hearing of God's Word. They leave Sunday service and spill out what they hear on the steps, neither wrestling with it nor "doing the word." The Bereans were not passively listening to sermons, but there was an eagerness, a readiness, a willingness and desire to know more about the Lord. When the truth comes, we must interact with it.

Paul in Athens

Each one of the thousands of statues Paul saw in Athens demonstrated the Athenians' hunger for God, but also indicated their spiritual emptiness. And this provoked in Paul a desperate concern for the spiritual needs of those he saw — there was a fire in his bones that the apostle could not hold in. Look at Paul's masterful communication to the different groups of people in Athens. He saw the statue of the "unknown God." The word translated "unknown" is the root from which we get agnosticism, meaning "without knowledge." The Athenians were supposed to know everything, being a center for culture and philosophy, but on the most important truth they came up short — they did not know God.

Paul drew out giant theological truths about God: that the God who made the world and everything in it also structured their lives in order to point them to Him personally and relationally. Everything was fine as long as Paul remained theoretical, but once Paul called them for action, the philosophers began to shift their posture — the thought of being accountable to the true God makes many people uncomfortable. Notice the reaction of the crowd: mockery, delay, and some — such as Dionysius and Damaris — believed.

"Does our grief over the idolatry all around us drive us to speak up and share the Lord Jesus Christ? Paul could not hold it in — there was a fire in his bones."

Encouragement in Difficulties

This Christian life and ministry is filled with difficulties, fears, uncertainties, discouragement, and many letdowns. Even Paul felt afraid (vs. 9). Paul was bivocational, working hard by making tents for a living (vs. 3), and during this time his witness was opposed and reviled. However, while Paul was in Corinth, Christ encouraged him during this time of difficulty. He tells Paul: "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people." (vs. 10) This encouragement went beyond reassuring physical safety — God reminded Paul that his labor is not in vain. Christ was telling Paul to keep going. He did not mean that there were many converts hidden among the people, but that there were many who had been chosen by God's own decree of election. They still needed the preaching of the gospel so that they might come to faith and repentance.

Mighty but Humble

Chapter 18 describes Apollos as "competent in the scriptures" (vs. 24). This meant that by the Spirit's grace he loved the Word of God, studied it carefully, and could clearly teach it. He reminds us of Ezra who "had set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel" (Ezra 7:10). However, he was only well versed in the Baptism of John, and was not yet aware of the Baptism by the Holy Spirit through Jesus. But he knew the Scriptures and had a great zeal for others to know the things concerning Jesus as Messiah from the Old Testament prophecies.

Priscilla and Aquila came along, invited him to their home, and filled in the gaps in his understanding so that he could teach more accurately the way of God. Notice the wisdom in Priscilla and Aquila to give private help to a preacher rather than denouncing or correcting him in public, and notice the character of Apollos, whose response shows that he was still humble, teachable, and eager to grow in his knowledge (vs. 26). How can we imitate his example?

"God has 'many people' in your city who are His people. We don't know who the elect are — we can only plant the seeds. This relieves us of immense pressure, reminding us that God calls us to be faithful in lovingly sharing the gospel."

Sold Out for Christ

Depending on your "pet sins" and what things held sway over your heart, repentance will look different in the life of a believer. For many in Ephesus, materialism was the false god that needed to be renounced. We see it hold a firm grip over the lives of Demetrius the silversmith and the craftsmen who were losing money due to the spreading of the gospel. For the Ephesians, repentance required destroying books of sorcery that had cost an enormous amount of money (vs. 19). But these believers took the loss in order to honor Christ. Along with Paul they could say, "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." (Philippians 3:7-8) What have you given up for Jesus?

In the case of the craftsmen, the love of money turned the silversmiths and craftsmen into violent enemies of the church. Indeed, you cannot serve God and money.

"Imagine Paul's name being discussed by the powers and principalities of the demonic realm. May Christ work so mightily through us that our enemies know our names because of how we have disturbed their plans through powerful gospel ministry."

Last Supper Feelings

Does not Paul's parting words to the Ephesian elders have the feel of the Last Supper? Paul knows he is heading to Jerusalem just like our Lord did, and even though he did not know specifically what awaited him there except that the Holy Spirit revealed imprisonment and affliction, they will never see His face again. Jesus gave His life up willingly, and Paul — who poured out his life as a living sacrifice — did not count his life as precious or of value that he would try to do anything to preserve it. His only desire was to finish his race and ministry received from Jesus and to be a good witness to the gospel of grace. As he said: "Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death." (Philippians 1:20)

The Full Counsel of God

This devotion to Christ prompted Paul's parting encouragements and warnings to these elders in Ephesus — something that every teacher and elder needs to hear. Paul's ministry did not hold back anything that would truly profit his people, but he imparted to them the whole counsel of God (vs. 27), because all of God's truth is sufficient and profitable. (2 Timothy 3:16) He did not skip over difficult doctrines or hard sayings, and he did not forget needed comforts and encouraging exhortations. The surest way to teach the full counsel of God is to go through whole books of the Bible exegetically, so that there is not a temptation to be imbalanced and to emphasize or avoid certain teachings of Scripture.

Warning of Wolves

Paul predicts that after he leaves, false teachers he refers to as fierce wolves will come in among them and from among them, twisting the Word, drawing them away from Christ and His truth and towards themselves. He calls the elders to "be alert." This reminds us of Peter's call: "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." (1 Peter 5:8) Our enemy and these wolves want to devour the sheep.

Paul's prediction did take place, as we see throughout 1st and 2nd Timothy. Foreseeing this, Paul urges these men not only to declare the whole counsel of God but to pay careful attention to themselves and to all the flock. Pay attention to your walk and to

their walks with the Lord. Admonish them with tears and direct them with the Word. Follow Paul's example — remembering how he had shown such careful and tearful concern for his converts during his three years in Ephesus, admonishing them night and day and counseling them toward the right path. Paul would eventually be killed, but the Word would be guarded by his successors, preserved not only in the memory of its hearers, but written and with us to this day.

"The surest way to teach the full counsel of God is to go through whole books of the Bible exegetically. If we pick and choose topics, we are merely being self-serving instead of loving God, His flock, and our neighbor."

Praying For and With Others

As Paul is headed toward Jerusalem, Luke tells us that before they departed from Tyre they prayed together with the families on the beach. What a beautiful picture. Do you think those children and families ever forgot that moment — kneeling with the apostle Paul as he was headed to Jerusalem to suffer for the gospel's sake? We often tell other people that we are praying for them, and that is well and good. But one of the sweetest and most encouraging things you can do for someone is pray with them there on the spot. They are sick — pray with them. They are leaving to go on a trip — pray with them. They are struggling with sin and temptation — pray with them.

I Gave My Life to Christ

"Then Paul answered, 'What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.'"

Agabus' prophecy wasn't news to Paul, and he was saddened by the others' reaction to it. Paul was ready to die for the gospel. He had been ready since that day when Christ had called him on the road to Damascus. Paul heard the leading of the Lord directing him to Jerusalem, and he positioned himself to essentially say: not my will, but Yours be done. Wherever you send me, I will follow. Whatever cup you give me, I will drink. May we all be true to our calling for Christ, whatever it costs us, wherever it takes us, that we may be ready to run the race until it is finished.

Hospitality

Verse 16 talks about a man named Mnason of Cyprus, known as "an early disciple," who opened his house to Paul. I have seen and known many older believers who use their retirement and their time well for the kingdom, serving the King. One of the best ways to love others is by opening your home to them as Mnason of Cyprus did. He opened his home to a traveling missionary in need. Here are a few verses that exhort us to be hospitable:

- "Show hospitality to one another without grumbling." (1 Peter 4:9)

- "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." (Hebrews 13:2)
- "Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality." (Romans 12:13)
- "And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'" (Matthew 25:40)

"There are blessings for both parties in opening your home. Mutual encouragement flows in both directions when you welcome the saints."

I Love to Tell the Story

Paul's speech in the temple court is autobiographical, evangelistic, and apologetic. He tells his audience of his upbringing as an orthodox Jew, his conversion at Damascus, and his commission to evangelize the Gentiles. You can tell that Paul strategically tailors this speech to his audience, emphasizing his education in Jerusalem under Gamaliel, and discussing his zeal for God which drove him to harass God's people. He speaks here as a Jew to Jews, seeking to win over some in this crowd to the faith. Paul had seen the risen Christ, heard His voice, and had been commissioned to go and tell with confidence what he had seen and heard: that Jesus of Nazareth, crucified by men and exalted by God, is the Messiah, the glorified Son of God, and the Savior of mankind.

We too are witnesses of Him to everyone of what we have seen and heard (vs. 15). When was the last time you bore witness and were able to give testimony of the risen Christ? Not that you have seen Him, but you know Him and love Him. Whether your conversion was quiet or dramatic, it glorifies God for us to reflect upon our conversions and to tell others of the work of the Savior.

Love Your Enemies

Even after the Jews unjustly seized and beat Paul, he did not curse them but instead lovingly told them about the Savior and the Messiah. Even though Paul was commissioned to be a light to the Gentiles, he loved those who shared his earthly heritage. Romans 9:3 captures Paul's heart for his fellow kinsmen: "For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh." Paul would have died for his fellow Jews if this would have saved them. Do you have enemies in this life? Follow Paul's example and be winsome and loving as you share their only hope in this world and the next.

Blinding Hatred

The Jews were listening to Paul up until he told them that God would send him far away to the Gentiles. They couldn't conceive that God would bring Gentiles into the fold because they could not see beyond their own hatred and pride. Paul, even though a Jew, was brought into the fold of Christ's flock and forgiven — accepted by brothers and sisters in Christ even though he had persecuted them. Indeed, he who has been forgiven

much, loves much. God brought Paul into His family, and so it wasn't much of a stretch for him to conceive God bringing the Gentiles into His family. Who can you love and extend grace to today?

"He who has been forgiven much, loves much. God brought Paul into His family – and so it wasn't much of a stretch for him to conceive God bringing the Gentiles into His family."

Light as a Feather

There is a saying, "A clear conscience is the best pillow." If that is true, in a sense Paul slept well knowing that he had "lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day." Paul is not saying he was not guilty of sin, but that he kept short accounts with God. A clear conscience is being quick to repent of sin. A clear conscience is living in private the same way as you live in public — before the face of God (*coram Deo*). A clear conscience is knowing that people you come into contact with on a regular basis have heard the gospel from you.

The Hope of the Resurrection

Paul was in prison for the hope of the resurrection. As a Pharisee, he already believed there was a resurrection, but he did not believe that Christ had been raised until He appeared to him on the road to Damascus. It was then that he came to understand that Christ fulfilled Old Testament prophecy and that Jesus Himself was the hope of Israel. Jeremiah called God Himself "the hope of Israel" (Jeremiah 14:8; 17:13). When Paul met Christ, he lost all hope in himself and saw only Christ as his hope.

If the Sadducees are right and there is no resurrection, then we have big problems. Paul addresses this in 1 Corinthians: "But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain... you are still in your sins... we are of all people most to be pitied." (1 Corinthians 15:12–19) But Paul does not rest his case there. He declares that Christ died for our sins, was buried, was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time — people whose names and addresses were known. We have an objective truth in the resurrection, and that means we have an objective hope in the resurrection.

"No authority in the ancient world doubted the resurrection happened, which is why they tried to arrest these men and shut people up about it. They are declaring not a myth, but what they have seen with their eyes and heard with their ears."

Alarmed

In the last chapter we discussed the truth of the resurrection. In the heart of the believer, this is an assurance and great peace, but for the unbeliever, this should be a cause for concern. Paul held before all his hearers the truth of the resurrection of the dead "both of the just and unjust" (vs. 15). It is a sobering truth that we will rise again, and all souls that ever lived will be in one of two groups: righteous or wicked. Everyone you see will spend eternity somewhere. In that sense, we are all eternal souls. This was a sobering fact for Felix — when he heard of righteousness, self-control, and the coming judgment, he became alarmed and sent Paul away. However, we have no evidence of Felix repenting.

I remember talking to a friend who was not a believer but had spent many years in church and ended up leaving. I asked him: "What do you think of the gospel these days?" He said, "I don't think of it, but I do think of eternity and it is scary... but I've never been happier." I responded, "You should be scared... and happy people go to hell every day. What you need is to be right with the Lord." For those outside of Christ, eternity should make them tremble as it did Felix, but it is not enough to feel guilt over sin and fear over the judgment day. There must be a response in faith and repentance of sin.

Not Doormats

It is interesting to see Paul giving an excellent defense as to his innocence in this chapter. He speaks matter-of-factly and isn't just laying down and taking the abuse and false accusations from the Jews. Paul is not doing this to save his own skin — we know from Acts 20 that Paul said, "I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God." (Acts 20:24) He knows the Lord still has work for him to do in Rome, and so he argues his innocence so that he would continue to be used by the Lord for His glory. May we view our days like Paul — seeing the time given to us as opportunities to give God the glory.

"Do you see other people as eternal souls, about to spend eternity somewhere? How would having that lens change the way you see and interact with others?"

To Caesar You Shall Go

The will of the Lord was playing out right before Paul's eyes. He knew two chapters earlier that the Lord had told him, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem so you must testify also in Rome." (Acts 23:11) As Paul hears the trial play out before Festus, he sees the opportunity to appeal to Caesar and be sent to Rome. This is how the Lord works! The interesting circumstances that the Lord puts in your life are to accomplish His will.

Pomp and Circumstance

Festus and others came to the audience hall in Caesarea with great pomp and a show of their power and wealth, but in reality they were desperate sinners who would soon face death, after which would come judgment. And even though Paul was in prison for the sake of the gospel, and visually the opposite of these rulers, he had the riches of heaven. Brothers and sisters, we are rich, because our Father owns the cattle on a thousand hills. Very soon, Festus would die, and leave his wealth and power a distant memory. We shall be in God's presence forever.

Knowledge Is Power

Compare the knowledge of Felix to Festus. In chapter 24 it says that Felix had an accurate knowledge of the Way. In this chapter, Festus simply says, "Rather they had certain points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive" (vs. 19). Festus is speaking in such simple terms of Christ. When Paul is writing to Timothy he says, "and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." (2 Timothy 3:15) Indeed, Felix still needed to repent even though he had an accurate knowledge of the Way — but without being acquainted with the sacred writings, we can never be wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. It is possible to know the Word of God in your head and for it to never travel to your heart. But it is impossible to believe the Word of God in your heart without first knowing it in your head. Make it a priority to be well acquainted with the Scriptures, and keep growing in the knowledge and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

"Paul's sorrows of being in prison for years became a doorway for the gospel to come to rulers and judges. Let us remember that the Lord Jesus rules over all for the sake of spreading the gospel to all people."

The Eloquent Servant

Look how eloquent Paul's defense was before Agrippa. Even secular scholars admire the beauty of the reasoning and logic of Paul's argument. It was an example of Paul's firm faith in God, combined with humility, respect, and sound reasoning, all marinated in love for the souls of men. Paul demonstrates how the grace of God has changed him. In Acts 9:1, Luke tells us that Paul was still breathing out murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord, and here before Agrippa, his account is seasoned with grace and truth. Formerly, Paul was "exceedingly mad," punishing the saints in "raging fury" (vs. 11), but now he is called a mad man and "out of his mind" (vs. 24) as he spoke sobering words full of truth to the glory of God. We are all blind enemies of God until our hearts are renewed by His divine grace.

The Gospel in a Nutshell

In one verse (vs. 18), Paul gives a short but rich summary of the conversion that Christ works through the preaching of the gospel. Paul was sent to preach to the Gentiles so that the Word of God would (1) open their eyes, (2) so that they may turn from darkness to light, (3) and from the power of Satan to God, (4) that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Jesus.

These are the terms of Paul's commission, and his commission echoes the commission of the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 42:6–7, speaking of Christ: "I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness." The same words were echoing in Paul's head as he reminds the Colossians how God the Father "has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light... who has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." (Colossians 1:12–14) Jesus was carrying out the commission of the Father, and Paul was carrying out the commission of Jesus by telling others of that same mission.

Looking at the Wrong Man

After hearing Paul's testimony, Agrippa, Bernice, and Festus turned to each other and said "this man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment" (vs. 31). They were looking

at the wrong man to determine his guilt or innocence. The entire time of hearing the truth, they were determining Paul's guilt. Instead they should have been determining their own guilt before a holy God. After that, they should have turned to the right man — Christ — for the forgiveness of sins and the newness of life. They said, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar" (vs. 32). Truthfully, they would have been set free from the dominion and power and penalty of sin if they had appealed to Jesus.

Agrippa intellectually agreed to the Scriptures, however, he would not bow his heart to the Christ of the Scriptures, as he says: "In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?" (vs. 28) Paul almost persuaded him to surrender and believe the only one who could wash him of his sins. Being an "almost Christian" doesn't help anybody. Only those who submit entirely to the righteousness of God in Christ, abandoning all hope of being saved by any other means, will be saved.

"Paul's account is seasoned with grace and truth. We are all blind enemies of God until our hearts are renewed by His divine grace — and then the same gospel that saved us also shapes how we speak of Christ to others."

Leadership on a Ship

Compare Paul's heart and actions to that of Jonah during another storm at sea. On this ship, Paul was clearly not like Jonah — the Old Testament prophet who fled his calling in disobedience. In Jonah's situation, the sailors almost lost their lives because of him (Jonah 1:6), but all on the ship were saved because of Paul in this chapter (vs. 24). Jonah hid, sleeping below deck until the pagan sailors woke him up, but Paul gave leadership and encouragement through his words and prayers. When trials come, we can be tempted to avoid and hide like Jonah, but God is calling us to be like Paul — trusting in the Lord and loving people.

Paul was the lowest man on the totem pole in terms of authority. He was a prisoner among centurions. There was no earthly reason to trust him, let alone listen to his advice on how to survive the storm. However, Paul had two things going for him: the Word of God and a godly character. Christian leaders have no authority apart from the Word of God. Paul had no credentials, but he had character. Even a lowly prisoner of integrity and godly character is more qualified for spiritual leadership than a CEO of a company whose integrity is questionable.

"No competent leader is going to be anxious to impress people with his credentials. Leaders who are truly able are qualified because of their character. They are easily identified, not by letters of commendation, but because of the influence they have on others." — John MacArthur

Leadership and Love

Look at the love of Paul for people and for souls. In verse 33, "Paul urged them all to take some food" and gain their strength back. At that point they had gone nearly two weeks without food. Paul broke bread and gave thanks to God, and the people on board were all encouraged. A true leader doesn't lead because it is his or her duty, but because they want to love and encourage people. The more a leader invests their life in people, the more effective that person will be in the Lord's service. How does a godly leader build trust? When the people around you are convinced that you will do everything in your power for their good and nothing for their harm, they'll trust you.

All Called to Lead

To one degree or another, every Christian is called to be a leader of sorts, because all of us are given a mandate to teach and to influence others. The Christian at his job has a duty to lead others to Christ, and the stay-at-home mom — whose sphere of leadership might stretch no further than her own children — has the same calling. All Christians in every kind of leadership are called to be spiritual leaders. We are called to lead others to Christ, and we are called to do so by trusting in God, with upright character, and out of love.

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Indeed, Still Working, and Unstoppable

We started examining the book of Acts back in chapter 1 and we saw that Acts really is just a continuation of the witness and story that Luke documents of the gospel spreading. Luke refers to his Gospel account as what Jesus "began both to do and teach" (vs. 1). He is implying that Christ is continuing to act and teach. The book of Acts is a documentation and witness of the beginning of that gospel spreading to the end of the earth.

The Gospel of Luke started in rural Judaea, after Caesar had made the people register for taxes, unknowingly bringing the unborn Christ to the place where the Scriptures foretold His birth. The book of Acts ends in the heart of the Roman Empire, with Paul, God's servant, boldly preaching Christ and His kingdom in Caesar's city. From beginning to end, the writings of Luke testify that God is fulfilling His decree concerning the Savior. Nothing could stop the complete accomplishment of redemption by Christ's death and resurrection, and nothing can stop the preaching of the gospel to all nations — not even a shipwreck or a poisonous snakebite on a missionary's hand. It is not pagan gods, or chance, or luck that rules over this world, but our triune God. This teaches us to serve God with confidence.

Chained Melody

When Paul arrived in Rome, even though he was confined to an apartment under house arrest and was chained to a soldier, he came out swinging in boldness. After all he had been through, he only gave himself three days to get settled before calling the leading Jews of all the synagogues and making a defense and explanation of the gospel and his testimony. Paul continued with persuading others "from morning till evening." James Stalker points out: "Paul's room became a fulcrum from which he moved the world."

As each shift brought a new guard, Paul had a captive audience for sharing the good news about Jesus Christ. Kent Hughes shares this piece of historiography: "Today in Rome you can see a square of plaster cut from the wall of the barracks in the Palace of the Caesars. On it is scratched a human figure with a donkey's head. The figure is nailed to a cross, and a man is pictured kneeling before it. The picture bears the inscription, 'Alexamenos worships his God.' Some of the Imperial Guard would come to know Christ and even some of Caesar's privileged household as well." (Philippians 4:22)

In the closing scene of Acts, Paul is welcoming all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. Furthermore, while a prisoner, Paul, through the Holy Spirit, wrote the New Testament books of Philippians, Philemon, Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Timothy. God did great things during Paul's difficult years, and he wrote shortly before being martyred for Christ: "For which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!" (2 Timothy 2:9) It should encourage our hearts to know that Jesus is still working, advancing, and building His kingdom, of which the gates of hell will not prevail. (Matthew 16:18)

"The word of God is not bound! Paul's room became a fulcrum from which he moved the world. Serve God with confidence — nothing can stop the preaching of the gospel to all nations."