

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLE LESSONS ACTS



DANIEL P. WEBSTER

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Daniel Webster has been serving as a missionary in Ghana, West Africa since 2004. Previously Daniel worked as a Certified Interconnect Designer (CID) listed with IPC (Association of Connecting Electronics Industries). His electronics career spanned fifteen years working in Canada for the Department of National Defense, as well as spending five years designing advanced electronic communication equipment for the Avionics industry. Daniel is from British Columbia, Canada, and came to know the Lord at the age of twenty-five. He is married to Priscilla, and has a daughter living in Canada. Since 1994 Daniel has been involved with bible teaching and preaching to Christian audiences in both Canada and the USA, and also through various ministries in Ghana. Daniel developed this series of New Testament lessons during a five-year study of the New Testament. The Lessons were prepared as part of an on-going radio ministry in Ghana, where the lessons were broadcast on a national FM radio station in Kumasi from 2010 to 2015.

Cover: Designed by Daniel Webster – Photo is magnification of Acts 17:11

Bible Quotations:

Unless otherwise noted, all scripture references are from the New King James Version.

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RADIO SERIES

DEVELOPED BY: DANIEL WEBSTER (2010)

Torah scroll - on sheepskin dating from 1155-1225



Courtesy of Alma Mater Studiorum - University of Bologna

KEY VERSE:

THESE WERE MORE NOBLE THAN THOSE IN THESSALONICA, IN THAT THEY RECEIVED THE WORD WITH ALL READINESS OF MIND, AND

SEARCHED THE SCRIPTURES

DAILY, WHETHER THOSE THINGS WERE SO.

ACTS 17:11

THEME:

AND YOU WILL SEEK ME AND FIND ME,
WHEN YOU SEARCH FOR ME WITH ALL YOUR HEART.

JEREMIAH 29:13

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Preface

The lessons from Matthew to Revelation have been prepared through personal study of the New Testament. As an on-going part of our radio ministry in Ghana, it was decided to broadcast a series of teachings that would provide one lesson for each of the two hundred and sixty chapters of the New Testament. This work was completed over a five-year period from 2010 to 2015. These lessons are not intended as a commentary, or as an in-depth exegesis of each chapter. The lessons were written to be a concise, and consecutive teaching of the chapters of the New Testament, while providing practical instructions in Christian living. There is a strong emphasis in these lessons on the gospel message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. The author's intent is not simply to help people learn the teachings of the New Testament, but more importantly, he desires that all would come to know Jesus as their personal Savior and Lord. Each lesson contains a section entitled "Today's Bible Question". This section is designed to address a relevant question, pertaining to the chapter lesson, or with a view to the present spiritual climate. The lessons will serve many purposes for those interested in the teachings of the New Testament. I envision this work helping various bible teachers, Sunday school teachers, or youth leaders who wish to use a consecutive approach to presenting the scriptures to those whom they teach. Each lesson has been kept to a standard of two typed pages, or between 1500 to 2000 words. This will allow the lessons to be easily adapted into a regular teaching schedule. Each lesson, including the bible question section, can be read in less than 15 minutes, leaving time for group discussions, or further commenting, during a 30 to 45 minute bible teaching class.

It is my hope that this work will serve many in the Christian community with a greater appreciation of the teachings of the New Testament, and also be used by God to bring people to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

This work is dedicated to the glory of God, and the expansion of His kingdom both now and forevermore.

Daniel Webster
Oct. 2015

LESSONS IN ACTS

Ancient Roman Aqueduct at Caesarea Maritima, Israel



Photo courtesy of Daniel Webster

“THEREFORE, HAVING OBTAINED HELP FROM GOD, TO THIS DAY I STAND, WITNESSING BOTH TO SMALL AND GREAT, SAYING NO OTHER THINGS THAN THOSE WHICH THE PROPHETS AND MOSES SAID WOULD COME - THAT THE CHRIST WOULD SUFFER, THAT HE WOULD BE THE FIRST TO RISE FROM THE DEAD, AND WOULD PROCLAIM LIGHT TO THE JEWISH PEOPLE AND TO THE GENTILES.”

ACTS 26:22,23

LESSON 90
A New Beginning!
ACTS I

In today's lesson we begin a study in the book of Acts. The book of Acts teaches us about the beginning of the Christian church from the day of Pentecost and the years that followed. Through the work of the Holy Spirit Christians were empowered to preach the gospel and perform many mighty works for God. This period in history marks a major change and transition in how God is dealing with men on the earth. The focus changes from dealing with the nation Israel, to a new called out company of believers made up of people from all nations of the earth. We shall find the story of Acts both interesting, challenging and full of lessons to help guide us in our Christian lives.

The book of Acts was written by Luke to a man named Theophilus, to whom also the gospel of Luke is addressed. We do not have more information about Theophilus, but he was likely an important official in the Roman government since Luke gives him the title "Most Excellent". After the resurrection of Jesus Luke tells us that he appeared to his disciples over 40 days, and gave them commandments. He told His disciples to stay in Jerusalem until the promise of His Father comes upon them through the Holy Spirit. The disciples had asked Jesus before His ascension back into heaven, about whether he was now going to restore the kingdom. They must have believed that the reign of the Messiah was now about to begin, since Jesus the king had been raised up from the dead. Jesus said that it was not for them to know the times and seasons which the Father has placed under His own authority. This verse is important for it teaches us not to be concerned with the date planned for Jesus return and His kingdom. We know Jesus is coming, and we should live as though He might come today, but God has kept this information secret from us for now. Those who try to set dates for the end of the world or for Jesus second coming, are not correct, for Jesus said it was not for us to know.

As Jesus ascended before His disciples, they stood their gazing at Him as he ascended, and then two angels appear and asked them why they are staring into the sky, for Jesus would come again in the same manner in which He left. Jesus left this world as a man to ascend to heaven and sit upon the throne of God, but one day he shall again return as a man coming down through the clouds and resting his feet again on the mountain outside of Jerusalem, and He shall put down all of His enemies, and then set up His earthly kingdom. Jesus told His disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the coming Holy Spirit, so they went and gathered together with all the followers of Jesus and met continually for prayer in an upper room, and their number was about 120 people.

Peter addressed all the believers and explained that they needed to appoint another man to be an apostle, because Judas had fallen by transgression. He found a reference in the book of Psalms which they understood to be speaking of Judas, the one who would betray the Lord. When Judas had hanged himself Luke describes what happened. Somehow his body fell from the tree he had hanged himself from and all of his entrails (intestines) gushed out of him. This terrible scene caused the people of Jerusalem to call this place the field of blood.

When the disciples prayed and cast lots, between two men they felt were qualified, the lot fell to Matthias. The disciples felt it was necessary to have someone who had been with Jesus during the time of his earthly ministry and who had been a witness of His resurrection. That seems to make good sense, but it is worth noting that Matthias is not mentioned again in the book of Acts or the NT. If he did any work for the Lord, it must have not been very significant for the Holy Spirit does not lead any to write about it. However the Lord himself choose a man whom he named Paul. Paul had not been with Jesus during his earthly ministry, and in fact was a persecutor of the early church. Paul had not seen the risen Lord, until the day the Lord met him on the road to Damascus. Now this is not the person you and I would have chosen to be an apostle, and yet the Lord calls Paul to be an apostle, and then directs him to the gentile world. Paul became the greatest missionary of his day, and was not behind any of the other apostles in his labors and zeal. So much of the book of Acts is taken up with what the Lord did through Paul, but nothing about Matthias. Perhaps if the apostles had been patient and waited upon the Lord's timing they would have found the right man for the job, who would be the Lord's choosing and not their own. It is not enough to know about Jesus to be His faithful servant, our hearts need to be smitten by the immeasurable grace of God in saving us. When a man realizes the extent of God's grace towards his own soul, he is inspired to do great exploits for God, and to even lay down His life for His master.

This first chapter of Acts helps set the stage for the coming of the Holy Spirit. We find the apostles along with Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brethren, and many others, (a total of about 120 believers) praying. They had listened to Jesus and were praying and waiting patiently for the coming promise. They probably did not really understand all that God was about to do, but they knew Jesus had risen, and that He was Lord, and they were prepared to obey and follow His commands. Into this scene of prayerful, obedient and expectant believers God was about to pour out all the power of God in the person of the Holy Spirit.

"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.." Acts 1:8

Today's Bible Question:

In today's lesson we learned about the disciples waiting in Jerusalem for the coming Holy Spirit. We also learned about how they choose Matthias to take Judas place as an apostle, after Judas died a horrible death by hanging himself. Jesus had given instructions and commands to his disciples to wait for the coming Holy Spirit, for they would be His witnesses. Someone might ask the question. "what does it mean to be a witness for Jesus?"

Many folks today associate being a witness for Jesus with the WatchTower Society and their members who call themselves Jehovah's witnesses. This is not what Jesus meant when he told the disciples they would be His witnesses. I hope most listeners have recognized that the WatchTower Society believe and follow a different Jesus than the one we find in the bible, for they do not believe that Jesus is divine, nor do they believe he rose from the dead in a physical body. They also deny the doctrine of Hell and the trinity. Please be aware that such witnesses are false, and not teaching the word of God correctly.

To be Jesus witnesses, meant that the apostles would tell the world about his teachings, and testify to His miracles, and most importantly to His death, burial and resurrection. This they did as they spoke of Him in Jerusalem, and all around Judea, Samaria, and then through Paul and others throughout the Roman world of the 1st Century. Jesus command to be His witnesses extends beyond those original apostles to all that belong to Christ. All Christians are to be witnesses of Him. We can do this first by testifying to our faith in Jesus, and this is done symbolically through the act of believers baptism. As a new Christian obeys the Lord and is baptized he is testifying to the world about his faith in Jesus as his Savior and Lord, and thus being a witness for Jesus. After a person has been baptized they can also go out into the world to share the gospel with their family and friends and this is another important way to be a witness for the Lord. But let us notice something important here in the text. Jesus said that His disciples were to be witnesses, not do the work of witnessing. That might sound similar but there is an important distinction for us to make, which is that being a witness involves much more than just talking about Jesus or handing out gospel tracts. Being a witness, involves being like Jesus, and doing the works of Jesus, and obeying all of His teachings. By faithfully following the Lord and obeying all of His instructions for the church, we testify not only about Jesus, but we demonstrate the power of Christ in our lives to change us, making us like Himself.

We must never be guilty of thinking we are the Lord's witnesses when we are not prepared to listen and obey all that Jesus has taught us. We might go to church on Sunday and put money into the offering, but if we are trying to cheat in our business, or mistreat our neighbors, or neglect the needs of our children, then we cannot make claims to be a witness for Jesus. Being a witness means that people can see Jesus in you through your actions and deeds, and not just your religious habits and religious talk.

The Lord wants all of God's children to be His witnesses, so that everyone may know about the grace of God, and the salvation that Jesus purchased for us with His own blood. I can tell people about the gospel, but my words will be much more effective, if those I preach at see the reality of Christ living in me. For all of you listening to the message to day, let me ask you if you have turned your life over to Jesus Christ. I want to testify to you today that God loves you, and sent Jesus into the world to die on a cross to pay for the penalty of all of your sins. It is only through the cross of Jesus that you can find forgiveness from God and the gift of eternal life. I hope you will take seriously the message of God's love through Christ, and surrender your life to Christ in faith. After all the works and miracles of Jesus for three years, it is hard to imagine that there were only 120 people who were found to be his faithful followers. Will you be among those few who are true believers and true witnesses for Jesus? I can testify that Jesus has changed my life and proven Himself to be my Savior through His faithful guidance, care and provision. Believe in Him, and place your trust in Him today for eternal life, and you will be assured of your place in heaven with Him.

*"This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all **witnesses**." Ac 2:32*

LESSON 91
The Day of Pentecost
ACTS 2

In our last lesson we began our study of the book of Acts and learned in chapter one about the 120 disciples of Jesus waiting in Jerusalem for the coming promise of the Holy Spirit. In today's lesson we shall see how the Holy Spirit descended upon the believers and the resulting demonstration of God's power in their lives, and how that affected the people dwelling in Jerusalem for Pentecost.

While the believers are gathered together in an upper room, suddenly a sound like a rushing mighty wind was heard, and the appearance of flaming tongues came upon each person in the room. They began to speak in other languages as the Spirit moved them to talk. The sound drew attention in Jerusalem and soon a crowd of people gathered together. As the crowd listened to the apostles speaking, they recognized that they were speaking about the wonderful works of God, and that everyone was hearing in their own language. They were confused by this, and some mocked them and said they were drunk. It is important for us to notice that people heard and understood the words that were being spoken on this occasion. They marveled that as the apostles spoke everyone was hearing the message in their own language. This was indeed a marvelous miracle. Whatever our understanding of people speaking in tongues might be, we can learn from this passage that it certainly was not unknown gibberish, but was clearly understood, miraculous, and resulted in thousands trusting in Jesus, and receiving the gift of eternal life.

Peter preaches to the crowd and explains that what the people were hearing was spoken of by the prophet Joel. Joel had spoken of the pouring out of God's Spirit and about signs in the heavens, sun and moon. Only part of this prophecy was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost with the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the signs in the heavens will later be fulfilled with Jesus returns to judge the earth in righteousness. Peter draws the people's attention to Jesus of Nazareth, whose identity had been attested to by miracles, signs and wonders. He said that Jesus had been delivered to death by wicked hands, and by the purposes of God. It is hard to imagine that the wicked acts of men could fit within the plans and purposes of God, but that is precisely what God did, when he allowed these sinners to crucify the Son of God. Most important to Peter's sermon was the witness of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This he pointed out was not just some story that the apostles had made up, but was foretold by David in Psalm 16. He shows the crowd that David prophesied of the Christ not being left in the grave to corrupt. Peter tells them that God has exalted Jesus to the right hand of God, and through Him has poured out the Holy Spirit, as they were witnessing that day. Peter then quotes from Psalm 110 to show that God has exalted Christ to sit at His right hand until he has made His enemies His footstool. All of these scriptures quoted were designed to help the people recognize that this same Jesus whom they had crucified, God had made both Lord and Christ.

While hearing this sermon by Peter, many in the large crowd of people were convicted in heart, and asked the apostles what they must do. Peter said they needed to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of their sins, and to receive the Holy Spirit. When reading this passage some might think that Peter is saying baptism is necessary for salvation, or for the removal of sin, but this is not what Peter is saying here, and we can know this by comparing other scriptures that teach us clearly about the doctrine of believers baptism. Peter was calling on the Jewish people, who were guilty of rejecting and crucifying their Messiah, to repent (change their mind) about Him, and as a demonstration of their faith and repentance they should be baptized to identify themselves as followers of Jesus as their true Messiah. It is their faith in Jesus that would save them, and only the blood of Christ is sufficient to remove our sins.

Many of the Jews did believe that day, and they gladly received the word and were baptized, and about 3000 souls were saved. They continued steadfastly in the apostle's doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers. These four spiritual activities are what constitute the biblical practice of a local assembly of believers. If any group of believers meet and carry out those four things, they are following the Spirit's pattern for a NT church. Some churches who do not teach God's word, or do not break bread together, or pray together cannot truly claim to be a New Testament church. Fellowship means to share things in common, and we see how the early believers began to sell their possessions and share with the needs of others. This was evidence of the Holy Spirit's work in their lives. When Christians gather for worship but are quite ignorant about the people in their church gathering, and not concerned with their needs, it shows that the Holy Spirit is not at work in their midst. The first work of the Holy Spirit in believers is to cause them to look to the needs of those around them and offer them assistance as needed. The church can shout out loud praises and demonstrate the power of their amplification system to the whole neighborhood, but without a genuine spirit of fellowship, that is sharing and caring for others, all the noise in the world will not please God. The believers met together daily, ate their meals together and were filled with joy and simplicity of heart. The marks of authentic spiritual life should include obedience, generosity, fellowship and joy as seen in the believers on the day of Pentecost.

"So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart." Acts 2:46

Today's Bible Question:

In today's lesson we learned about the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the believers on the day of Pentecost, and how they began to speak in other languages so that others could hear the wonderful works of God. We heard Peter preach to the crowds, pointing out how the miraculous speaking in multiple languages was a manifestation of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as spoken of by the prophet Joel. He said that the resurrection of Jesus was also foretold by David, and declared Jesus to be Lord and Christ. After the sermon 3000 souls placed their trust in Jesus, were added to the church, and baptized. Someone might ask the question, "Is tongues a necessary manifestation to prove one has received the Holy Spirit?"

Some of our charismatic friends teach that receiving the gift of tongues demonstrates the reception of the Holy Spirit, or being filled with the Spirit. Some even go so far as to say that if a person does not have the gift of tongues they are not saved. This teaching is a very unfortunate perversion of the gospel. All through our New Testament the teaching of salvation is clearly dependent upon one's faith in Jesus Christ. We will not find any place in the New Testament that requires all believers to speak in tongues, or that tongues would be an evidence of being filled with the Spirit or being a believer. In fact in the Corinthian church tongues were being abused, and not being used to edify but to show off to others. Paul must rebuke them, and teach them how tongues are to be properly used, with interpretation. It is also clear in studying this subject carefully that tongues is not meaningless gibberish as we so often hear coming from churches today. Tongues was a known language, and the Greek work used for tongues in scripture always carries the meaning of a known language.

There seems to be a great deal of confusion going about churches these days about the gift of tongues. On the day of Pentecost we should take notice that what was spoken to the crowd, was not just strange unintelligible sounds, but it was language. In fact many of the people groups are listed so we know that their different languages were being conveyed through this miraculous event. When the apostle spoke in tongues, everyone could hear them. The whole point was so that others would hear and believe the gospel. The fact that these men were enabled supernaturally to speak and everyone to hear in his own language was a miracle intended to give witness to the power of God at work in these men. If what people heard was unintelligible, why would that be any testimony to God's power, and how would that help anybody understand and respond to the gospel. God does not speak to us in words which we cannot understand, but gives to us words that help us to hear and understand the gospel message, so we will repent and believe the gospel.

If someone stands up in a Christian church and begins to speak an unknown foreign language, then the church is not edified. Paul strictly warns against such self centered exhibitions in the church meeting. If someone shares something, it needs to be understood so that it may help those present, and so interpretation was required in the church. Many churches today include praying in tongues as part of their service, but we should all carefully examine what scripture actually teaches about this subject, unless we fall into the trap of following other spirits that are not of God. Speaking in tongues was certainly a gift given by God during the first century to testify of the power of the Holy Spirit and to authenticate the teachings of the apostles. Once the canon of scripture was complete certain sign gifts, such as tongues ceased to be of any use and faded away from the church. It was not until recent times that speaking in tongues somehow regained interest with some Christian groups. The Church has managed without this gift for most of its' history. With careful discernment we might well come to the conclusion that another spirit is at work seeking to bring confusion, and we know that God is not the author of confusion. Paul told the Corinthians that the greatest gift was teaching. Teaching aims at our understanding, and brings people into the knowledge of salvation. If you do not have the gift of tongues you need not be concerned because the manifestation of the Spirit is seen by obedience, generosity, fellowship and joy as we saw in our lesson today. If you have these, then you can be confident you are a believer and the Holy Spirit dwells in you.

"For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints." 1Cor 14:33

God's Appeal for Repentance

ACTS 3

Our last lesson was about the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the Christian church on the day of Pentecost. Peter preached to the crowds which had gathered to hear the apostles miraculously speak the wonderful works of God, resulting in thousands of souls finding salvation through Jesus Christ. The great message of salvation began to be told that day in Jerusalem, but continues even to this day. God is appealing to men everywhere to repent and believe in Jesus Christ for the salvation of their soul.

God uses Peter and John to perform a miracle to testify to the people of Jerusalem, that the Jesus they thought was dead and gone, was still alive and doing mighty works through His followers. When Peter and John are going to the temple to pray, they saw a man sitting near the gate called beautiful begging for alms. The man was lame and so could not work and earn a living, and had to beg daily for his food. When Peter saw the man he was moved by the Holy Spirit to speak to him and tell him that though he did not have any money to give him, he had something much better. Money would have perhaps lasted a day or two, but the man's greater need was healing so that he could work and earn his own money. Peter took the man's hand and said to him, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk", and immediately the man received strength in his legs and began to walk and leap for joy while praising God. As the people saw the man leaping and praising God, they recognized him as the man who had been lame and sat begging, and so they all marveled at what had happened. Many of them were staring at Peter and John as though they had done this great deed. Peter seeing their admiration is very quick to point out that it was not by their own power, but through Jesus Christ of Nazareth that the man was now made whole. There is something very important for every Christian to learn from Peter's response to the crowd, and that is that all glory belongs to the Lord and not to man. It is so easy and tempting to allow others to praise us, or exalt us to be something or someone greater than we actually are. No one can do anything at all for God, unless God gives him the power to do it, so the glory belongs to God. Every servant of Christ, should direct attention to Christ, and all praise and glory to God. Those who bask in the praise of men, are not following Christ, but use religion to gain a name for themselves.

Peter preaches to this large crowd that had gathered. He speaks of what had happened, namely that these same Jewish people had rejected and despised Jesus and led him away to Pilate to be crucified, and wanted a murderer to be released to them. Peter admits before them that it was done in ignorance for they did not understand the true identity and mission of Jesus. Then he tells them to repent so that their sins may be blotted out. To repent means they must change their mind about Jesus, and stop resisting and rejecting Him. It was through His power that this lame man was healed, and they had the witness of this miracle before their very eyes. There was no excuse for them to continue in unbelief. It was of God's great mercy that the offer of salvation should still be extended to these stubborn and rebellious Jews, who had crucified their own Messiah. God is like that though, he loves to show mercy before judgment. He longs to save us from our sins, and to open our eyes to our terrible condition, so that we will turn to Him and trust in Him for our salvation. Peter also mentions that these things were confirmed to them through the prophets of the Old Testament. He mentions that Moses had spoken of a greater prophet, whom the children of Israel were to listen to, or be utterly destroyed. He mentions all the prophets from Samuel and afterward who spoke of these days when the Savior would come and redeem a people for himself. He also reminds the crowd that they were Jews, and therefore sons of the prophets, and those who belonged to the covenant of Abraham, through whom God intended to bless all the families of the earth. This was all designed to show them that Jesus was not just some radical teacher that had come from nowhere, but He was God's son, foretold of throughout the OT period. This was the one whom they were now witnessing in His rejection, death, burial, resurrection, and power to heal men. Peter wants them all to see that God was reaching out to them. The very one they rejected and crucified, was now risen and coming to them in power to heal not just a man but a nation who were far from their God. The healing of this man was not just for his own benefit, but was the way Jesus was appealing to all these who had consented to his crucifixion. He appeals to them to repent, believe and receive God's blessing of forgiveness and eternal life. The incredible and amazing grace of God is seen in this passage. How many of us would want to bless the man who wants to kill us with cruel hatred. Jesus heart is so filled with love, that he reaches out to the very people who despised and rejected Him, offering God's eternal blessings. To receive the blessing they had to repent by humbly admitting their sin and that Jesus was indeed their Messiah. I wonder if you have recognized God's amazing grace towards your own soul. God does not owe you anything but punishment and judgment in Hell, but He chooses to extend to you the free gift of forgiveness and eternal life. You would be foolish not to accept such a valuable gift, from such a great friend of your soul. Let today be the day when you receive Jesus into your life as your Lord and Savior.

"Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord." Acts 3:19

Today's Bible Question:

In today's lesson we learned about a lame man who was healed through the name of Jesus when Peter and John spoke to him at the temple. Many people marveled at Peter and John doing such a mighty wonder, but Peter quickly turned their attention to Jesus and the salvation that comes through Him. Someone might ask the question, "Can men still command healing in the name of Jesus today?"

We know that many people are flocking to church services where promises are made for healing, and there are so many preachers and pastors claiming to be healing people in the name of Jesus. We know many of these are not proven, and some are false claims. But are there actual cases of people being healed, or men who have the power to heal in Jesus name? We must be careful to understand how and why God has healed in the past, so that we do not try to go beyond God's plans and purposes.

In the scriptures there are many cases of people being healed by God's miraculous intervening power. This mostly took place during the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ while he was on the earth. This was in fulfillment of his Messianic mission, and for the purpose of authenticating whom He really was. When John asked if Jesus was the expected one (the Messiah) or should they expect another (Matt 11:2-6), Jesus sends word to John about the many signs and miracles of healing as proof of His identity. So we learn that miracles and healing were part of Jesus ministry to help people understand who He really is, that is God's Son, so that they would place their trust in Him.

Many people suffer from some affliction or handicap and would like to be healed, but it is not the will of the Lord to heal everyone all of the time. This can be clearly demonstrated from the scriptures. We have many cases of people who were not well, but God did not choose to heal them, such as Mephibosheth who ate at the table of King David. We also have Timothy who suffered from a stomach illness. Then there was Trophimus who Paul left at Miletus sick. Paul had the gift of healing but he did not heal this man, nor did he heal Epaphroditus who belonged to the Philippian church. Paul himself suffered from some sort of affliction, but when he prayed for God to deliver him from the affliction, God said that His grace was sufficient for Him. God had a unique purpose in allowing his servant Paul to suffer, so that he would not be exalted above measure, because of the many revelations he had received. God often uses suffering to perfect the image of Christ in us, or to remind us that we belong to a sinful fallen race that has rebelled against God. The curse placed on man and creation affects us all. Some people are afflicted with terrible sicknesses or handicaps, but the Lord is not obligated to bring healing to everyone simply because they ask for it or have faith in Jesus to heal.

The Lord may sovereignly choose to bring healing to a person, but we should not expect that God will do so because we demand it from Him; or think that if our faith is strong enough it will force God to act. This is taught nowhere in the scriptures. It is a very unfortunate thing to tell a sick or crippled person that if only they had enough faith God would heal them. When they are not healed, their faith is stumbled and they are left to wonder why God does not care or look upon their affliction. God does care, but that does not mean He is obliged to heal everyone from all their problems, for he may have reasons for us to suffer that we simply cannot see or understand right now.

Some might argue that God has provided for healing in the atonement. To this we would say, indeed God has provided for the healing of the soul from the penalty of sin to all who trust in Christ, but you will not find a guarantee in scripture for all believers to be healed from every disease. When the Psalmist is praising God because of his goodness in Psalm 103 he says, "who heals all thy diseases", but we must not take this to be an unconditional promise to everyone, but praise due to the blessing he knew for his own soul. The Psalmist extols the virtues of God, who takes pity on those who trust in him, but the verse does not mean to suggest that every person will be healed from all their diseases in every circumstance. The greatest healing comes to us when we take Christ as our Savior, and our soul is healed from sins penalty. If you want physical healing then pray, but be careful not to expect that God has to heal you, for he may have some purpose for your suffering. Also be sure to praise Him in all your circumstances for His goodness.

"And He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you' for My strength is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." 1Cor 12:9

Better to Obey God than Men

ACTS 4

In the last lesson we saw how God healed a lame man through the apostles, and how this led them to preach salvation to the Jews, being witnesses of God's power and salvation through Jesus Christ. The miracle of healing was God's way of appealing to the nation of Israel to repent and believe in Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Today the story continues from where we left off and with the reaction of the religious leaders in Jerusalem, who tried to stop the preaching about Jesus. The apostles said they must obey God rather than men, and the result is that the gospel spread and more souls came to follow Christ.

When the Sadducees heard the apostles preaching about the resurrection of Jesus, they were greatly troubled, for they did not believe in resurrection. They had the apostles arrested and held in custody until the next morning. When the Jewish religious leaders, along with the High Priest and his family, had all gathered to question Peter and John, they asked them by what power and name they had done this miracle? Peter, filled with the spirit, answers them boldly, claiming that the same Jesus they had crucified, and whom God had raised from the dead, it was by His name and authority that the lame man was healed. This was a direct confrontation, and Peter was not going to compromise or withdraw from the intimidation of the whole Jewish religious authorities. Peter tells them that it is through Jesus, and Jesus alone, that men may be saved. The Jewish authorities marvel at the boldness of these simple men, who had no formal rabbinic training, and took notice that they had been with Jesus. A person, who knows Jesus personally, will have confidence and boldness in their salvation with a transforming power in their lives that others will see, and should marvel at.

The Jewish authorities threatened Peter and John to no longer preach in the name of Jesus, but Peter and John asked them to judge for themselves whether they ought to obey men rather than God. They said that they could only testify to the truth of what they had seen and heard. This should be the attitude of every Christian. If men were more willing to please God than men, then the world would see Christ in the Christian church, and not just the failures and weakness of man's religion. The Jewish leaders are stumped as to what to do, since these men refuse to quit their mission of preaching in Jerusalem the name and power of Jesus to heal and save. They knew that a miracle has been performed and no one could deny this. The man was walking, leaping and praising God and all could bear witness to it. They were forced to let the apostles go with some warnings. Evil men cannot hinder the power of Christ and the gospel, or even the devil himself, for God will be vindicated and His truth shall stand.

When the apostles went back and reported to the whole church what had taken place, they lifted their hearts to God and prayed. They acknowledged God's power in creation, and remember David's prophecy about the heathen raging and the people plotting vainly against the Lord's anointed. They acknowledged that Herod, Pilate and the Jews had plotted to kill Jesus, and this was all according to God's plan and purpose to bring about salvation. Then they appeal to God for greater boldness to proclaim His word, and that miracles, signs, and wonders might be performed in the name of Jesus. They wanted the whole world to know the power of God to save sinners. The Holy Spirit filled them and took away their fears. When a man or woman knows they possess eternal life, then the most important thing to them is to boldly tell the message of the gospel to others, so that also may hear and be saved, even if that means persecution and death. In response to their prayer God shook the room where they were gathered and they were all filled by the Holy Spirit and spoke God's word with boldness. A true mark of the Holy Spirit's work in a person's life is their attraction to and proclamation of God's word. Not the words of men, and not unintelligent sounds, but the word by which men can hear the gospel and be saved.

Next we heard how God blessed the young church with unity of mind and heart, and that they did not consider their possessions as belonging to themselves alone. They began to sell lands and houses to share the proceeds to the apostles for distribution to all that had need among them. The apostles were giving great witness to the resurrection of Jesus through their preaching and wonders, and the grace of God was upon them all. While they began to sell their property and share with the needs of others, there is mention of one man named Barnabas who sold some land that he had, and placed the money at the feet of the apostles. This demonstrated not only his faith in Christ, but also his belief that these apostles were God's chosen men to proclaim the good news, and to feed and bless the church. Giving money sacrificially is perhaps one of the most difficult things for people to do. Even godly Christians can find it most difficult to part with their money. However when a person is filled with the Spirit and they view things as God sees them, then they find their security in Christ and not in money. They see money as an opportunity to help those less fortunate than themselves. How a person handles money says a great deal about their faith and maturity in Christ. How much would you be willing to give to the Lord? Until you are ready to surrender all to Him, then you cannot experience the power of God in your life. Barnabas became a great man in the early church, and was called to preach the gospel abroad, but it started with his faith in giving.

"But Peter and John answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge." Acts 4:19

Today's Bible Question:

In today's lesson we saw the reaction of the Jewish authorities to Peter and John who had been preaching the resurrection and salvation through Jesus Christ. These Jewish leaders did not like to hear that the man they had crucified was not only alive but performing great miracles in Jerusalem through his servants. When challenged, Peter and John boldly told them that they were prepared to obey God rather than men. We also learned about how the early church was willing to share with each other's needs and the unity and power they enjoyed in their fellowship. Someone might ask the question, "How can the church today regain its power and testimony like the church of the 1st century?"

Often times today's church seems to lack real spiritual power and influence upon the world. We must ask ourselves why, we as Christians, are not making a greater impact for our Lord Jesus Christ, and seeing more souls saved and added to God's eternal kingdom. We should notice some things about the early church, and ask ourselves if we are doing as they did? We all want to see God give us showers of blessing, and we pray for the power of God to rest upon us making us shine as lights in a dark world. Let us take notice that these early believers were filled with the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that more of Holy Spirit came upon them, for they were already indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Some might be inclined to think if you can be filled with the Holy Spirit, then perhaps you can be half-full or one quarter full of the Holy Spirit, as though we get only a portion of the Spirit depending on how well we pray or behave. The fact is that every Christian is indwelt by the Holy Spirit from the moment of their conversion. However this does not imply that we have given Him full control over our lives, our thoughts and our actions. When we yield entirely to His will and control, then we are filled by the Holy Spirit. So it is not a matter of getting more of the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit getting more of us in submission and obedience to Him.

Because the early Christians were filled with the Holy Spirit, they were filled with a desire to share with needs of those around them. The spirit of generosity is the mark of a Christian that is filled by the Holy Spirit. If the whole church is so filled with sacrificial love, that they begin to share liberally with others, then the church would be transformed, and others would see the power of Christ in our lives. So often we want to cling to our money and possessions, but the Holy Spirit wants to make us cheerful givers, since God has been so bountiful to us in saving our souls. The early church was not only willing to share with the physical needs of those around them, but they were also deeply concerned about sharing the gospel message with the world. They prayed for boldness to proclaim the word. It was through hearing the word that they learned of salvation through Jesus Christ. They learned how much God loved them and was willing to forgive them, even after they had despised and rejected Jesus. The gospel had so gotten a hold upon them, and converted them, that they were compelled to want to share God's message of love and salvation to the world. They knew that doing so would meet resistance, and some would fight against them, perhaps even kill them, as they had done to Jesus. None of this matter, for the message was so important, and concerned the eternal welfare of the people whom God called to repentance. The Holy Spirit will also convict us about the seriousness of the gospel message, and compel us to want to share this message with our family and friends as much as we possibly can. When the Holy Spirit is working in us in this manner then it will also transform the church into a mission field with passion for reaching souls. So often our modern churches are centered around our own selfish desires, and being served, rather than serving the needs of those around us. The Christian and every local church should be driven by God's grace to love others, and to give away the gospel at every opportunity. To see God's power in the church today Christians will have to begin to see themselves as citizens of heaven and not this world. This means storing our treasures in heaven and not on earth. Until we are willing to let the kingdom of God cost us not just a small donation on Sunday morning, but the sacrifice of all that we are and all that we have, our Christianity will remain shallow and ineffective in this world. For what makes us different from the rest of the world? Is it not the radical transforming power of the Holy Spirit, who causes us to forsake all and follow Christ?

"Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ." Phil 3:8

LESSON 94
Corruption in the Church
ACTS 5

In the last lesson we saw how the religious rulers in Jerusalem were upset with the apostles for preaching the resurrection, and salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Although the leaders wanted to stop this preaching about Jesus, they could not deny that a great miracle had been done, and though they threatened the apostles, yet they could not stop them from obeying God. Today the story continues with a sad story of corruption in the church, and another confrontation with the religious authorities.

While the believers were glad to sell their possessions and lands in order to use the money to help the poor, there was a married couple that thought they would also like to get in on the glory of giving. Perhaps they thought they could make a name for themselves by being charitable like others. However when Ananias and Sapphira sold their possession they conspired together to keep some of the money for themselves and give only in part to the apostles. There would be nothing wrong with this, except that they pretended as though they had given the full amount of the sale. They were lying, and they were not really interested in helping the poor as much as having a good appearance in front of others. We must be very careful in our own giving, that we do not make a false show, as though we are doing more than we really are. God hates lying and hypocrisy. When it comes to money it certainly can reveal men's true heart. Perhaps the single greatest area of temptation and sin concerns coveting money. But nothing is hidden from God, and when these two lied to the apostles about the matter, the Holy Spirit revealed their lying to Peter, and he rebuked them, saying they had not just lied to men but to God. *Just on a side note here, we notice that the lying was against the Holy Spirit, who here is clearly identified as God himself. Thus we understand from this passage and others that the Holy Spirit is indeed God, and a unique person in the godhead, for you cannot lie to a force or power, but you can lie to a person.*

When Peter exposed their lying, they both were judged by God and immediately died when confronted. This sudden and severe judgment by God, shows us how much God hates corruption in His church and among His people. When the Christians saw this judgment, great fear came upon all of them, and others were afraid to join their numbers. However many people were being saved and added to the church.

Many sick people were brought into the streets hoping that just Peter's shadow might pass over them, and many were healed through the apostles. The high priest and others were indignant with the apostles and had them arrested and cast into prison. An angel came in the night and released the apostles, and they went to the temple area as instructed by the angel and began to preach about Jesus. The religious rulers assembled in the morning hoping to put these men on trial, but when they called for them to come from prison it was reported that the prison was locked, but the men were not there. Then another man came and reported that those same men they had imprisoned were in the temple area and preaching to the crowds. It is almost amusing to consider how these religious men keep fighting a losing battle against those who have God on their side. No prison or threats could keep these men from doing just what God had called them to do. This should encourage all those who faithfully serve the Lord and proclaim His salvation, knowing that when God's work is done, according to His will, then He will protect and ensure the success of the mission.

The apostles are again called in before the leaders and told that they had been strictly warned not to preach in this name, and that they were now trying to make them guilty of this man's blood. It is strange to hear such comments from those who had not only consented the death of Jesus, but were screaming out for His crucifixion. They were most certainly guilty of His blood. When Peter answers them, he again does not back down, and said they intended to obey God rather than men. Peter points out very clearly that they had taken Jesus and crucified him, but God had raised him up and exalted him to be Prince and Savior, and through him repentance and forgiveness was now available to Israel. This bold answer from Peter infuriated all the religious authorities, and they wanted to have them killed. However there was a wise counselor among them, who said that they should leave these men alone. He argued that if these men were not from God, then their doctrine would fade and be forgotten, but if they were indeed speaking for God, then they would be in danger of fighting against God himself. On this good advise the authorities decide to release Peter and John, but before they do, they beat them and again threaten them not to teach or preach in the name of Jesus. Peter and John were joyful that they had been counted worthy to suffer shame for the name of Jesus, and went on their way rejoicing. Though under threat, they feared not to preach and teach the name of Jesus daily in the temple area and also in every house.

While it is a terrible thing for one of God's children to disobey God and fall under judgment, it is also a very wonderful thing to know that when we serve our God, we need not fear what men might do to us, since God is on our side, and men can do nothing to harm us unless our Father in heaven should permit. Even if we are called to suffer for our Lord Jesus, it is an honor to do so, for He suffered in love for our souls. Trust in Him today and have all your sins washed away!

"But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: "We ought to obey God rather than men." Acts 5:29

Today's Bible Question:

In today's lesson we learned about the sin of Ananias and Sapphira who thought they could lie to God, but were quickly judged for their hypocrisy. We also saw how the apostles were persecuted for preaching in the name of Jesus, but because God was with them, their enemies could not prevail against them. Someone might ask the question, "Why did Ananias and Sapphira receive such severe judgment for lying?"

If God choose to instantly judge with death any and every person who told a lie, I dare say there would be very few people around at all. Lying is so common, not just boldface lies, but deception and misrepresentation, such as the case with Ananias and Sapphira. They did not tell a boldface lie, but they gave an impression of giving so much when in fact they had kept back money for themselves. We must recognize that God hates lying, and in fact says that all liars will find their place in the lake of fire (Rev 21:8). God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. What this means is that God cannot lie, in fact the bible says it is impossible for God to lie (Heb 6:18). God's character is such that he never deceives or misleads, but always reveals truth. For those who are called to God's children, they must be prepared to represent the true character of God by being honest all the time. When a Christian tells a lie, he is denying his position as God's child for he is not at all representing God.

We know that God is merciful and ready to pardon our sins, and we know there are other sins, which we would judge to be far worse than telling a lie, and yet God does not instantly judge an adulterer, or a drunkard, or a man who abusing children. Why does God choose in this particular case to be so severe and immediate in his judgment. It would be helpful for us to consider other instances where God gave instant and severe judgment. In the old testament we have a story that has some similarities with the story of Ananias and Sapphira for it involves deception, covetousness, and instant judgment. It is the story of Achan found in Joshua chapter 7. Achan wanted some of the money and items that were dedicated to the Lord from a city which was accursed by God. He hid the money in his tent secretly to deceive everyone and hide his covetousness. But the Lord saw the wickedness and called on Joshua and Israel to judge Achan with stoning. In both of these stories the money that was stolen was dedicated to the Lord, which shows us that what is given to the Lord is not money to be thought of lightly. This is part of the worship of God's people, and when someone tries to rob God of his glory, then their will be severe and instant judgment. We also notice that the story of Achan was at the beginning of Israel coming into the land and establishing it's own country and governance. Likewise the story of Ananias and Sapphira takes place at the beginning of the church age that was also being established as God's people on earth. It appears that as God was establishing his covenant people in both the old and new testament, he had to deal with the corrupt and covetous nature of man's heart, and to establish quickly and instantly the nature of His righteous rule among His people. In both stories we see how the people feared God, and knew that nothing could be hidden from Him. There is another two stories in the old testament about instant judgment concerning the alter and ark of God. We don't have time to explain all the details, except to say that Aaron's two sons who tried to offer strange fire on the alter, and Uzzah who tried to steady the ark that was being carried on a cart, were instantly judged with death for their actions. These two stories remind us that when it comes to those things that pertain to worship, God is holy and jealous. We cannot afford to misbehave in God's presence, and not discern the Lord's sacrifice or holiness. When the church at Corinth had changed the Lord's supper into a drunken feast where they did not care or regard the needs of one another, the Lord was angry and some of them were judged and died.

What we can learn from all this is that there are some times and places where God will not tolerate our lack of reverence, our covetousness, or our own ideas. God is zealous for his holiness, and for all that represents Jesus Christ our Lord. When it comes to things dedicated to God in worship we must all be extremely careful to honor the gift and giving as that which is for God's glory and not for man's lusts. Those who would dare to take from the church offerings for their own pleasures, are doomed to God's most severe judgment. Those who act casual or irreverent in the place and time of worship invoke the displeasure of God and are likely to end up as others who failed to understand the holiness of God.

"They shall be holy to their God and not profane the name of their God, for they offer the offerings of the LORD made by fire, and the bread of their God; therefore they shall be holy." Lev 21:6

LESSON 95
Sharing the Workload
ACTS 6

In the last lesson we learned about corruption in the church, when Ananias and Sapphira lied about the amount of money they had given to the apostles, and how this resulted in their immediate judgment and death. We learned that God hates hypocrisy in His church, and that God will defend those who stand up for Him, and proclaim His word faithfully. Today we shall learn about sharing the workload among God's people. There is much work to be done for God, and therefore the church needs those who are willing to pitch in and help in the various ministries of the church.

As the church began to grow in numbers a complaint was raised about fair distribution of help for widows. It appears that the Hebrew widows were being favored more than the Hellenist widows. The church had been distributing to the needs of all their widows, which is a kind and gracious thing for the church to do, but when favoritism creeps in then feelings are hurt and quarrels are started. The matter was needing attention and the leaders decided to take action. The apostles called the Christians together and asked them to choose from among them seven men who were filled with wisdom and the Holy Spirit. They wanted to have men whom they could entrust with the responsibility of overseeing the care of the widows and the distribution made to them. The reason they needed all these men, was because the church had grown to a large number, and the apostles were now busy in the daily work of praying and teaching the word of God. Since God had given them this important spiritual ministry, they did not feel it proper to leave the word of God to serve tables. It is not that serving tables was not important, it most certainly was, but there was a greater task to be done. So often we make decisions and accept what is good when we could have what is best. Sometimes we compromise and do what has little value at the expense of what is more important. The word of God was a priority and could not be neglected, so the wise leaders knew that they needed some helpers. They did not choose just anybody, and they also made sure to include the church in selecting those who were most suited to the task.

To serve God requires not only a person of good reputation, and a person of wisdom, but most importantly that the person is filled with the Holy Spirit. By being directed by the Holy Spirit the church could have confidence that they would do their work in the will of God, and not by their own wisdom. It is also necessary that the whole congregation give their approval so that the confidence and support are established by the whole church, and not just a few select leaders, who might be inclined to do what suits their own interests and not the whole church.

The seven men who were chosen were set before the apostles, who prayed for them, and laid hands on them, to identify with their work and God's approval of them to serve. This help in the early church caused the word of God to multiply greatly. We should all recognize that the more workers there are in the church, the more work that can be accomplished. It is a sad fact that so many come to church gatherings to do no more than to sit and listen to the preacher. Most are willing to put some money in the collection, but how many are willing to take time to teach a Sunday school class, clean the church building, cook a meal for the needy, or visit the sick in the hospital. Too often we hire people to do all this work for us, and expect others to serve us. We want to enter a nice church building and sit on a comfortable chair, and listen to the preacher feed me from the word, and then go home to consider what I heard. This form of Christianity does not reflect the Christianity we see here in the book of Acts. The first Christians spent their time together, and found ways to share the gospel with others, and to serve one another. Make sure that you have found a work to do for the Lord in the church, and don't just sit idly by while others do all the work.

One of the appointed workers for the church was Stephen. Stephen was not just helping the widows, but was preaching the word of God, and this got him into trouble with some of the Jews who were from other areas. Though they disputed with Stephen, they could not resist the wisdom and Spirit by which he spoke. Such is the favor God shows to those who walk in obedience and are filled by His Spirit, so that none can resist them. These Jews stirred up the people, the elders and scribes against Stephen claiming that he spoke against Moses and against the temple and the Law. This was a misunderstanding and misrepresentation of Stephen's words. So often proud people do not take the time to listen and understand, and are quick to make rash decisions. Stephen wanted them to know the salvation that comes through Jesus Christ, but they were busy picking on some points in his preaching that they felt were contrary to God's revelation in the Old Testament. It was so hard for them to understand that much of the Old Testament was given to teach us about ourselves, our sin, and our need of a Savior. The Law was given to direct us to Christ, but these proud Jews loved their Law, but hated the one of whom it spoke, that is Jesus the Christ. We shall see in our next lesson how Stephen must defend himself against these proud Jews. I hope you have the humility to hear God's word and to accept Jesus as your personal Savior.

"Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables." Acts 6:2

Today's Bible Question:

In today's lesson learned about the appointment of servants for the church to relieve the apostles so that their work in the word and prayer would not be hindered. We also learned about the proud Jews fighting with Stephen, but could not resist Stephen's wisdom. Someone might ask the question, "Is preaching the word the most important work in the church?"

I think a new visitor to the church would be convinced that preaching must be the most important work in the church. This is because most of our churches today emphasize preaching and the pastor's role as a preacher more than any other ministry in the church. We are so focused upon preaching, that any other ministry fades into oblivion, and loses significance. We learned from today's passage that the apostles did not want to leave their work in the word and labors in prayer to serve tables, but that did not mean that serving was not important. They felt it was very important and therefore appointed several men to oversee this task. While preaching is a very important part of the church's ministry, sometimes we get caught away with the fame of the preacher, and we exalt the men who are called to teach the word. Let us remember it is not the man preaching that should capture our attention, but the word of the Lord. It is God's word that serves our spiritual development and health, but so often we have exchanged the power of the word of God, for the charisma and personality of the preacher.

The church was not commissioned to just preach sermons on Sunday, but to go into all the world and preach the gospel. This work of sharing the gospel is not just for the leaders of the church to do, but it is for every Christian to share their faith. If we limit our workforce to just a few preachers, then we shall find it difficult to get the gospel out to every creature under heaven. But what about other works for the church? Preaching is very important to the church, but so is serving and good works. It seems the church has lost its bearings when it emphasizes hearing the word and not doing the word. The early church was marked by its doings as much as its preaching. We saw how the Christians sold their possessions and gave to the needy. This showed that they wanted to serve the needs of the poor. One of the great works of the church of that day was its care for those in need. Today, it seems churches are money making machines, that do little for the poor, but make preachers rich. The church should understand its role in the community to serve the needs of the poor and needy. It is also evident that our Lord Jesus cared for those who suffered with sickness, disease and handicaps, and spent much of his ministry healing people who suffered from all kinds of afflictions. The apostles continued to demonstrate this ministry to the sick and diseased and also performed many miracles to authenticate their ministry. While the gifts of healing and miracles may not be prevalent today, the church's interest in showing compassion and assistance to those who are hurting should still be an important part of the church's work. Those who are poor and needy whether financially, physically, or spiritually should be the focus of the church's love and benevolence. A church that runs an orphanage, or feeds widows is much closer to biblical Christianity than churches that simply gather to hear their favorite preacher, but have no good works. Far better to do God's work, than to just speak about it. But then what are some other important works the church should be involved with.

Here are some things that we might consider.

1. Feeding the hungry
2. Clothing the naked
3. Comforting those who are sick
4. Sharing with the needy
5. Caring for widows and orphans

These works are important for they demonstrate God's interest in those who are less fortunate. These are things which all Christians can do, not just the preachers. We must get away from the idea that Christianity is all about listening to sermons. Christianity is about showing God's love to a hurting world. Yes they all need to hear the word of the Lord, but how much better they will hear, when they can see the word lived out in our lives through our good works. Sometimes we are convinced that God's work involves preaching, and it certainly does, but if preaching does not lead us to serve our fellow man, then the preaching has done us no good. Let every Christian learn how to serve in their church by doing, and not just hearing God's word.

"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." James 1:22

LESSON 96
Stephen's Message
ACTS 7

Our last lesson from Acts 6 was about sharing the workload, and how the apostles had assigned more workers to help with the practical needs of the church. We also heard about a Christian man called Stephen, who was preaching, and others could not resist his wisdom. Today we shall hear a message from Stephen given to the religious authorities in Jerusalem, and the results of his bold speech.

Stephen's speech covers much history in the Old Testament and we do not have time to delve into all aspects of his lengthy speech, but we can make some general observations and applications. When asked to answer his accusers, he asks for their attention, and begins talking about some of the important people found in Genesis and Exodus, then he skips ahead to the time of David and construction of the temple, ending with a scathing rebuke to the Jews who had killed Jesus. Stephen chooses his subjects and history very carefully, because he is trying to help the Jews to see that they were doing precisely as their former generations had done, by rejecting God's purposes and plans through His appointed leaders. He begins with Abraham, who is the father of their nation, and speaks of the promises and covenant that God had made to Abraham. God had spoken prophetically at that time about Abraham's descendants and how they would become slaves in a foreign land. He reminds his audience that Abraham was given a son according to God's promise, and through Isaac, Jacob was born, and the 12 sons of Jacob.

Next Stephen turns his attention to Joseph, the son of Jacob and great grandson to Abraham. Stephen points out how Joseph was sold in slavery by his brothers who envied him, and yet how God was with him wherever he went, and exalted him to be ruler over Egypt. Some years later when Joseph's family are in need, due to a famine, they come to Egypt to find food, and Joseph is revealed to them as their brother, and their family becomes known to Pharaoh. It seems that Stephen is leading in a direction in his speech, but perhaps his audience did not yet sense the point he was making. Just as Joseph had been rejected by his envious brothers, Jesus was also rejected and cast out because of envy. And just as God exalted Joseph, so God has also exalted Jesus. The very one whom they had despised, was now their Savior. The story of Joseph ends on a happy note, for Joseph's family came to Egypt and prospered under the care of Pharaoh, until the time of Joseph's death. Now Stephen turns his attention to another important figure of the Old Testament and that was Moses. When Israel grew and multiplied in Egypt this worried the king and his officials, and so they ordered all the Hebrew male children to be cast into the Nile river. However Moses' mother hid Moses for 3 months, and at last put him in a basket in the river, but Pharaoh's daughter saw the baby and raised the baby as her own. Thus Moses grew up in Pharaoh's own house and learned all the wisdom of Egypt. However when Moses one day saw an Egyptian mistreating one of the Hebrew slaves, he killed the Egyptian. When his murder was discovered he ran into the wilderness to flee from Pharaoh. Later he saw the Lord in the burning bush, and was commissioned by God to go to Egypt and lead the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt. But the people at first doubted and complained against Moses, and said "who made you ruler and judge over us". But now when he returned and showed great power and signs, the people placed their confidence in Moses and he indeed became their great leader delivering them from their oppressors. Again we see how Stephen is providing his audience with some hints about what he is really trying to say to them. For here again we have God's appointed leader rejected for a time and cast out, but raised up by God to lead his people to freedom from their oppressors. Just as Moses, Jesus also was cast aside by the Jews, but later would come a second time as their great deliverer. This speaks prophetically about Jesus' 2nd coming, for while today he is still the rejected king and Messiah of Israel, he shall one day return and be their Savior, through mighty signs and wonders, even as in the day of Moses. Stephen points out that it was this very Moses, whom they had rejected as their leader, who had given the Law, and brought them out of Egypt with signs and wonders, who was rejected because the people had their hearts back in Egypt. Even Moses, said Stephen, spoke of another prophet like himself that would come. So Jesus had come, and was taught the Law of God with even greater insight, but the people refused to hear him.

Now that Stephen has carefully used these various Old Testament characters and stories to draw out his point, he lastly turns his attention to the place of worship. This is what some of the people had been contending with Stephen about. Stephen now points out that God gave Moses instructions to build a tabernacle and they did, and later David wanted to build a temple for God, but instead Solomon built it, but God does not dwell in temples made with man's hands. At this point Stephen calls these Jews stiff-necked, uncircumcised in heart, always resisting the Holy Spirit. He says they like their fathers had rejected all the prophets sent by God, and they had killed the Just One (Jesus) whom God had sent. He says they received the Law but did not keep it. At this the men were furious. When Stephen says he could see heaven open and Jesus standing on God's right hand, this was more than they could take, so they dragged him out of the city and stoned him to death. However Stephen prays that the sin will not be charged against them. Stephen was very bold and cleverly used Old Testament scriptures to tell the Jews how they were just the same as former generations who had rejected God's leaders, and God's purposes. Stephen was faithful to proclaim his message, and though it cost him his life to say these words, he was ushered immediately into the presence of Jesus.

"But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God." Acts 7:55

Today's Bible Question:

In today's lesson we learned about Stephen's message to the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. We saw how he used the stories of Abraham, Joseph, Moses and the tabernacle to expose their own failure to recognize and honor God's appointed leader, namely Jesus whom they had crucified. After stoning Stephen the bible tells us that Stephen "fell asleep". Someone might ask the question, "why is dying called falling asleep?"

On a few occasions the bible refers to death as sleeping. This is said of Lazarus, and the disciples were confused by Jesus words, when he said Lazarus was sleeping (John 11:11-12), for they thought he meant that Lazarus was only resting in sleep, and did not understand that Jesus meant that Lazarus in fact had died. We also find another reference in 1Thess 4:14, where Paul refers to Christians who have died, as those who sleep in Jesus. There are also two references in 1Corinthians which refer to Christians who have died as those who are sleeping (1Cor 11:30, 1Cor 15:51).

It appears that the New Testament writers were given this way of referring to the death of believers as sleep, because it removes the sense of finality in death. We know that someone who sleeps will once again awake. And we also know that Christians will one day be resurrected and united with the Lord Jesus in a new day of glory and joy. Since the Christian can look forward to his hope in heaven, death need only be considered as sleep. Now when we refer to a Christian's death as sleep, we must be careful not to be confused about this, for some people teach that the soul will sleep from the time of death, until the time Jesus comes to collect His people and bring them to heaven. This is a false teaching and shows a lack of understanding of what is meant by sleep for the Christian's death. The sleep that occurs is a reference to the body laid to rest until the day of resurrection, or day of rapture for the Christian believer. We all know that when a person dies whether, Christian or not, their body is laid down in the grave. However, the Christian knows, from the bible, that even though his body will go into the grave, his soul will be with Christ. Paul wrote that to be absent from the body was to be present with the Lord (2Cor 5:8). What this means is that at the moment of death, our body separates from our soul, and though our body is buried, our soul is taken into the presence of the Lord. So there is no such thing as soul sleep. Every Christian who dies is immediately transported into the presence of the Lord. This is seen in the story of the rich man and Lazarus of Luke chapter 16. When Lazarus died he was carried into the bosom of Abraham by angels immediately following his departure from his body. So the body is what is asleep, and awaiting resurrection, while the soul is in heaven.

The term of sleep is a more gentle term to use, and helps to remind us that death is not the end, and that a new and better day is awaiting all of God's children, when their bodies are raised to be reunited with their souls. In our story today we saw a tragic end to the life of Stephen, as he was taken out of the city and stoned to death, but we also read that he fell asleep. From the world's point of view they got rid of this preacher, whom they did not like to hear, but from heaven's perspective Stephen was ushered into glory, and his body would take rest until raised up at a later date. The Christian can use this language of sleep in the most positive way, and be encouraged. However, for the unbeliever, there is no comfort offered in these words. For the unbeliever, indeed their bodies are buried also, and will be one day be raised up again, but not to enjoy heaven, but rather to be cast into the Lake of fire. Their soul already suffering in torments, will be cast along with their dead body into that eternal flame of God's wrath and judgment. In light of this doctrine, I do hope you will choose to trust in Jesus as your Savior today, so that you will not have to fear death and God's judgment? The Christian loved ones who have left us, are asleep in Jesus, and we can be comforted to know that one day their bodies will be raised again to be reunited with their soul, and if we too are believers, we shall see them again one day.

"And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment." Hebrews 9:27

The Work of the Holy Spirit

ACTS 8

Last time we learned about Stephen preaching to the authorities in Jerusalem, which resulted in his being stoned to death, though scriptures tells us that Stephen fell asleep, meaning his body would be raised up by Jesus one day to be reunited with his soul. Today we shall consider the work of the Holy Spirit to convert sinners, and not as a gift intended for men to perform miraculous signs.

In Acts 8 we first meet a man named Saul, who later would be known as Paul, who became an apostle and is perhaps the most significant Christian mentioned in the New Testament due to his work and writings. Saul had consented to Stephen's stoning, and was casting Christians into prison. But as the Christians were persecuted they spread out, and this caused the gospel message to also spread to new areas. Philip was in the city of Samaria preaching and miracles accompanied his preaching to authenticate his message as being from God. Simon was formerly a sorcerer, and practice magic arts to impress others, and make them think he was someone very great. Men can certainly deceive people into thinking they have great powers, but men of themselves hold no special power over other men. However some men do tap into the power of Satan and demons, and even masquerade their powers as being from God. Simon saw how Philip's preaching was also accompanied by miracles, and this greatly interested him, and he offered money to gain this power. The power though came from the Holy Spirit, and was not something that could be bought with money. Simon was interested in making a name for himself, and putting on display some magically powers to impress others, or make some quick cash. Unfortunately many characters today can be found in churches, who want to claim powers of the Holy Spirit, in order to impress others, gain a name for themselves, and make money. We should be warned by this passage that the Holy Spirit is not intended to serve our selfish interests and lusts, but His purpose is to give life to repentant sinners, and to demonstrate God's power for the purpose of leading people to place their trust in the Lord. Miracles and signs are never given to man for his own selfish ends. Paul would later write to the Corinthians to tell them that this attitude was a childish and immature understanding of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Simon was strongly rebuked for his wrong motives, and I wonder how many today would also be rebuked by God, if their bad motives were clearly exposed.

Philip was an evangelist and having some good success in Samaria, but then God suddenly called him to go into the dessert to the south. He did not know exactly the assignment, but Philip was sensitive and obedient to the Spirit's call to go. In the dessert Philip saw a chariot, and the Spirit of God told him to join the chariot, so he ran and greeted the Ethiopian man in the chariot. As it turns out this was an important official, the treasurer for the Queen of Ethiopians. He had come to Jerusalem to worship, and though in the city of God, could not find God there. This is because of the corruption of man's religion and the failure of the Jews to reveal God's salvation through Christ. As Christians we should remember that if we are not ready or prepared to share the gospel with others, we shall miss the blessing, and God will use someone else to preach the good news. Philip was that ready servant, and explained to the Ethiopian man about Jesus from the very scripture he was reading in the scroll of Isaiah. After explaining how Jesus came into the world, was attested to through miracles and signs, gave his life on the cross, was buried and rose again, he must have also mentioned something about baptism as the way to identify with Jesus in his death and resurrection. The Ethiopian saw some water and asked if he could be baptized. Philip said that if he believed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, he would be permitted to be baptized. The Ethiopian man gladly confessed Jesus as the Son of God, and so Philip baptized him. After the baptism, Philip was caught away by the Holy Spirit, and the Ethiopian went on His way rejoicing. Now today's lesson is about the work of the Holy Spirit, and we should take careful notice here of how the Holy Spirit works in the lives of men. Firstly he used a man who was full of the Spirit, meaning he was obedient and listening carefully to the Spirit's instructions so that he may follow God's leading. This man was used by God to communicate the gospel message to a man who was searching for God, and looking carefully at the scriptures to find God. So we see the servant of God lead by the Spirit of God to the sinner who is seeking for God. The Holy Spirit then used the word of God to reveal the Son of God. This is the purpose and plan of God to save sinners. Too often we associate God's work with miraculous signs which do not relate to the word of God, nor to the salvation of sinners. We want to use God's power to affect some better circumstances in our life, or to get rich, or to curse our enemies. All this sounds selfish and similar to Simon who wanted God's power for his own fame and fortune. Notice too that When the Ethiopian man confessed Jesus as the Son of God, that he immediately had a desire to obey the Lord in baptism. Another clear work of the Holy Spirit happens when a person is genuinely converted, and that is the desire to obey the Lord, and be identified with Him. Remember Jesus was shamefully crucified and rejected, and those who choose to follow Him are also choosing to be rejected and put to shame in a world that still hates and despises Jesus. You might think the world loves Jesus, and perhaps they even say they love Jesus, but when it comes to living for Jesus in righteousness, very few are willing to pay the costs of standing apart from the rest of the world which practices sin and rebellion against God's standards. If you want to share in the joy that the Ethiopian found, then submit your life in faith to Christ, and choose to obey and follow Him.

Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may."

"And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." Acts 8:37

Today's Bible Question:

Today we learned about Simon the sorcerer trying to tap into the Holy Spirit's power to make money and a name for himself. Also the Holy Spirit lead a sinner to repentance and faith, through a spirit filled man and the Holy scriptures. Someone might ask the question, "Should I seek to have power from the Holy Spirit?"

There are many people today asking for the anointing of the Holy Spirit, hoping that God will endue them with power from on high, so that they can perform mighty acts for God, or preach His word. There is a common misunderstanding of the work of the Holy Spirit and involvement in our lives. Some have been convinced that some Christians are special because God has anointed them with His Holy Spirit in some unique way that other Christians do not possess. This causes us to separate these people as special, and we exalt them, and are inclined to believe and follow them, because we believe they are God's specially anointed servants. However, we need to understand that the Holy Spirit dwells within every believer, so in that sense we are all anointed by the Holy Spirit. But anointing has to do with an outpouring, which is clearly what we evidenced in the book of Acts when the Spirit came upon the church. But we have something superior to a mere temporary outpouring of the spirit for some specific purpose. We are actually indwelt by the Holy Spirit. This is so much greater than any of the old testament saints enjoyed, for the Holy Spirit came upon them at times to perform certain tasks, but never lived within them, and sealed them forever, as are Christians today. So if we have the Holy Spirit living within us, all God's power is available to every believer. This is not to say that we can go around performing miracles and signs just as we may please. God is not our puppet, who does whatever we command. We are to be under his control and follow His will. Thus the Holy Spirit is not some agent we use to gain some power or advantage over others, but rather He is our God, to whom we must obey and follow. The Spirit of God is not in business of showing off His power to impress people. He is interested in the care of people, and their salvation. Thus when the early Christians were full of the Holy Spirit, meaning directed and under His guidance, they began to share with each other needs, and to proclaim the gospel. There were certainly miracles being done, but these were intended to help people understand that these people were speaking from God, and had God's authority to proclaim His message.

Today we learned of a man who sought the power of the Holy Spirit for selfish reasons. He wanted to tap into a power that he could use for making money and acquiring fame. This shows a tremendous misunderstanding of the Holy Spirit's mission, and a lack of respect and reverence for God. Men love to have power, they want to be exalted, and be seen as someone great. If religion or money can bring that to them, they will try to get it. But men are sinful creatures, and their pride leads them to usurp authority that belongs to God alone. However the Spirit of God would teach us humility, gratitude and service for others. Those who try to use religion for status, money or fame, are certainly not being led by the Holy Spirit, and will be condemned along with Simon the sorcerer. We need to have a proper understanding and respect of God's power and the work of the Holy Spirit. God wants to bless us with His salvation and direct us to live a godly life, and when we also desire these things, The Spirit of God will help us, teach us, and regenerate all who place their trust in Jesus. He will comfort us and confirm to us our salvation. When the Holy Spirit performed miraculous signs during the early days of the church, it was to authenticate God's word, and draw souls to salvation. God is not interested in amusing and entertaining men through signs and wonders. When we seek special power or look for miracles and signs, we are not walking in faith, and cannot please God. God wants us to trust in His word. Remember that God's greatest power is not seen in miracles, such as casting out a demon, or giving sight to the blind, but rather in a life of godliness. Those who are born of the Spirit of God and manifest the fruit of the Spirit, namely love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, show God's power to transform a sinner into a saint. This is the miraculous power that people need to see, so they will believe the gospel.

"For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind." 2Tim 1:7

LESSON 98
The Conversion of Saul
ACTS 9

Our last lesson was about Simon the sorcerer who wanted to buy God's power with money, and was rebuked for his wicked motives. We also heard the story of the Ethiopian man who was reading the word of God, and found the Son of God, through the spirit-filled servant of God. Today we shall see the remarkable conversion of Saul of Tarsus, who had been persecuting the church, but now would become her great advocate and preacher.

Saul was a Pharisee and a zealous Jew. He persecuted the Christians believing them to belong to a false cult. He was responsible for sending some to prison, and was now going to Damascus to find Christians and throw them into jail. While on route to Damascus Saul saw a great light and heard a voice speak with him. The voice asked why Saul was persecuting him. Saul recognized that the voice and light must be from God, and therefore he addressed the questioner, by asking "who are you Lord?" When Saul was told that the voice he was hearing, was the voice of Jesus, he instantly changed his mind about Jesus, and he had to reject all his previous thoughts about Him and his followers. He now realized that Jesus was Lord, and his followers were the true children of God. It was of God's great mercy to provide such a powerful vision and experience for Saul, so that he would believe in Him. The Lord Jesus when speaking with Saul said that He would send him to the Gentiles to preach the gospel. Here we see God acting sovereignly, and speaking about the future of this man. While God has set forth a plan and purpose for our lives it is up to us to learn what His plan is, and to cooperate with that plan. God will allow us always to make our own choices. God knew that when Saul was confronted with the fact that Jesus was Lord, he would surrender and become a faithful follower and preacher for Christ. In Damascus God used a Christian man, Ananias, to welcome him, pray for him, and through laying on of hands to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Saul was struck with blindness by the vision of the Lord, but when Ananias met him he regained his sight. Immediately Paul began to preach that Jesus was the Christ, but many of the disciples were afraid of him, for they knew he had previously been persecuting the church. Barnabas though had confidence in Saul's conversion and brought him to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles there. While Saul was in Damascus his preaching caused a real stir among the Jews, and they wanted to kill him, but some of the disciples helped him to escape the city by lowering him in a basket over the city wall. Now the persecuted was the one being persecuted. Saul's conversion is one of the great evidences to the authority of the Christian faith, for he was a sworn enemy of the Christian church, but after encountering the risen Lord in a vision he converted and became the greatest missionary of the 1st century. When Saul was in Jerusalem he was also preaching about Jesus as the Christ, and again the Jews and Hellenists wanted to kill him, so the disciples sent him away to Tarsus.

Also in this chapter we read about Peter staying in Lydda, not far from the coast of Joppa, where he is used by the Lord to affect the healing of man paralyzed and bedridden for eight years. The result of this miraculous healing was that many in that area turned to the Lord. The purpose why God was doing miracles was to lead people to trust in Jesus as their Savior. Peter became very visible in those early days of the church as a leader and someone through whom the Lord performed miraculous healing. When a woman named Tabitha (or Dorcas) became sick and died, her friends called for Peter to come to nearby Joppa. The Christians were very distressed to have lost their beloved sister in Christ, for she had been doing many good works for the poor people in their town by making them clothes. They were showing Peter all the clothes she had made for them. Peter put everyone outside of the room, and knelt and prayed. He turned to Dorcas body and said, "Tabitha, arise", and she opened her eyes and sat up. After Peter presented her alive to the Christians and widows, the news of this miracle spread quickly throughout the town of Joppa and many believed on the Lord. Peter stayed in Joppa for many days after this miracle. One thing that we should take careful notice of is that the miracles that were performed by Peter, were not for show, he did not do it for an audience, in fact he sent everyone out to avoid too much publicity. We also should notice that these miracles had the result of bringing people to faith in Christ. This was a very special time in the church's history when God permitted special miraculous signs to be given so that people could believe the message of the apostles, and place their trust in Jesus as their Savior. If we observe carefully the purpose for which God used miracles to bring about salvation to souls, then we might well discern that the misguided attempts to call for miracles today in the churches are sought for the temporary benefits that an individual receives, and not for God's glory, or the propagation of the gospel. So let us be wary of these miracle workers when it appears to be for show, done for an audiences applause and amazement, or to collect money. In some churches you have to buy expensive anointing oil, or pay for the opportunity to visit with the pastor, so he might pray for you to be healed. I hope you can recognize this lust for attention and money. God is far more interested in healing us from the disease and consequence of sin, then making our life here on earth more comfortable or pleasant.

"And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed on the Lord." Acts 9:42

Today's Bible Question:

Today we learned about Saul who, while persecuting the church, encountered the risen Lord Jesus Christ in a vision on the road to Damascus, was converted, and became a preacher of the gospel. Also The Lord was doing some remarkable miracles through Peter, including the raising of a certain woman from the dead. Someone might ask the question, "Does God only pick some people to receive salvation?"

As we consider together how Saul of Tarsus became a Christian, we might think that God just sovereignly decided that this man was going to be a Christian and a preacher of the gospel, even if he did not want to. This might be our conclusion when we recount this miraculous intervention by God in the life of Saul. In such a spectacular way God dealt with Saul's unbelief, and revealed to Him the truth of Jesus as the Risen and glorified Lord. It almost seems that Saul hardly had a choice in the matter. There are many Christians and theologians who believe that God picks out certain people to be saved, while leaving others to suffer the consequence of their sins in Hell. But is this what the bible teaches us? The doctrine of divine election has been debated for the past four centuries or more among bible scholars, and I do not wish to suggest that I have a better understanding than these eminent scholars. But allow me to present what I believe the bible teaches on this important subject.

Firstly in the case of Saul, we see how God confronted him in a most miraculous way, and that certainly would have been all the convincing that anyone should need in order to place their trust in Jesus as Lord, and to submit their lives to Him in service. But it still was a choice that Saul had to make for himself. The Lord did not demand that He believe, but gave him the unique opportunity to see and hear evidence which made unbelief and disobedience an unwise choice. For most of us we will not be given such a profound revelation and vision, and the choice is certainly left up to us as to whether we shall believe in Jesus as our Savior or not. We see that this choice is ours by the way the gospel is presented throughout the New Testament. For instance in John 1:12, John writes, "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name:" Here, and in many other places, we discern that the decision is left up to the individual to believe on Jesus. Now the difficulty that causes so much controversy comes from the fact that God knew ahead of time who was going to believe. We see this clearly in the conversion of Saul. When God spoke to Ananais, saying that Saul was a chosen vessel of mine to bear my name before Gentiles, kings and Israel, we might conclude that God had already chosen Saul and planned what he was going to do, but we must be careful not to think that because God can speak with authority about the future, for he knows what will take place, that this means that God has pre-determined what will take place. Many seem to confuse this notion, and see that God's foreknowledge about those who will believe, actually means that God has chosen some individuals to salvation, while leaving others not chosen, and therefore eternally condemned. But this would make God unjust, and mean we could not really accept what God says is true when He tells us, "For God so loved the world, that WHOSOEVER believes in Him, should not perish but have everlasting life." There are many verses in the New Testament that confirm to us that God's gospel message is for whosoever believes. There is no restrictions on who can be saved, because the invitation is to everybody.

While some Christians will disagree on the doctrine of election, one thing we should understand is that God wants to save us, and has made provision for our salvation through Christ. We have a choice to make, just as Saul had. Saul was always so grateful that God had stopped him in his vicious rampage against the church. He was thankful that God had mercy upon Him and revealed the truth about Jesus so he could place his trust in Jesus. Though he was fortunate to have great evidence, he was still left to make up his own mind about Jesus. There were many other Jews who witnessed the miracles of Jesus but still refused to believe in Him. So whether we have little evidence or much evidence the choice is still with us, as to whether we shall place our eternal hope in Jesus Christ as our Savior. I hope you are making the right choice, for God will honor the choice you make. He loves you and does not want to have to judge your soul, but he will never remove the freedom to make your own choice, because He loves you too much to force you to accept what you do not want.

"Thus saith the LORD; Behold, I set before you the way of life, and the way of death." Jer 21:8

The Conversion of Cornelius

ACTS 10

In our last lesson we learned about the miraculous encounter that Saul has with the risen and glorified Jesus, and how Saul believed in Him and surrender his life in service to the Lord. We also considered how God used Peter to perform miracles that lead to the conversion of many souls. Today we will see how the gospel was sent to the house of Cornelius, showing God's loves for gentiles as well as Jews.

Cornelius was a Roman soldier, and also a believer in the God of the Jews. He gave generously to the poor, and always prayed to God. One day God sent a message to Cornelius that his prayers and good deeds were remembered before God, and He told him to send for Simon Peter from Joppa to come to his house, for Peter would tell him what he must do. Meanwhile The Lord was also speaking to Peter through a vision. Peter was also praying, when the Lord gave him the vision. While Peter was feeling quite hungry, the Lord showed him a number of animals, and told Peter to kill and eat, but Peter said, "Not so Lord, for I have never eaten anything common or unclean". But the Lord told Peter he was not to call unclean what he had made clean. This vision repeated itself three times to confirm to Peter the message. While Peter was wondering about the vision, the men from Cornelius' house arrived, and the Spirit of God directed Peter to receive these men. Peter told them that he was the man they were looking for, and asked what they wanted. The men explained about Cornelius' and how he was instructed by an angel to send for Peter and to hear the message from him. Peter let them men stay with him that night, and the next morning they journeyed back to Caesarea to the house of Cornelius. Cornelius called together all his friends and relatives to meet with Peter, and when Peter arrived he bowed down before Peter and worshiped him. But Peter did not allow him, and said that he was just a man like Cornelius. When Peter saw the crowd that had gathered he explained that it was not lawful for a Jew to keep company with gentiles, but God had shown him that he should not call unclean what He had made clean. He asked why Cornelius had called for him, and Cornelius spoke of how an angel instructed him while he was praying four days earlier to call for Peter. It is interesting that Cornelius did not know Peter or the message he was to bring, and that Peter also was not given any specific message for Cornelius, but God had orchestrated this meeting and knew that Peter by the Holy Spirit would provide the gospel message to this household. We should all remember as Christians to always be ready to tell others the gospel message, for we know that God wants all men to be saved. Peter preached to this gentile audience about Jesus who had done miraculous signs, and was prophesied about in the Old Testament, and how he was crucified, and rose again the third day, and how God was now calling on all men to repent and believe in Jesus as their Savior for the remission of their sins. It amazed the Jews that were with Peter to see the Holy Spirit come upon these gentiles just as they had experienced themselves on the day of Pentecost. They knew the Spirit had come upon them, because of their miraculous ability to praise God in languages they had not learned before. This miracle was clearly for the benefit of Peter and the Jews with him, so that they would know that the Spirit of God had come upon the gentiles, and that God was now including the gentiles into the one body of Christ. It was a very difficult thing for the Jews to understand God's acceptance of gentiles, for they had believed that the Jews were God's chosen people, and that the gentiles were unclean in the sight of God. But in fact all men are unclean before God, due to sin, and that included the Jews. Now through the sacrifice of Christ, all men whether Jew or gentile could receive cleansing from sin, and the hope of eternal life.

As we think of today's story of how the gospel was spreading from Jerusalem, to Judea, Samaria, and now to the gentile world, we should take notice of how prayer was the means God used to put the seeking sinner in touch with a loving Savior. It often amazes me that more people do not have a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. I wonder why it is that people can't seem to find God. Oh many find religion all right, but as for a personal relationship to God, and the salvation that God offers, so many are lost and on the road to destruction. This is sad indeed for many are deceived into thinking that they will go to heaven someday, because of their religious practice. Even Cornelius was a good and God fearing man, but still needed to hear and respond to the message of the gospel. He needed to have the Holy Spirit regenerate him. Perhaps the reason many have not found Christ as Savior, is because we have not taken God very seriously, and we really do not believe we are in danger of Hell. Only when we see ourselves as lost, and under God's wrath and judgment will we flee to God for mercy and cry out for His salvation. Cornelius was praying, though he was not a saved man, but God saw his heart, and his desire to know God, and so he sent him His servant to preach the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ. Do you know Jesus as your Savior? Are you trusting in the sacrifice of Christ to put away all of your sins? It is only when you turn to Jesus and receive Him by faith, that you can be assured of a place in heaven. Why not pray right now to receive Jesus, for God does hear your sincere prayers, and is very willing to save your soul.

"The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ, He is Lord of all." Acts 10:36

Today's Bible Question:

Today we learned how the gentile home of Cornelius heard the message of the gospel through Peter. These men, both praying, were lead together by the Holy Spirit, and the result was many more were saved and added to the church. Someone might ask the question, "Does our good work merit favor with God?"

Today we learned about a man named Cornelius, who was a God fearing man, who helped poor people with generous gifts, and always prayed. We might expect that God would accept this man as one of his children because of his good conduct. However we learned that he needed to know Jesus as his Savior, just as much as any other sinner. Our good works do not wash away the stain of our sins. Only the death of Christ has the power to wash away sin. But then do our good works matter at all? Why don't we just live as we please, if Jesus is going to pay for all of our sins anyway? It is extremely important for everyone to understand that while our good works can never merit our salvation, they are noticed and rewarded by God. God is righteous and Holy, and he calls on us to live in a manner that agrees with His character. Now Cornelius was a good man, still not saved, but because of his good deeds and prayers, God remembered him, and sent Peter to him so he could hear the gospel. From this we learn that the good conduct of God fearing men and women, who earnestly want to know and live for God, are in a position to receive God's mercy. They put themselves in the place where God will certainly guide them and lead them to Jesus for salvation. People who practice wickedness, can be hardened about their sin, and driven further and further away from God, until they cannot hear or listen, even when God speaks loud and clear. We see this in the case of Pharaoh in the Old Testament, when Moses warned him through many plagues, but still he stubbornly refused to acknowledge and submit to the Lord. God does hear the prayers of the humble who seek to know and follow the Lord, and will direct them to where they can find the blessing of eternal life.

While our good works will put us in a favorable place to hear the gospel and respond to God's love and salvation, it in no way can contribute to our salvation. Salvation is God's work alone! Our good works add nothing to salvation through Jesus Christ. If that were so, then Christ's death would not be sufficient, and to suggest such a thing is a great insult to the grace of God shown to us. So let us remember that good works do not earn salvation, or contribute in any way to our salvation. Having said that good works do not merit salvation, that does not mean that good works have no value. For the believer who has taken Jesus Christ as his personal Savior, good works will earn rewards in heaven. God appreciates the faithful service of His children and therefore will reward them according to His kindness and goodness. We do not deserve and reward, and ought to serve the Lord out of gratitude to God for saving our souls, even if we should not receive any reward. But God is good, kind and generous to His children, and promises to reward those who serve Him. So what we have learned is that while good works can not earn salvation, they certainly do merit some reward in heaven. In other words our good works cannot get us into heaven, only Jesus can do that, but our good works will help us to enjoy heaven all the more when God rewards His children. Now try to imagine those people who are trying to earn salvation and impress God with all their good works. To this the bible would say, that all your righteousness is like filthy rags (Isa 64:6). But then their our those who profess to know and follow the Lord Jesus as their Savior, to whom James would warn, faith without works in dead (James 2:17). James here is pointing out that if one says they have faith, but their faith has not produced any good work, then there faith is dead, it amounts to nothing. They are only fooling themselves into thinking they are a Christian, when their lack of good works prove that they are not. Good works do not gain us salvation, but they prove that we have salvation. This is important for us to understand, for many people have stumbled over this very thing, thinking that their good works will save them, or the religious person who professes to have faith, and yet has not produced anything pleasing to God. These are common misconceptions that will lead souls into everlasting damnation. I plead with all who are listening to consider carefully this matter, and to know that salvation is through your faith alone, and not by your works, but true saving faith will always be accompanied by good works, which show the reality of the faith. Let's think of an example to help us understand. If someone prescribes medicine that does not make them a doctor. To be a doctor requires a certain amount of education, but when the doctor prescribes medicine to his patient, it gives evidence to his being a genuine doctor.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast." Eph. 2:8-9

LESSON 100
The Gentile Christians
ACTS II

In our last lesson we learned about the conversion of a Roman Centurion named Cornelius. Though Cornelius was not a Israelite, and Peter was reluctant to meet with a gentile, God showed Peter that all people, whether Jew or Gentile were welcome into the Christian church. Today we shall see how the gospel spread further into gentile areas, and how the church adapted to these changes.

After visiting Cornelius and seeing many of the gentiles trust in the Lord, Peter returned to Jerusalem. The Jews in Jerusalem had heard about the gentiles receiving the word of God, and some of them contended with Peter for visiting and eating with gentiles. Peter takes time to carefully explain how God had given him a vision, so that he would learn not to call unclean what God had made clean. He explained how the gentiles had received the Holy Spirit just as they also had at the beginning. He then asked, "who was I that I could withstand God". The Jews listened to the whole story of how Peter was instructed by God to go to Cornelius' house and preach to them, and how they also received the Spirit and were baptized. This made them believe that the gentiles were now accepted into the church, and so they glorified God. It was not easy for the Jewish believers to understand that gentiles should be welcomed into the family of God. They did not, however, resist what God was teaching them through the vision given to Peter. This became an important development in the early church. They learned that God's message of salvation was not just for them, but would be extended to all nations. So the gospel began to spread even further.

There had been a persecution against the Christians when Stephen was killed by the Jews, and this caused the Christians to spread out to the north and to the west traveling a good distance from Jerusalem. There were men from Cyprus and Cyrene who came to the city of Antioch, and there they preached about the Lord Jesus, and many people believed and turned to the Lord. Even though persecution had spread the Christians far and wide, that did not stop the spread of the gospel. It was this persecution that actually caused the gospel to go further and reach more people. No one would be happy to face persecution of their faith, and have to leave their home. However, if we understand how God is doing a greater work, with His purposes being fulfilled through our persecution, then we could rejoice that more souls were saved.

When the church at Jerusalem heard the news about the growing church in Antioch they decided to send Barnabas there. When Barnabas saw what great things the Lord had been doing, and how many were turning to the Lord he was glad and encouraged them all to continue following the Lord. Here the bible tells us that Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith. As a result of his visit to Antioch many people were added to the Lord. It is encouraging to read about a good man like Barnabas, whom the Lord was able to use to bring blessing to the church, and see souls saved. Wouldn't you also like it to be said of yourself that you were a good person, and the Lord used you to bring spiritual blessings into the lives of many people. This could be your testimony, if you are willing to let the Lord rule over your life, and be His willing servant.

Barnabas knew that Saul of Tarsus was a man with much spiritual strength, and that he could be a great help to the church at Antioch. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to find Paul, and when he found him, he brought Saul back to Antioch, and the two of them spent a whole year teaching the word of God to the church. This was the first place where the believers were called Christians. The term *Christian* means a follower of Christ. Though we cannot be sure who originated this term, it has been widely accepted, and adopted, by all people as a reference to those who subscribe to the Christian religion. The term unfortunately is used by many people who only remotely identify with Christianity. Some people were baptized as infants, and are therefore considered Christians, even though they never go to church, read a bible, or pray. This is far from what the bible meant when it made reference to *Christian*. A true Christian is someone who has placed their faith in Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and Lord. This produces in the believer a love for God, a love for His people, and a love of righteousness. We must not adopt the name Christian if we are not prepared to follow Jesus Christ and obey His teachings.

Some prophets had traveled from Jerusalem to Antioch, and one of them named Agabus prophesied about a coming famine. This resulted in many of the Christians gathering together whatever they had as an offering to assist their brothers and sisters in Judea. This was a beautiful expression of the love and fellowship that the early church enjoyed, as they sought to help one another spiritually and physically. There is much for us to learn from the example of these early Christians. They used their adversity to spread the gospel, they were willing to travel far to encourage one another, and to sacrifice to help their brothers in Christ who were in need. They were willing to accept God's revelation that Jews and Gentiles were one in Christ.

"When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life." Acts 11:18

Today's Bible Question:

Today we learned about how the gospel was spreading further and further from Jerusalem, and how many people were coming to faith in the Lord Jesus in the city of Antioch. We learned that the growth of the early church was the result of persecution against the Christians. Someone might ask the question, "How can I know if someone is a true Christian?"

We learned today that the name *Christian* was first used at Antioch, and was a reference to those believers who had been added to the church through their faith in the Lord Jesus. I think we all recognize that there are many people in the world who use the name *Christian* who are not really true Christians. So how can we tell if someone is a true Christian or not? It is not always easy to discern if someone has a true relationship to God through the Lord Jesus Christ, but there are several evidences that we could look at, to test whether a person has truly become one of God's children. Here are some things that would help indicate if a person has been saved, and is thus a true born again Christian.

1. Does the person who professes to be a Christian, learn and follow the teachings of the bible? Some people who claim to be Christians, never read the bible or care about what it says, and this would be a strong indication that they are not true Christians.
2. Does their profession of faith indicate a specific time when they received the Lord Jesus as their Savior? If a person cannot speak of their conversion specifically then they likely have never made a personal decision to place their faith in Christ.
3. Does the professing Christian live in open and defiant sin? If a person can knowingly practice sin without remorse or repentance, then there is a strong indication they are not the Lord's.
4. Does the person love the people of God, and enjoy spending their time with other Christians in spiritual activities? When a person loves God, they will also love His people.
5. Does the professor try to tell anyone about Jesus, and how they can be saved? One of the great indications that a person has been saved is that the gospel is important to them, and they want to share the message of salvation with others.
6. Does the person live selfishly or generously? If the Spirit of God has come to live inside a person, he will change his heart, cause him to care about others, and to share with the needs of others. To live for money and self are indications of not been born of the Spirit of God.
7. Does the person enjoy conversing about the Lord, and about the bible, and feel comfortable with prayer? A true child of God will be more interested in spiritual conversation than about who won the football match. He will want to discuss the teaching of the bible, and will not feel awkward when asked to pray.

Now we can look for these evidences in others in order to have some idea if they are really a Christian, but we cannot determine absolutely if another person is a Christian or not. Only God can see into the heart and judge if their faith in Christ is genuine. When we see strong evidence that a person is a believer, then we can have a good measure of confidence that they belong to the Lord. We ought to be careful not to encourage people who have a poor testimony and little, if any, evidence of being a true Christian. We would not want to allow people to believe they belong to Jesus when, in fact, they have never really known Him. The most loving thing we can do for people is to help them to know Christ, even if they think they already know him, but are only fooling themselves. It is never wrong to try to witness to someone, even when they say they are a Christian. It might upset someone if you ask them if they are really saved and on their way to heaven, because your doubt of their faith, could be taken as an insult to them. But if they are truly God's child then they should be glad that someone cares enough to make sure of their hope of heaven.

Let me ask you, do you know for sure if you are a Christian? Are you sure you are going to heaven? Did the things we talked about, that indicate a true believer, apply to you? If there has been any doubt raised in your mind about whether you truly belong to the Lord, then I plead with you to make sure that you find assurance of your faith. If you need help to know whether you are saved, then ask a spiritual leader at church to help you find the assurance you need. Remember not all those who call themselves Christians go to heaven, but only those who are born by the Spirit of God.

"For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God." Romans 8:14

LESSON 101
The Persecuted Church
ACTS 12

In our last lesson we learned about how the church was spreading into gentile areas because of persecution against the Christians. We also learned about the church at Antioch and how it was growing. Today we shall consider how King Herod also began to persecute the church, and how God dealt with this proud man.

Herod began his campaign of persecution against the Christians, and had one of the apostles James, the brother of John, killed. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he continued his persecutions, and arrested Peter and put him into prison. It is clear that King Herod cared more about pleasing popular opinion than in doing what was right. It seems that most people who take on leadership roles tend toward pleasing the crowd, rather than seeking to do what is right.

While Peter was bound in prison at night an angel came and stood by Peter, woke him up and told him to get dressed and then follow him. So Peter followed the angel, after his chains had fallen miraculously open and set him free. They past the first and second guard, and then the iron gate just opened for them of its' own accord. Peter was not sure if he was having a dream or all this was real, but it soon became clear to him that he was not dreaming. As Peter went down the street, the angel departed from him. When Peter thought about what had just happened, he realized that God had sent an angel to deliver him from the hand of Herod. Although God does not always protect us from harm, he will often provide the protection we need. In the case of James God was pleased to allow James to come to heaven early, but in Peter's case, because God had more work for him to do, allowed Peter to remain longer on earth before bringing him home to heaven. The time of our departure is known only to God, and we should seek to be useful and profitable for the kingdom of God, before our day of departure arrives.

Peter went to the house of Mary and her son John Mark, where many were gathered and praying together. Peter knocked on the door, and a girl named Rhoda came to answer the door, but when she heard Peter's voice she ran back to tell everyone that Peter was at the door, though she did not open the door for him. They did not believe the girls report, but she kept insisting that it was Peter at the door. Then the people thought it must be angel. Meanwhile Peter was outside knocking, and when at last they opened the door and saw him they were all very astonished. It is clear that the Christians had gathered to request Peter's release from prison, but they must not have believed that God was ready and able to answer their prayers. Sometimes we pray also without really expecting that God will answer us, because we lack faith. We know how we ought to pray and for whom, but we simply lack the faith to believe that God will answer our prayers. But God can and does answer our prayers, when we ask for those things give glory to God, like the release of his servant so he can continue to preach the gospel.

Peter spoke to his friends and asked them to report to James and the brethren all that had happened, and so they did as Peter requested. Meanwhile when the soldiers awoke in the morning they very distressed and wondered what had happened to their prisoner Peter. When Herod heard the news about Peter not being found in the prison, he had his soldiers do a complete search for Peter, but they could not find him anywhere. Then Herod was angry with the guards and questioned them carefully. He held them responsible for Peter's escape and ordered their execution. This should remind us all not to resist God's servants, or mistreat them, for in fighting against God's servant we align ourselves against God, and will suffer the consequences. Satan is a cruel task master, as seen pictured in the actions of Herod, and those who agree to follow an evil ruler in his rebellion, will undoubtedly suffer a similar judgment. These prison guards were only following orders, but the orders were in direct opposition to God's purposes. Had they realized they were fighting with the Almighty, they might have chosen to disobey man, rather than God.

Herod was annoyed by the costal towns of Tyre and Sidon, and these people knew that they depended on King Herod for their supplies and business, so they sought to make peace with Herod. They befriended an important and close servant of Herod's, and this was their way of trying to win favor with the king. At Caesarea Herod appeared before all of these people in his royal robes, sitting upon his throne. As Herod addressed this crowd, they began to shout out "the voice of a god and not of a man". Herod loved the attention and honor he was getting from the people. If he were a humble man, he would have given God the glory, but instead he wanted men to think highly of himself, and so he allowed them to shout these words of praise at him. God was very displeased and immediately struck Herod, and he died and was eaten by worms. This horrible judgment was God's comment about Herod's proud conceit. Though Herod tried to harm the church, yet God protected His servants so that the gospel message went far and wide. Barnabas and Saul took a young man named John Mark from Jerusalem back to Antioch to help with the gospel work in that area, and so word of God continued to spread more and more.

"But the word of God grew and multiplied" Acts 12:24

Today's Bible Question:

Today we learned about How Herod killed one of the apostles, and tried to also jail Peter, but was unsuccessful in his attempts to hinder the spread of the Christians and their message. Herod died a horrible death, because he allowed others to call him a god, rather than give glory to the one and only true God of heaven. Someone might ask the question, "Why would God allow evil men to rule?"

When we consider how evil Herod was in killing James, jailing Peter, and seeking the destruction of any who did not follow his orders, we must wonder why God ever allowed this man to take a position as ruler over His people? Why do evil men, corrupt men, cruel men become leaders, and God seems to allow them to carry out their evil, without stopping them. Today we saw how God dealt with Herod, and how he died a miserable death, but we are still left to wonder how this evil man was permitted to kill a good man like James, or why God would ever allow him to sit on a throne ruling over the people of Israel.

I think one thing we must consider is that God does not necessarily protect us from evil men, when we ourselves do not resist evil, or we enjoy the benefits of unrighteousness. Many people do not care if a man is good or bad, only that he offers them some personal advantage. We see this repeated many times in the Old Testament, where the whole fabric of the society was utterly corrupt. They had a outward appearance of being godly, but their hearts were full of covetousness, lust, and greed. When a society has become bankrupt of righteousness, the Lord may use an evil ruler to judge his people, to bring about repentance.

Another thing to consider is that we live in a world that is in rebellion against God, and if God intervened every time someone did a evil thing, then that would fix our problems I suppose, but most people probably would not live very long, before God's heavy hand of judgment took them away. The bible tells us "It is of God's mercy that we are not consumed" (Lam 3:22). God love us, even when we prove to be very wicked and evil in our actions. He still waits upon us to repent of our evil ways, and to turn to Him for forgiveness and mercy. It might be difficult for us to imagine why God is so patient with evil men, but we just have to accept that God is very loving, and that He is not willing that any should perish, and that includes even evil men like king Herod. God always will leave room for men to repent, and turn to Him for salvation.

So when we wonder why wicked men prosper, and are given positions of power, when they behave wickedly, we must remember that God does not approve of their wickedness, but may use them as judgment against a people that has forgotten God, or patiently wait for their repentance because he is more interested in their salvation than in judging them in the fires of Hell. It is so difficult for us to understand God's dealings with men. This is because we are only looking at things from our own perspective in this world, and not looking from God's perspective which looks across all of eternity, and always knows how to do what is best for the salvation of men's souls.

We are prone to complain against our leaders, whether in government, in our churches, or in our homes. We are rather dissatisfied with the failures of those whom we look to for guidance and justice. We want justice for our own selfish reasons, and guidance for our own prosperity. When our leaders cannot supply our selfish desires, then we are ready to condemn them. God does not look favorably upon us when we stand in rebellion and opposition to the leaders He places over us. God calls on us to obey all the authorities which he has put in place, and that includes frail and failing men; men who should do better, but often in weakness do not measure up the standard we expect. The bible says we should pray for our leaders, and for all in authority, so we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in godliness and dignity (1Tim 2:2). Yes God does allow some men to lead who are not worthy to lead, and sometimes we all suffer under evil leaders, but our job is to submit under authority, pray for our leaders, and serve them as much as it does not disagree with God's righteousness. If we all lived like that, then I rather suspect God would be pleased to provide us with godly leadership that will bring blessing and prosperity into our lives.

As you think of your leaders today, perhaps you can offer up some prayer for them. I also want to encourage us all to submit to Jesus Christ as Lord of our lives. It is when we follow His leadership, that we can be identified as God's true children. Is Jesus Lord over your life?

"Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake." 1 Peter 2:13

LESSON 102
The First Missionaries
ACTS 13

In our last lesson we learned about Herod's attack on the Christian church, and how God destroyed this proud and godless man. We also came to realize that even though the church was being persecuted, that did not stop the word of God from spreading even further. Today we shall see how God raised up the first missionaries to step out in faith and carry the gospel to new areas.

There were several teachers and prophets meeting with the church in Antioch, and these men were ministering to the Lord and fasting, when the Holy Spirit indicated that Barnabas and Saul were to be separated for the work of spreading the gospel. The church obeyed the directing of the Holy Spirit and after fasting and praying, they laid their hands on these two men and sent them away. There are several things we can learn from this passage about missionary work. First of all notice that it was God the Holy Spirit who indicated who was to go into the work of the Lord. God's servants are chosen by God, and not picked out by men. However God did use the leading Christian men in Antioch to recognize and commend these men to the work of the Lord. Notice also that the call to service came after a season of prayer and fasting, and that the men chosen to serve were men who had already proved themselves in their service for Christ, having already spent more than one year in Antioch teaching the word to the church. There is no mention of money, salary, or even the location and type of work these men were to do. They definitely went out trusting in the God for their support, and for leading them where they should go, and to whom they should preach. This is unlike the ordination and salaried positions that the churches today practice widely. It would be good for all churches to once again look here in the book of Acts for their guidance in recognizing God's servants, or sending them forth to preach the gospel. If we want the blessings of the 1st century church, then we must be prepared to follow the same instructions of the Holy Spirit as they did.

Saul and Barnabas began their missionary journey heading west towards Cyprus by ship. After some traveling they came Paphos and met an important Roman official named Sergius Paulus, who wanted to hear the word of God from Barnabas and Saul. However Elymas the socerer tried to resist the message and persuade Sergius to disregard the gospel. But Paul, filled with the Spirit, rebuked Elymas sharply, and struck him with blindness. When Sergius saw the miraculous discipline of God against Elymas he became of believer, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord.

When Paul and Barnabas continued their journey back to the mainland (modern day Turkey), their young companion John Mark left them and headed back home. Paul and Barnabas then came to Antioch in the region of Pisidia. In the synagogue of the Jews they were invited to share a word of exhortation to the people. Paul preached to them how the Old Testament pointed forward to the coming of the Messiah, and that Jesus had fulfilled all that the prophets had been writing about the Messiah's rejection, suffering and death. He then added how God had raised up Jesus from the dead and was seen for many days afterward, by His brethren from Galilee. This he pointed out was a fulfillment of what was prophesied in Psalm 2 and Psalm 16. Paul then invites them to believe in Jesus as their Messiah to receive forgiveness of sins, and warns them if they do not heed God's call to repentance and faith, they would suffer the consequences spoken of by the OT prophets.

When the gentiles heard Paul they pleaded with him to preach to them the following Sabbath. Many of the Jews wanted Paul and Barnabas to continue with them, and speak to them again, so the following Sabbath almost the whole town came out to hear the word of God. But the Jews were filled with envy, so they resisted Paul and Barnabas with contradictions and harsh language. Paul explained to these envious Jews that he first had to bring the message to them, but since they did not count themselves worthy of eternal life, he would now take the message to the gentiles, who were more disposed to hearing and believing the gospel. The gentiles rejoiced that the message was coming to them, and many of them believed in Jesus the Savior. So the word of God continued to spread through their missionary work. The gospel is for everyone, but some people (the poor, humble, those who seek righteousness) are the people who tend to be very happy to hear and believe the gospel. It is the proud who reject God's love and mercy.

When the Jews and prominent people of the city persecuted Paul and Barnabas, expelling them from their region, they left and shook off the dust from their feet. The gospel has the effect of bringing great joy to those who embrace it gladly, but God's displeasure and judgment on those who reject it. Once they fulfilled their mission in that area, they moved onto another city to preach to more people. If we look carefully at the book of Acts, we will notice that the gospel made advances, because God sent missionaries out to new areas, and they did not stay long in one place, but kept moving around, so more and more people could hear. Today we also need people who are willing to take the gospel to new areas. Will you go?

"Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away." Acts 13:3

Today's Bible Question:

Today we learned about the first missionaries that the Holy Spirit called from among the Christians at Antioch, and how these two men (Paul and Barnabas) went to new areas proclaiming the gospel message to the Jews and to the gentiles, and this caused many more to be added to the church. Someone might ask the question, "How does the church recognize and send forth missionaries?"

The pattern we learn in Acts chapter 13, should be the basis for how a missionary is recognized and then sent into mission work. While we talked about this subject briefly in our lesson today, let's take another careful look at this subject, for it is important for the church to practice according to the pattern of scripture, and not the decisions and wisdom of men.

When the church was fasting and praying the Holy Spirit made the call for two men to be separated. Notice that God works in the church, when the church is serious in its spiritual exercise. Perhaps the fasting and prayers were calling on God to reach out to save more souls, and in response God directed the church to send out two missionaries. It is not likely God will do much in a church that has little spiritual zeal. The Holy Spirit called for these two men to be separated. This teaches us that when someone is called by God, they need to be freed up from other responsibilities in the church, or in their secular employment. They are separated from their current sphere of spiritual service, so that they can be used by God in another place or in another way. For the gospel to be spread all over the world, the Lord needs to have those Christians who are willing to be separated, willing to leave loved ones, willing to leave job and career, willing to leave the familiar comforts of home, and even our Christian friends with whom we fellowship. This separation is part of the sacrifice a missionary must make, and helps to reflect the importance of the gospel to the people to whom he will preach.

But then can anyone who wants to go to the mission field go? Our question is about how to recognize a missionary, and that happens when the church is sensitive to the directing of the Holy Spirit. A clear evidence of someone called to mission work, is seen in what they have already been doing to support the spread of the gospel. If it can be clearly seen that God has been using someone to bring people to Christ, and they show a zeal to share the gospel with others, and they have been living to please the Lord, then it would not be too difficult for the church to acknowledge God's gifting and directing. Notice that when the Holy Spirit called for Paul and Barnabas to be separated for the work, he did not specify which place these two men would go. Often we hear of people who feel strongly burdened about going to some particular location. Well that might be their burden, but here in the scriptures we do not see emphasis on where the missionary is called to serve, but rather the emphasis is on God separating them for a work. This tells us that the missionary will go out trusting in the Lord, with no guarantees about where they will be, or how support will come to them. Just imagine Paul and Barnabas heading on ship to unknown areas, without any certainty of how they will manage financially, where they will go, or whether the people would even receive and hear them. With all these things being unknown to them, it is remarkable that they cast their trust in the Lord and went out in faith. Today many missionaries go to a mission board who have carefully laid out plans about where the missionary is to serve, and exactly what he will do in his service, and how much salary he will receive for his work. This does not sound at all like the mission work found in the book of Acts, and removes the important element of trusting the Lord. If a person cannot trust the Lord for guidance and support, then how can they be certain that what they are doing is in fact the Lord's work, and not just the work of men? The pattern given to us here in Acts is rather clear. The church when given to serious prayer for the lost, and sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit, and confirms the clear usefulness and proven track record of one already serving in the gospel, and all things confirm the call to go forth to serve in the gospel, the church will recognize and rejoice in God's call, and commend that person to the work of the Lord. This does not imply financial obligation or a dependency on the church, for the missionary must go out trusting the Lord for their support. However any church that is exercised to support the gospel and send out missionaries would desire to share in the fellowship of the mission through financial gifts as the Lord enables them to do so. Today God is still sending forth missionaries, and if we followed the pattern we see in Acts, the world would be evangelized in just a few short years. How are you supporting mission work?

"And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, Who bring glad tidings of good things!." Romans 10:15

LESSON 103
Missionary Dangers
ACTS 14

In our last lesson we learned about the first Christian missionaries Paul and Barnabas who were commended from the church at Antioch. We learned how their preaching aroused interest and many turned to the Lord in faith, while some prominent Jews were envious and persecuted them. Today we will learn about the dangers that missionaries can face in their work for the Lord.

When Paul and Barnabas traveled to Iconium, they preached in the synagogue and many Jews and Gentiles were converted to the Christian faith. But the Jews who did not believe tried to convince others not to believe what these Christian missionaries were preaching. Paul and Barnabas decided to stay in the area for a long time, and preached with boldness the Christian gospel. This caused the city to be divided, for some believed and other did not. The unbelieving people became so distressed by this new religious movement, that they planned to kill both Paul and Barnabas. But when Paul and Barnabas learned of their intentions, they fled to the cities of Lystra and Derbe. They preached the gospel in this location also. While Paul was preaching he took notice of a man who had been crippled from birth, and had never walked. Paul perceived that the man had faith to be healed and said to him, "Stand up straight on your feet". The man leaped on his feet and walked. This was a remarkable miracle, for the man's legs had been useless his whole life, and he did not just get up slowly, but immediately leaped to his feet and walked. That is the way God does a miracle, so it leaves no doubt as to where the miracle came from, and that it is genuine.

When the people saw what Paul had done, they marveled and thought that Barnabas and Saul were the Greek gods Hermes and Zeus. They planned to make special offerings to them, for they thought the gods have come down in the form of men among them. When Barnabas and Paul heard about what these people were saying and doing, they ran into their midst and explained that they were just men like them, and that they should turn away from their false religious ideas, and trust in the true God who made heaven and earth, and blessed all men with food and gladness. The people were so intent to make sacrifice it was difficult for Paul and Barnabas to convince them to stop what they were doing. Herein is a great danger for missionaries. People tend to look up to men of God, who serve the living God, as though they were closer to God and therefore great people, whom we almost want to worship. When a missionary sees the admiration in the eyes of those they serve, they might be inclined to be proud, and make themselves into someone great in the sight of men, being exalted to fame and fortune. But that is not what God desires, and in fact, the bible says God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble. We can see how Paul and Barnabas were very distressed because the people thought they were greater than mere men, and quickly ran among them to tell them not to worship them, but to worship the true God who made heaven and earth. A true servant of God will never try to take the glory and fame, but points people toward God, to worship and praise Him who alone is worthy of it. Missionaries must be so careful not to allow others to exalt them above measure, for any good that they do, is all because of the grace of God given to them.

Not long after this some Jews from Antioch and Iconium came to find these preachers of the gospel, and when they found Paul they stoned him, and then dragged him outside of the city thinking he was dead. However Paul was not dead and when the Christians had gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city. The next day he and Barnabas went to Derbe, a nearby city, and began to preach their also. Amazingly Paul did not hesitate to continue preaching, even though the Jews had travelled far to find him and to try to kill him. Here is another danger of missionary work. Some people really hate the gospel, and the devil will do all he can to stir up men to destroy those who preach the gospel. Being a missionary has great risks, because of the hatred of those who are prepared to kill any who preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is interesting to take notice of the fact that it is almost exclusively the Christian religion that meets with persecution, while other religions are not persecuted. I noticed this once when preaching on a university campus in the USA, where many religions were openly advertising their faith and doctrine, but it was only the Christians preaching the gospel, who met with fierce opposition. No one seemed to mind the other religions. I believe this is because the gospel threatens people with God's judgment against their sin, and no one really wants to hear about God's wrath and anger, but underlying this hatred of the gospel undoubtedly is the devil, who hates anyone finding the true way to salvation and eternal life. So there are definite dangers involved with missionary work; the danger of being exalted and becoming proud, or the real danger of persecution from those who hate the gospel.

Paul and Barnabas went back to all the churches they had established strengthening them, and appointing elders in every city. Then they went back to Antioch, from where they were commended, and reported to the church all that the Lord had done through them in their missionary travels. The results of Paul and Barnabas' mission work was that many churches were established and many souls added to the kingdom of God. It is difficult work, but the value of eternal life is so much greater than any suffering or dangers one might endure because of sharing the glorious message of the gospel.

"So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed." Acts 14:23

Today's Bible Question:

Today we considered the dangers of missionary work, and saw how Barnabas and Saul refused to be thought of as anything greater than mere men. We also saw that missionary work can be dangerous because those who hate the gospel will sometimes persecute and even kill missionaries. Someone might ask the question, "Why did Paul and Barnabas appoint elders, and not a pastor for every church?"

It is widely believed and accepted today that each church should have its own pastor. Some churches have more than one pastor, but usually have someone they call their pastor. This is a very curious development in the Christian church, for the bible does not support this practice. It would seem to be rather important to ensure that the local church is established with leadership according to the biblical teaching, and not just follow the traditions of men. The term pastor is taken to be a title. Men certainly love to own titles that make them feel important or spiritual. But the bible does not provide us with any examples of this, and certainly does not encourage us to take Christian titles. In fact Jesus spoke directly against this practice in Matthew 23:8-11.

The reason that Paul and Barnabas did not give anyone the title "Pastor" of the church at Iconium, or Derbe, was because that was never God's intention. Instead they appointed elders. This was a reference to the work these men would do, in overseeing the flock and nurturing them with the word of God. Jesus told us that we are all brethren, that is we are all equal in the sight of God, and should not exalt ourselves above one another with special titles, offices, and rankings. An elder is someone who does not use the term "Elder" as some sort of prestigious title to exalt himself above his brothers and sisters in Christ. Unfortunately this has been done by some groups, but for the most part, we do not hear of Elder John, or Elder Peter. No where in the bible are men given this as a title. Peter refers to himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ, notice he does not say the Apostle Peter, which is also a common misconception of titles of the New Testament. Peter identified himself as one who was an apostle, that is designated as one sent out by the Lord to proclaim the gospel and care for the church. It was his work not his title that was in view. But Peter also refers to himself as a fellow-elder when writing his first epistle, and advising other elders about their responsibilities to care for God's church. He never makes reference to a Pastor of the church, but a plurality of elders. By having more than one elder to govern the church, it helps in many respects to care for the church. It certainly helps to prevent one man being exalted with pride, since no one stands alone as the sole head of the church. Only Jesus Christ our Lord deserves, and is given the title, 'Head of the church'. Also when several men serve together as elders in a local church it helps to divide the work load. It also helps there to be a good balance in gifting, preaching, and decisions. If we have only one man heading up the church, then he will have the final say, and tend toward his own biases. If he is an evangelist, he may over emphasize evangelism, at the expense of providing a balanced spiritual diet to the church. By having a team of men working together, they can help keep each other accountable before the Lord for their Christian conduct and service.

Besides seeing all the practical and spiritual advantages of having a group of elders to oversee any local church, we must take notice of the fact that this is what the bible teaches us to do. Above all else we ought to obey the direct teaching of our Lord, rather than follow the false traditions of churches, even if that tradition has been practiced for many generations. It is hard to imagine how the church has been blind to this teaching for so long, and has adopted its own manner of governance, which has led to all kinds of spiritual mischief. Can the Lord be pleased when we decide to do things our own way, and not the way He has taught us in the word of God?

I suspect there are many today, who have been given the title pastor of their church, and who expect to receive much reward when in heaven, because of their faithful service rendered to the Lord. Could it be that they shall suffer some loss, for taking on titles, and accepting a position of honor that God never intended? Will they be surprised when the Lord asks them why they choose to ignore His teaching, and chose rather to follow the ways of men? If we believe that Jesus is Lord of His church, then we owe it to Him to do what He instructs, for only then can we have His full blessing, and anticipate His reward.

"The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; 1 Peter 5:1-3

LESSON 104
Contentions in the Church
ACTS 15

In our last lesson we learned about some dangers that missionaries face, namely the danger of being exalted by men, and the danger of being persecuted by those who hate the Christian gospel. Today we will learn about contentions in the church over doctrine, and concerning the Lord's work.

We would expect that Christians, who have been born of the Spirit of God, would learn humility, grace and forgiveness, and this should keep us from quarreling among ourselves. But as anybody knows the church has been riddled with contention even from its' earliest days. This is because, though a new creature in Christ, the believer still has an old nature that he often allows to control his thoughts and actions. Believers argue because they feel passionately about what they believe, and about the Lord's work, and want to defend the truth when they see others compromising or opposing the truth. The trouble is we don't see as God sees, and so we are not adequate judges.

An issue arose in Antioch when some men had come from Jerusalem and were teaching the gentile Christians that it was necessary for them to be circumcised in order to be saved. Paul and Barnabas disputed strongly against this doctrine. It was decided that Paul and Barnabas, along with others, should go to Jerusalem to consult with the apostles and elders. As they went towards Jerusalem they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria and encouraged all the brethren in these parts about the conversion of the gentiles, bringing much joy to those who heard this news. Although Paul and Barnabas were disturbed about the false teachers in Antioch, and on a mission to resolve the matter, they still found time to share an encouraging report with others along the way. This shows that the contention had not so consumed them so as to take away their desire to serve the Lord and encourage the saints. There is a good lesson for us to learn here, and that is to not allow our personal struggles affect our joy in the Lord.

At Jerusalem the elders and apostles gathered to hear about what Paul and Barnabas had to say. When some of the believers who were Pharisees heard about this matter, they began to also insist that the gentiles needed to be circumcised and follow the Law of Moses. But Peter stood up and said they should not tempt God, for it was clear that salvation was by grace through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, as God had shown them, by giving gentiles the Spirit just as he had given to the Jews. Paul and Barnabas spoke about all the miracles and wonders God had done through them among the gentiles. James spoke up and asked for everyone's attention. He agreed that God was calling the gentiles to salvation, as Peter had said, and he confirmed this by making reference to an Old Testament scripture written by the Prophet Amos (Amos 9:8-12). Amos made reference to the gentiles who belonged to the Lord, thus establishing God's intent to save gentiles as well as Jews. No one else was prepared to argue with the scriptures, so it was agreed that they would not lay any burdens on the gentiles, but would just ask them to observe some courtesies so as not to offend the Jewish believers. Namely they should not eat meat offered to idols, flee all forms of sexual immorality, eating anything that had been strangled or containing blood. These were not binding laws of the New Testament church, they were instructions to help the gentile believers to live in a manner that need not offend the Jewish believers who were sensitive to all the regulations of the Law of Moses. Perhaps sexual immorality is mentioned because it was so prevalent in some of the gentile cities. When Paul and Barnabas took this report back to Antioch, and read the letter to the gentile Christians, they were very pleased and encouraged that nothing more had been required of them but these courtesies, and that it had been confirmed that their salvation was secure through their faith in Jesus, and not be observing the Jewish Law. This message came to the brethren not just through Barnabas and Paul, but also Silas and Judas Barsabas, who were leaders in the church at Jerusalem. This would have confirmed that the message was indeed from the apostles, and not just contrived by Paul and Barnabas. Silas and Judas stayed for a while in Antioch teaching the believers and strengthening them, but when Judas went back to Jerusalem, Silas decided to stay and visit longer. After some days Paul suggested to Barnabas that they return to the churches they had seen established on their first mission journey to see how they were doing. Barnabas agreed with the plan, but when he wanted to take John Mark, Paul flatly refused. Paul was not about to allow John to join them after he had abandoned them on their first journey. Barnabas would not give way either, and the result was that each made their own plans to go in different directions. So Barnabas took John Mark with him, and Paul took Silas and strengthened the churches in Syria and Cilicia. This contention was over the work of the Lord, and John Mark's role in it. These mature and godly men could not find agreement with each other, but that did not deter them from both carrying out the work which God had directed them to do. Sometimes a peaceful separation is the best solution when Christians cannot resolve their doctrinal or practical differences.

"Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?" Acts 15:10

Today's Bible Question:

Today we saw how contentions can arise among the church, due to disagreement over doctrine, or practical issues concerning the Lord's work. From this we can learn that Christians should seek peace while not compromising the truth of the gospel message. Someone might ask the question, "It is okay for Christians to argue with one another?"

Certainly we saw how the church in the book of Acts was faced with some challenges and this led to some heated debating among the Christians. But is it okay to fight with fellow Christians? Would this not suggest that we lack love and gentleness and humility. Should we not just suffer the wrong, and give place to others so that we keep the peace? After all we do not want people to see the flesh in us, and thereby be convinced that Christians are just like anyone else. Well certainly we want people to see the beautiful character of Christ in us, and that would include of course gentleness, meekness, and kindness. However when it came to defending God's honor, or preserving righteousness our Lord Jesus was anything but meek and gentle. The Lord used scathing rebukes against the religious hypocrites, and zealously defended God's honor when men had turned the temple into a den of thieves. The Christian does not have the same moral authority as our Lord Jesus Christ, but that does not mean that the Christian should not oppose that which is false, and in particular we are commanded in the New Testament to earnestly contend for the faith. The Christian should always maintain a loving attitude towards all men, but when men are willing to compromise the gospel, or try to diminish the glory and worth of the Lord Jesus Christ, we should be quick to uphold the truth, and fight for God's glory.

While the Christian is called on to exhibit humility, grace, peace, forgiveness, and the fruit of the Spirit, that does not mean that truth should not matter. The truth of the gospel is absolutely vital for the eternal welfare of men and women, and the most loving thing we can do is defend that truth, to the death if need be. Imagine if someone broke into your house and tried to harm your children. Would you not fight to defend your children? Would you just allow evil to destroy that which you love? Of course you would defend your children, and battle for their safety. Anyone would do so. That does not mean that they are proud or ungodly. Anyone who loves God will value all human life, and defend the weak and helpless. Fighting for what is good and right is a noble thing to do, but must be done with a clear conscience that a person is in fact defending the truth of the gospel. Sometimes people want to fight about things that are either not that clear in scripture, or perhaps not so important. It would hardly seem worth our time to argue about which hymnbook would be best to use in church services. The reason this is not an important issue is that you will not find instructions in scripture about hymnbooks. This is a modern invention of the church to help us praise our God, and so which one we choose is simply a matter of personal preference. No doctrine is affected. Now if someone in the church tries to teach something contrary to the gospel, such as a person needs to keep the Law in order to be saved, well then that is very important, for it can lead people to believe a false gospel and be lost forever. In this case, the Christian must fight vigorously to defend the truth of scripture that salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ, apart from any Law keeping, or doing good works. This is not an issue of pride, but a vital doctrine of the Christian faith, for which we cannot afford to have any wrong understanding.

Contentions will most certainly happen, and all too often contentions are over small trivial things that don't really matter in view of eternity. Christians in general ought not to be contentious, for this does not promote love, and unity of spirit among brethren. We should always strive for a peace and harmony in the church, and only when serious concerns arise about the fundamental doctrines of the faith, should Christians stand strong and battle for the truth. Knowing which battles to fight takes wisdom and Christian maturity. I have all too often witnessed very unfortunate contentions, by Christians who are not at all acting in a manner that honors the Lord Jesus. In most cases when a fight happens among Christians, it could or should have been avoided, if each person was walking in the Spirit. Even though Paul and Barnabas had a dispute, they were fellow workers and brothers in Christ, and God continued to use them for the furtherance of the gospel. Disagreement, does not have to suggest a break in fellowship, or a lack of love and respect. The bible calls on us to maintain peace with all men as much as possible. Is this how you have been behaving among the Christians you fellowship with?

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LESSON 106
Searching the Scriptures
ACTS 17

In our last lesson we learned about the gospel spreading into Europe, and how a young man named Timothy was invited to join the missionary team. We learned about the conversions of Lydia and a Philippian jailer who after converted to faith in Christ showed kindness to God's servants, Paul and Silas. Today the story of the spread of the gospel continues, as the missionaries travel through Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens. Today we shall learn from the key text of this New Testament study, namely that 'searching the scriptures' is the most noble pursuit of all!

When the missionaries left the Christians at Philippi, they traveled south towards the city of Thessalonica, and Paul preached to the Jews in the synagogue. For three Sabbath days he reasoned from the scriptures explaining how Christ had to suffer and then rise from the dead, declaring Jesus to be the Christ. Although many of the gentile people believed, the Jews did not believe and were envious. They gathered a mob of people to set the city into an uproar, and then attacked the house of Jason where the believers were meeting. They could not find Paul and Silas in the house, but they took Jason and others and to the rulers of the city and accused them of turning the world upside down. This was quite the accusation to make, and it was actually a great compliment in a way, for the gospel ought to have an effect of unsettling hearts and changing behavior, and in effect turning the world upside down. Of course these men meant it as an accusation against these preachers who were disturbing the peace and religious views of their city. When we take the gospel to the world, we should anticipate a hostile reaction from people, who do not like to be confronted about their sin, and need of a Savior, about a need to repent and change.

The main contention the Jews had was that the Christian evangelists were suggesting there was another king besides Caesar, named Jesus. After they took some security from Jason they let the men go. The Christians in Thessalonica had seen first hand the hostility of the Jews towards the evangelists, so they sent them away by night to the town of Berea, about 40 miles to the south west of Thessalonica. Again the missionaries first tried to reach the Jews by preaching in the synagogue, and they found a much more welcome response. The people were fair-minded, giving an open ear and searching the scriptures each day to see if what these men were saying was indeed the truth found in God's book the bible. Man's most noble pursuit is when he seeks to find God and his truth through His written revelation in the scriptures. This verse is the key verse of our entire study of the New Testament, for we read how these people were more noble because they were not just going to accept what any visiting preacher might say. They wanted to know the truth and be sure about it, and so they made their own diligent search in the scriptures to come to a conclusion not based on feelings or emotions, or persuasive talk, but on the unerring and unchangeable revelation of God as given in the Holy Scriptures. We all would do well to let this principle sink deep without our hearts, so that we will not rely upon any others to convey the truth of eternal life to us, except we confirm it with what God has said. Everything that I, or any other preacher says, needs to be compared with the bible, so that each one may be convinced in his own mind, and come to his own conviction and faith. God especially will bless us with an understanding of His revelation, and assurance of its' truth, when we take it seriously and diligently seek out the truth for ourselves.

Though things were going well in Berea and many Christians were being added to the church, there were some Jews that came from Thessalonica to disturb Paul and Silas in their Christian outreach, by stirring up the crowds against them. The brethren of Berea thought it best to send Paul away, though Silas and Timothy were left behind. When Paul reached Athens he called for Silas and Timothy to join him, and while he waited for their arrival, he found himself troubled in spirit when he saw the whole city was given over to idols. So Paul reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and gentiles, and also spoke in the open market place. Some of the philosophers in Athens (Epicureans and Stoics) wondered about Paul, who they called a "babbling". They clearly did not take Paul very seriously, but they were curious about what message he might have to share with them. They brought Paul to the Areopagus, a gathering place for philosophers and debaters. They asked Paul to speak about his new teaching. These men in Athens spent much of their time just listening to speeches and new ideas. As philosophers they seemed curious and interested in hearing, but were not interested in acting upon what they heard. This was just a fun hobby that made them feel rather sophisticated and intellectual. Paul preached to these men about the true God who created all men, and sustains the life of all who belong to the human family. He spoke of the need for repentance from idol worship, and about Jesus who would judge the world in righteousness, as the one ordained by God, and confirmed to all by His resurrection from the dead. At the idea of resurrection the men mocked, but some wanted to hear more. Paul decided to leave, but not before some men were converted to the Christian faith. We learned today that the word of God needs to be received with a serious and humble mind, and those who hold themselves above God's revelation, will suffer judgment.

"These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so." Acts 17:11

Today's Bible Question:

Today we learned about Paul and Silas' travels through Macedonia (modern Greece), and how these missionaries were winning more converts, and establishing more churches, but were still being chased from city to city by hostile Jews. We also learned about the noble Bereans who searched the scriptures daily to confirm the message they heard from the missionaries. Someone might ask the question, "How can we know that the bible is true and not just another philosophy?"

In today's lesson we heard about some philosophers called Epicurean and Stoics. These Greek philosophies were men's attempt to answer to the purpose of life and to find maximum pleasure, or to attain to the highest virtues of wisdom, bravery, justice, and moderation. These were proud men who thought themselves very wise and noble, but did not believe or know the true and living God. They were driven by their own lusts and mental powers to make a life that suited their own interests. If someone like Paul should come along with a different message, they would entertain him, by listening to him talk, for they loved to listen to any new thing that was been introduced whether religious or philosophical. However when the words of Paul got around to talking about Jesus resurrection, they simply mocked him. They referred to Paul as a babbler, and this word, as used in the original language, means a "retailer of scraps", or "a collector of words". It was a prideful and derogatory way of saying they thought Paul was just peddling some meaningless words for attention or money. Their ability to learn from someone else was hindered by their pride and supposed understanding of the nature of life and fate. The bible tells us that knowledge will puff a person up with pride (1Cor 8:1).

If we sincerely wish to find truth, we must be like the Bereans that Paul met on his missionary journey, for these people were very sincere in their search for truth. They did not prejudge the preaching of Paul and Silas, but wanted to be sure that what they heard was in fact the true words of God. They checked in the scriptures daily to find if what the preachers were saying was consistent with what the bible said. But then you might ask, how do we know that the bible is really true, and not just another book of philosophy? This is a very important question, for those who doubt the authority of the bible. So much relies upon this, so we need to be absolutely certain that we can trust in the bible.

There are many internal and external evidences that can prove to us that the bible is in fact the true word of God, while all others are false, or poor imitations. Lets think of some important evidences that can give us confidence that the bible is the authoritative word of God.

1. The bible certainly claims to be the word of God. Many times we read "Thus says the Lord". This is not necessarily strong evidence, but it is important that we understand that the bible claims to be from God.
2. The bible confirms it's message through prophecy. About 30% of the bible makes prophetic claims about the future. The bible provides us with many fulfilled prophecies. Scholarly evidence will verify that these prophecies were made often years, even centuries before their fulfillment. To predict the future might be possible if one is lucky. For instance, I could predict that it might rain tomorrow, which is not at all improbable. The bible provides us with hundreds of prophecies, often with great detail, helping us to understand that only God, who knows the future, can provide us with these details before they happen.
3. Another evidence that the bible is God's word, is its' consistency in doctrine. Although written by about 40 different men over a span of more then 1500 years, the bible is always consistent in what it teaches. This is remarkable, and could not have been orchestrated by men, especially over such a long period of time.
4. The bible also has been accepted by people from all generations, and all ethnic backgrounds, as the literal word of God. This does not make it the word of God, simply because people think it is, but it shows us that the effect the bible has on people causes them to place their confidence in it.
5. Also the bible changes lives, transforms sinners, community and nations from wickedness to righteousness. Although many who profess the Christian religion live lives of hypocrisy, there are also many sincere believers, who actively demonstrate their faith, by doing good, and giving their lives in service to the Lord.
6. Lastly, what the bible teaches us about sin, about man, about salvation rings true, when we observe the world around us. What God has said in the bible is not difficult to believe, for it fits accurately with what we learn about ourselves and the world in which we live.
7. The bible is verified through archeological evidence. Many discoveries have been made by archeologists that confirm the historical accuracy of places, events and people mentioned in the bible.

Yes the bible is indeed God's word, and though men have doubted, and resisted it, it stands firm through history, directing people to Jesus Christ for salvation. Have you believed in Jesus?

"The entirety of Your word is truth, And every one of Your righteous judgments endures forever." Psalm 119:160

LESSON 107
The Traveling Missionary
ACTS 18

In our last lesson we followed the missionary journey of Paul, Silas and Timothy from Thessalonica to Berea and then on to Athens. In each location they met with opposition to the gospel, but also many believed and new assemblies were established in each place they visited. In today's lesson we will continue to follow Paul as he spends time in Corinth and sees a new assembly started there, and after sometime travels the long distance back to Jerusalem, and later back into Asia once more.

We could certainly call Paul the traveling missionary, since his travels took him from Jerusalem, to Antioch throughout Asia, and its' various regions, then onto northern Greece, Macedonia, and southern Greece Achaia, and then sailing across the Mediterranean back to Judea. As we think of the miles that Paul traveled with his companions we are left to marvel at the many places he went to and the many churches that were established and strengthened through his tireless labors. Some have estimated that Paul traveled as much as 13 or 14,000 miles in all of his journeys, and without the help of a car, airplane, or bus.

Paul was in Corinth for 18 months after leaving the philosophical center of Athens. In Corinth he met a Jewish couple named Aquilla and Priscilla, and he stayed and worked with them because they had the same trade of tent-making. Paul, as was his custom, went into the synagogue on the Sabbath days to reason with the Jews, and persuaded them from the scriptures that Jesus was the Christ. When he met with opposition, then he said to them that their condemnation could not be blamed on him, and now he was going to preach to the gentiles. Through Paul's gospel work many people in Corinth believed and were baptized. Paul received a special message from the Lord in a vision, saying, "Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you, for I have many people in this city." What a wonderful word of encouragement from the Lord. Perhaps Paul was feeling a bit overwhelmed with the opposition he was enduring, and had faced in every city they had visited. The Lord wanted Paul to continue preaching to the people, with assurances that he would not let anyone harm him. The Lord also pointed out that he had many people in that city. This could mean that the Lord had many who were true believers who would be there to encourage Paul, or it could also mean that the Lord knowing that many of the people of Corinth would turn to the Lord, referred to them as his people. Whatever we understand we see how the Lord was comforting his servant, as the battle for the gospel was being fought. It is wonderful to serve God, and know that He not only looks after the needs of his workers, but protects them from danger, and comforts and encourages them in the midst of trials.

While in Corinth the Jews were persecuting Paul and brought him before the Roman proconsul Gallio, but when they made their complaints about the teachings of Paul, he became upset with their trivial arguments and said they should go and settle their own religious debates. The whole affair upset some of the local Corinthians, as they did not really care much for the Jews, and so they took the synagogue ruler and beat him before Gallio, but Gallio did not show any concern or interest. Often those of passionate faith, impose upon those of differing beliefs, expecting some sympathy, as though everyone should see and understand as they do. This shows a lack of respect, and also some spiritual pride. God can use the Christian to tell forth truth, but would choose rather to use a humble and sincere believer, then a proud and arrogant person. So often this was the case with the Jews, and why they did not meet with favor in the Roman cities in which they dwelt.

After sometime Paul left Corinth and made his journey back to Jerusalem, and then back to Antioch. This concluded his 2nd missionary journey, and it appears that he travelled alone and left Timothy and Silas in Achaia. He left his friends Priscilla and Aquilla in Ephesus, while on his way back towards Judea. In Ephesus Aquilla and Priscilla met a man named Apollos. Apollos was an expert in the Old Testament scriptures and a great preacher, but he did not know anything more than the baptism of John, for as yet he had not heard about Jesus life, death, burial and resurrection. When Aquilla and Priscilla heard him speak, they took him aside privately and explained to him the way of God more perfectly, explaining all about Jesus the Christ. This made Apollos a mighty gospel preacher, and he went about preaching that Jesus was the Christ, with very convincing and convicting messages from the scriptures.

It is interesting to notice whom the Lord chooses to serve in the preaching of the gospel. Paul who was a sworn enemy of the church, was dramatically converted, and being a well educated Pharisee, who knew the scriptures, became perhaps the most influential missionary in the churches long history. Apollos also became a powerful preacher of the gospel, because of his knowledge of the bible. From this we should recognize that our usefulness in the kingdom of God directly relates to how well we know, understand, and practice the teaching of the bible. If you have not yet read the entire bible let me challenge you today to set this as a good goal to try and achieve.

"Now a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures, came to Ephesus." Acts 18:24

Today's Bible Question:

Today we learned about Paul as the traveling missionary, who traveled thousands of miles to proclaim the message of eternal life to as many as would hear. Everywhere he went he met with opposition from the Jews, but that did not deter him, and the Lord encouraged him to press on and preach to the people. Someone might ask the question, "Who is properly qualified to teach the scriptures to the people of God?"

We can certainly see how God chose both Paul and Apollos to preach the bible to others. This was because both of these men had learned the bible very well, and therefore could speak accurately and with authority about God's word. But do notice that both Paul and Apollos first had to be converted to the Christian faith, and come to understand that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God before they were qualified to preach in the New Testament church. They were well qualified to teach the Old Testament teachings in the synagogue, but only after they became believers in Jesus Christ were they ready to take the gospel and Christian doctrine to others. It is also interesting to notice that both of these two men, who knew their bibles well, became such powerful preachers, convincing both Jews and Greeks that Jesus was the Christ. With Paul it took a miraculous visit by the Lord to open his understanding that Jesus was indeed the Christ, but once he could accept this he immediately preached effectively from the scriptures that Jesus was the Christ. In Apollos' case he did not need a miraculous vision from the Lord, but some kind Christians explained to him the way of God more perfectly, and once he understood the truth about Jesus, he became a mighty preacher of the gospel. So clearly one of the most important qualifications of teaching the bible is not only to know the bible, but especially to know the Christ of the bible, namely Jesus.

But what does the bible teach us about special ordination to preach the gospel. We might expect that there should be some ordination, or formal recognizing of God's call on a person to teach His word. We could come to this conclusion based on the practice of the church over many centuries, which has appointed and ordained men to preach. Schools also ordain men as preachers, or spiritual leaders. The practice is so widespread, we would be convinced that this practice must be found in the bible, but strangely it is not found in the New Testament. During the old testament period there were certainly appointed leaders, kings, prophets and priests. In the New Testament we have the appointment of the original apostles, but after them the only appointments made in the local assemblies was the appointment of recognized elders and deacons. We do not find anyone ordained to preach, or to be pastor of a church. The elders were men recognized in the local church, by the Christians. These were men who busied themselves in God's work and were teaching the word. We notice that both Paul and Barnabas were never formally called to preach at Antioch, and yet we find them there in the church preaching for a whole year. It can be inferred also that Timothy was likely a preacher in his area, when Paul found him, and this was without any special ordination. When Paul wanted Timothy to join their mission team, the elders in the church laid their hands on Timothy, not to ordain him to Christian service, but simply to identify with his calling, and recognize him as the Lord's servant. In Acts 13 it was the Holy Spirit who pointed out who was to go to the mission field, and it was not through the ordination of men. The church simply laid their hands on Paul and Barnabas to show their recognition and acceptance of God's unique role given to them to preach the gospel to the gentiles.

Aquilla and Priscilla took aside the teacher Apollos, to explain to him the way of God more accurately. From this we can learn that any of God's children can convey their knowledge of the gospel to others in need of it. This married couple were tentmakers, and were not ordained to preach, but they felt a liberty to speak with Apollos and give instruction to the man. God used that to help this man become a mighty preacher of the gospel. This should encourage every Christian to be available to open the scriptures and teach others the truths we have been taught by the Holy Spirit.

It is a sad condition in the church today where many Christians are under the delusion that teaching the bible belongs to a select few people, who have been ordained to preach and teach. This is not what we read or learn from the New Testament. Any believer indwelt by the Holy Spirit has every right to share with others what he or she knows from the scriptures to help others learn of Christ. Imagine how wonderful things would be if every Christian sought to have a bible studies in their home, and opportunity was given for all believers to learn how to share and teach the bible to others. This would cause the work of the Lord to advance so much more.

"For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food." Hebrews 5:12

LESSON 108
The Ephesus Riot
ACTS 19

In our last lesson we heard about Paul the traveling missionary, and how he traveled thousands of miles to preach the gospel to as many people as possible. We learned Apollos was a man mighty in the scriptures, who became a great gospel preacher after Priscilla and Aquilla explained to him the way of God more perfectly. Today we again find Paul in the city of Ephesus where his preaching stirred up a public riot.

Paul's missionary journeys lead him to come to Ephesus, where he would spend much time preaching and teaching in this important coastal town. From Ephesus all the people in Asia (modern Turkey) would hear the word of God proclaimed, and many were saved. When Paul arrived in Ephesus he met some of John's disciples, who had not heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. After explaining the gospel to these disciples of John, they gladly believed and received Jesus as the Christ. Paul baptized them in the name of Jesus, even though they had been baptized already by John. After Paul laid his hands on them and they began to speak in tongues. This is the 3rd and final time that we read about tongues speaking in the book of Acts. In each case we find souls are saved through a known human language. It is clear when we study this subject carefully that God had a purpose in giving the supernatural sign gift of tongues so that the Jews would respond in obedience and faith to the call of the gospel. Tongues also helped the early church to understand that the church would include not just Jews, but also Samaritans, Gentiles, and now John's disciples who subsequently received Christ as Savior. The evidence of the Holy Spirit gave witness to the unity of the body of Christ.

Paul was teaching and preaching for two years at Ephesus, and through him many miracles were also performed. Some of the Jewish exorcists witnessed the miraculous power Paul used when he invoked the name of the Lord Jesus, and so they thought they could do the same. They tried to cast out a demon, but the demon replied to them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?". The evil spirit leaped on them and overpowered them, until they just escaped with their lives. When others heard about this the news spread and the people feared, and the name of Jesus was magnified. This resulted in many putting their trust in Jesus, and they came confessing and telling all of their evil deeds. They also burned all their evil books of magic. There were so many books burned that the value of them was 50,000 silver coins. When we hear the gospel and believe it should cause us to turn away from all evil, and destroy those things in our lives that caused us to sin. Perhaps we all have things we need to burn up and get rid of so that we may live in a better way to please the Lord.

Paul wanted to travel again into Macedonia and Achaia to visit the churches there, but he decided to send Timothy and Erastus while he continue in Asia for a while longer. At Ephesus a man Demetrius had his trade in making silver shrines to the goddess Diana, and was worried because the gospel was causing many to turn away from idol worship, and this meant he was losing money because fewer wanted to buy his shrines. He rallied together other tradesmen, who depended on making shrines for their living, and told them that Paul's preaching against their idols was hurting their trade, and defaming the great goddess Diana. The statue of Diana was the goddess of fertility and kept in a large temple, which was considered one of the 7 great wonders of the ancient world. The tradesmen were upset by what Demetrius said and starting shouting "Great is Diana of the Ephesians". This caused the whole city to be in an uproar, and everyone assembled in the large theatre and for two hours everyone was shouting, but most did not even realize why they had assembled together. Paul wanted to rush into the theatre to address the crowd, but his friends would not allow him to go for fear of the violent crowd. The city clerk eventually settled the crowd down, and said that the evangelists had not done anything to offend their laws, and that if Demetrius and other tradesman had a law case against Paul and his companions they could bring them to the Roman court for trial. He also warned the crowd about the danger of their unlawful assembly, and sent them away. It is interesting to see how people will follow the crowd, and can quickly be lead to violence. Because we are emotional, and religious, and tend to follow the crowd, we often act in a manner that does not make much sense. We see people behaving in a church gathering in a way they would not otherwise act in public, because the emotion of the moment causes them to lose control of their sensibilities and act in a confused and disorderly manner. This is neither good for civil order, or for church order either. The bible even instructs us to be sure that all things are done decently and in order. When we allow our emotions to take control, we can find ourselves departing from proper Christian behavior. Emotions are very easily manipulated especially in a large crowd, for everyone wants to fit in and not be different. But the crowds are so often wrong, as was the case with the idolaters of Ephesus. If we follow the crowd we could end up following the sin and confusion of false religion. We must learn to think for ourselves, and test our religious beliefs with the scriptures to be sure that we are following the way that leads to eternal life through Jesus.

"And many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds." Acts 19:18

Today's Bible Question:

Today we learned about Paul preaching in Ephesus which led many people to abandon their idol worship, but that caused some people, who made their living by making idol shrines to get upset and start a riot in the large theatre. Someone might ask the question, "Is it okay to make money from religion?"

It is certainly true that many make money from religion, but is that what the Lord intended? There are both right and wrong answers to this question. The bible tells us that a worker is worthy of his wages, and this was written to remind us that those who labor for the gospel, should be permitted to live by the gospel. It is okay to receive help when serving the Lord, from those who wish to support the Lord's work. Having said this though, we must also warn against the attitude of using religion to make money. So many people have seen that religion can pay well, and so they put on their religious show and program in order that they might make money. Their motive is to make money, it is not to serve God, or bless His people. When Peter is writing to the elders of local churches he tells them they should not seek the work of caring for God's people because of their interest in money. Money corrupts our hearts, and takes us away from the true purpose of spiritual work. God cares for people, and so His servants must also care about people. The servant of God should never plead with others to support his work, because God is able to provide for his workers, when they trust in Him, looking to Him alone for their daily bread.

Why is it that we find so many people using the church to gain money? We see church leaders heaping up riches, and living in luxury, while the church members are poor and struggling. The bible tells us the love of money is the root of all evil. So spiritual leaders who show through their preaching and actions that they are motivated by the love of money, are showing themselves to be false leaders. They are the blind leading the blind, and those who follow them will fall into the same pit of covetousness, pride, selfishness, and many hurtful lusts.

So we have seen how the bible teaches that a worker is worth his wages, but also that the love of money is the root of all evil. So let us understand that when someone enters into the work of the Lord, and they are trusting in God for their support, it is right and appropriate for the people of God to share with their needs. If the church rewards its preachers, evangelists and servants who serve faithfully with some practical help so they can better accomplish their work, then God would be pleased. From the perspective of the worker, he should not serve God for the motive of money. His heart needs to be detached from the love of money. The bible says clearly that we cannot serve God and money. We know that no one can manage unless they have some money to feed themselves each day, and so the church should feel its' responsibility to help those who are serving the Lord and are in need. Those who beg for support, are not worthy to receive support, because they demonstrate their desire for money, and lack of faith. The worker should not need to ask anyone for any help, if he is truly God's servant, and doing God's work. We must be aware that many people are claiming to be God's servants, but have not been called by God. Not everyone who stands on the street corner shouting out bible verses has been called by God to serve. Many of these people who preach on street corners, or in churches are simply greedy, and covetous people who see religion as a convenient way to take advantage of gullible people. We do not need to feel obliged to support people whose goal appears to be money, and they cannot preach except there is a mention of their financial needs, and a pleading for support. There are of course many people who are truly called to serve God, and even some of these lack the faith to trust God entirely, and so they look to their church and friends to support them, and make appeals for money. This is unfortunate, and the reality of for many workers within the church today. How wonderful to meet a true servant of God who does not ask anyone for money, but trusts alone in God, and is doing the work of God, and has all his needs supplied. This honors the Lord, and shows that the Lord can and does supply his servants.

Living by faith does work. The servant of God must, however, use money for God's glory, and not for his own comfort and pleasure. Money can be such a snare to those involved in the Lord's work, because confidence in money is so tempting rather than trusting in the living God. I believe there is an important secret that every Christian needs to learn, and that is to handle money for the glory of God, not allowing the love of money to rule us.

"For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows." 1Tim 6:10

LESSON 109
The Ephesian Elders
ACTS 20

In our last lesson we saw how the influence of the gospel in Ephesus caused a riot to start when some tradesmen were losing their business. Today we are going to see how Paul instructed the elders in Ephesus to care for God's church, using himself as an example for them to follow.

After the Ephesus riot, Paul did some traveling through Macedonia and Greece for about 3 months while visiting the various assemblies in those areas. When he traveled back to Asia he was joined by some Christian brothers at Troas. These companions were undoubtedly a real help to Paul in his work as a traveling missionary. At Troas they waited for seven days until the first day of the week, that is Sunday, when the disciples at Troas met together to break bread. While Paul was meeting with them, he took the opportunity to preach to the disciples and carry on quite late until it was midnight. Because of the late hour and the many candles or lamps burning in the room, one young man grew tired and fell asleep as he was sitting in the window. He fell from the window and died, but Paul rushed to him and held him, and informed all that the boy's life was still in him. God used Paul to bring back the young man's life after he had died, and the people were greatly comforted by this act of mercy from God. We should take notice of the fact that the believers made it their practice to meet on the Lord's Day, that is Sunday, as that was the day of the Lord's resurrection, and the day he appeared to His disciples. It only seemed fitting that Sunday should be the day when they commemorated the Lord's supper, and we would do well to follow their good example, by reserving each Sunday for time to remember the Lord in the breaking of bread as He has commanded us to do.

After departing from Troas Paul traveled by ship southward along the coast of Asia until he reached Miletus. From Miletus he called for the elders of Ephesus to come and meet with him. Ephesus was about 30 miles to the north, so the elders likely had to spend a couple of days away to have this meeting with Paul. This shows us the willingness of local elders to take time to meet together and with the missionary for spiritual encouragement and counsel. Elders should take time to meet alone together or with missionaries they work with to discuss the spiritual concerns of the church, and to encourage one another.

Paul spoke of many things to the elders about his own example while among them in Ephesus, and about how they must care for the flock and protect the flock. Paul used his own example of dedication and service to encourage the elders to be fully committed to their task of caring for God's church. As we hear Paul speak about his daily preaching, not just publicly but also from house to house, we realize that he was tireless in his pursuits of reaching souls for Christ, and nourishing them in the word of God. We also learn of how much his heart was attached to his work, when he spoke of his tears, and the persecutions he had to face. He mentioned to the elders that though his life was constantly in danger, that did not concern him as much as being sure he fulfilled all that the Lord had given him to do. This level of dedicated Christian service is quite rare, and that which Paul wanted to instill into the elders from Ephesus. We too should learn to have that same heart of passion for the gospel, and for serving the Lord. Paul also speaks to them about the need to feed the flock and protect the flock, using the analogy of shepherd and sheep. The elders of the local church are responsible to faithfully teach the word of God and to guard against false teaching and false teachers. Paul commends them to the Lord and the word of God. It is the word that will build and protect the church, and that which leads the faithful towards their inheritance in heaven. While Paul talks about the importance of caring for God's church he points out that while he served the Lord, he did not covet gold or silver that belonged to anyone, but was willing to work with his own hands to support himself and those with him. Paul shows a tremendous example of how the servant of the Lord must think about his work. He is God's worker, and a slave to the cause of Christ, and will be all means support the mission, without expecting high wages, or ease and comfort in the work. The work is hard, working night and day, the emotional strain is also high, and the wages are poor, in the sense that the worker must be willing to sacrificially serve, and even work to support himself if need be so the gospel can be preached without charge to others. He ends his speech to the elders with a reminder of the words of the Lord, that it is more blessed to give than to receive. The Christian servant must see and appreciate that his life is to be a constant offering to God. A life of sacrifice and giving, and for Paul eventually would mean the giving up of his life for the gospel.

When Paul left the elders they wept and kissed him, because they were filled with sorrow that they would not see Paul again. They dearly loved him and appreciated the example and sacrifices he had made for them, and for the Lord's work in Ephesus and beyond. Every spiritual leader can learn much from Paul's example of dedication and service, and every believer should recognize that God expects us to give Him our very best.

"For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God." Acts 20:27

Today's Bible Question:

Today we learned about Paul's meeting with the elders from Ephesus to discuss their care for the church, and to use his own example to motivate them to faithful service. We also learned about Paul and others meeting on the Lord's Day with the disciples at Troas. Someone might ask the question "How often should the church break bread together?"

In today's lesson we noticed that the pattern at Troas was for the Christians in that area to meet on the first day of the week, that is Sunday, for the purpose of breaking bread. They undoubtedly had other spiritual activities included in these Sunday gatherings, such as prayer, bible study, preaching and serving the body of Christ, but we are very distinctly told here in Acts 20 that it was for the breaking of bread that the believers came together on Sunday. This tells us that, for these Christians, the Lord's supper was the central purpose for meeting on Sunday. It was the gathering around the person of the Lord Jesus Christ that was their focus. Jesus Himself had instructed His disciples to "Do this in remembrance of me". Although Jesus did not instruct his disciples that the Lord's supper should be conducted on a weekly basis, it appears that is what the early church understood and adopted as a practice. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians he speaks to them about the Lord's supper also, and tells them "for as often as you do this, you show forth the Lord's death, until He comes". The implication in the words "as often" seems to imply that this was something to be done frequently, and not just on rare occasions.

Today many churches have made preaching the main attraction at their meeting times. Along with some lively music the preacher will take 45 minutes or perhaps one hour to preach the word of God. While preaching the word is very good and necessary, it seems that we have missed our priority when Jesus asks us to remember him in the breaking of bread, but we only give this a small place perhaps once a month as a add on to our preaching service. Some churches only afford a few minutes to conduct the Lord's supper, and some churches celebrate the Lord's supper only once every 3 months, some once every six months, and some perhaps never do so. The Lord's supper has been diminished to a place of insignificance in the church today, which is very sad. It would seem that if we really loved our Lord Jesus, that we would be more than happy to do whatever He has asked us to do. Jesus did not tell the church to hold preaching services on Sunday, although I am sure that was something agreeable to His purposes. The Lord did not instruct the church to meet weekly for prayer meetings, although that too was something that would be anticipated for the church as the Spirit indwelt them and guided them. The Lord never instructed the church to open a Sunday school, or to meet for bible studies, although these are also good spiritual activities that help the church to grow. Notice and mark it very well in your mind and in your heart, Jesus said, "This do in remembrance of me!", and that was a reference to taking the bread and wine as we consider his death on our behalf. If for no other reason, then to please and obey our master, we should often meet to break bread together. The first Christians made it their habit to make the Lord's supper the central reason for their gathering together, and they did not feel it burdensome to meet each Lord's Day for that distinct purpose. But let us also consider the spiritual benefits of regularly meeting to break bread. The Lord's supper requires that we walk in holiness before the Lord, for we know that we cannot take the bread and wine in an unworthy manner, so we must constantly be confessing and forsaking the sins in our life in order to have a clear conscience to meet with the Lord and worship before His presence. Also the Lord's supper keeps before us His love, grace and sacrifice on our behalf. This keeps us humble, grateful, and inspires us to serve, and to witness to others. It is that one time when Christians meet together, where no one but the Lord Jesus is in charge, and we all sit together as equals in the presence of God. There is an unfortunate practice in many churches where the pastor or leader is officiating and administering the bread and wine, but this is certainly not the practice found in the bible. When Jesus met with his disciples, they were all one, redeemed by the same blood. No matter what station in life we might have whether doctor or shoe shine boy, when seated at the Lord's table we are all sinners saved by grace. This is why it is important that the Lord's supper does not take on the officious stature that many have made it into, with the clerics and leaders officially leading and overseeing. Believers should all come together as equals, and any brother who feels directed by the Holy Spirit should be permitted to pray, offer thanks or pass the bread and wine. The focus must always be upon the person and work of Jesus Christ, and not on man. The bible does not require believers to meet every week to break bread, for it gives no such command, but those who love the Lord, will discern that His desire is that we do this often, and make Him the center of our lives, by first obeying Him. Remember also that when we take the bread and wine as Christians, there is not intrinsic value in the emblems themselves, but they are simply given to us as a vehicle to bring us to Christ in remembrance. They are symbolic, He is the reality whom we apprehend through faith.

"And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread..." Acts 20:7a

Paul's Journey to Jerusalem

ACTS 21

In our last lesson we saw how Paul instructed the elders at Ephesus to take care of the church by feeding them the word, and protecting them from false teachers. Paul now begins his journey back towards Jerusalem with several stops along the way. Paul is told by others not to go to Jerusalem because the Jews will capture him, but Paul is still determined to go no matter what may happen to him.

After Paul left Miletus he began his voyage by ship first to an island called Cos, then onto the famous island of Rhodes, and back to the southern coast of Asia (Turkey), to the town of Patara. After this he found a ship that was destined for Phoenicia (modern Lebanon) and entered the ship to continue his journey towards Jerusalem. After passing the large Island of Cyprus, eventually they landed in Tyre on the coast of Syria, north of Israel. Here Paul and his companions stayed for seven days and met the Christians from that area. The Christians of Tyre spoke to Paul and said he should not go up to Jerusalem. They had been shown by the Spirit that Paul would have troubles in Jerusalem, so they discouraged him from going. When they left Tyre they traveled south to Ptolemais spending one day with Christians in this seaside town. Then they traveled further south along the coast until they came to Caesarea, where they stayed with Philip the evangelist. A prophet named Agabus came to them from Judea, and used Paul's waistband to tie his own hands and feet, saying to them that Paul would be bound by the Jews in Jerusalem. After hearing this the other disciples again tried earnestly to persuade Paul to not to up to Jerusalem. However Paul told them they should not weep or try to break his heart, for he had determined that he should go to Jerusalem, and that he was prepared to die if necessary for the name of the Lord Jesus. Paul was fearless for the sake of the gospel, not counting his life of more value than his mission to proclaim the gospel wherever the Lord would send him.

At Jerusalem Paul went to meet the elders and brethren, and they gladly welcomed him. Paul reported how the Lord had been working among the gentiles through his ministry, and they were glad to hear this news and gave glory to God. Because of the many zealous Jews in Jerusalem, and Paul's known reputation for standing against Jewish customs and laws, the elders asked Paul to join with four other men who were carrying out a vow, and ceremony of purification. They felt that this would show other Jews that Paul indeed agreed with the Law of Moses and not opposed to it, even though gentiles were not to be bound by the Jewish laws. Although Paul agreed with this plan, it does show us that the early church was still struggling with their Jewish heritage, and had a very difficult time separating themselves from all the customs and rituals of the Law. The Christians were very much swayed into this Jewish practice, but God would show the church his displeasure and judgment against Judaism, when the temple would be destroyed, which took place in 70AD, only a few short years after this time that Paul was in Jerusalem. In this period of transition when the church was struggling with a proper understanding of the Old Testament Law and how it fit into the life of the church, God was patient to teach the Jewish believers, but eventually expected them to learn that the Law was only a teacher to bring people to saving faith in the Lord Jesus. The Law was good, but could never make a man righteous before God.

When Paul went with the four men to the temple according to their vow, some Jews from Asia recognized Paul, and remembered seeing him with a gentile (Trophimus) earlier, and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple area and had polluted it. They ignited a riot and took Paul by force out of the temple area and began to beat him. When the news of this riot reached the captain of the guard, he sent in his soldiers to stop the beating and find out what the charges against Paul were. When the crowd was yelling out different charges and the captain could not discern anything about what Paul had done, he had Paul brought by the soldiers to the fortress, but as Paul was taken up the stairs Paul asked the captain if he could speak to the crowd. Though the crowd was so hostile towards Paul, he still wanted an opportunity to explain himself, and share the gospel. Paul was in a crisis, and this was why so many had warned him not to come to Jerusalem, but Paul bravely faces his enemies with only one desire: to make the gospel known, even if that should have to cost him his life. The captain was surprised to find that Paul could speak the Greek language, for he had thought he might have been an Egyptian rebel. When asked about his identity, Paul informed the captain that he was a Jew from Tarsus, and asked for permission to speak to the crowd. The captain gave his permission and Paul motioned with his hand to silence the crowd, and began to speak in Hebrew, which would have gained the attention of his Hebrew speaking audience. We shall find out what Paul says and the crowds reaction in our next lesson. What we can take from today's lesson is the courage and determination of Paul to fulfill his mission and preach the gospel, even to his enemies. I wonder if we could be so courageous through faith in Jesus Christ our Lord? When the gospel really gets a hold of a persons heart, then that person will most certainly proclaim the gospel at all costs.

Then Paul answered, "What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." Acts 21:13

Today's Bible Question:

Today we learned about Paul's journey to Jerusalem, and how he willingly faced the dangers of meeting the hostile Jews, even when his dear Christian friends warned him not to go. Someone might ask the question, "When, if ever, should a Christian risk facing dangers?"

As we think of Paul from today's lesson we see how determined he was to go to Jerusalem, even though warned on at least three occasions about the dangers that awaited him from the Jews in that city. We might be led to think that Paul was rather bold, and even foolish, to run straight towards these dangers. How many of us would willingly place ourselves in harm's way? It just does not make any sense, until we think of the reason why. If I see a child about to be run over by a car, I might just jump out to grab that child, even though I risk my own safety. There is a greater cause to be considered in some cases that would lead us to place ourselves in danger. When we think of the importance of the gospel, and how it can bring eternal life to those who hear the message, then we might evaluate the risk and costs, and say it is worth the risks, even if that means death. This is what Paul saw and believed with all of his heart. He was willing to give his life if necessary to make sure the gospel message was preached to all people. Jerusalem was where the message started from. This was the city where the Lord was crucified, where He rose from the dead, and where the church had its birth. This was where many souls were saved, and yet there was still a hardness of heart, and an unwillingness to turn from the traditions of the Old Testament, and to believe that Jesus was the fulfillment of all that the prophets had written. Paul was a zealous Jew, before he had been converted, and he knew what it was to be a proud and zealous Pharisee, so he felt especially indebted to the Jews, among whom he had grown up, to share with them the gospel, if they would only hear him. Yes, this would put him at great risk, but he could see no other alternative, and so desperately wanted them to believe in Jesus as their Messiah.

Normally it would not be wise for any person to put themselves into a dangerous situation. For the Christians who want to be faithful to the Lord and to the gospel they might have to consider being put into a situation where they could be harmed because of their faith in Christ. There are some countries in the world where Christians are hated and persecuted, and even killed. Today Christians who live in these countries are being martyred for their commitment to Christ. Someone might advise them to leave, and take the safer road by not preaching the gospel in such hostile territory. However, if God calls on his servants to go and preach, then they must go, whether that preaching is welcomed or not. When a Christian is certain of their call to preach the gospel, no matter where that call may place them, then they can find peace and courage to tell the world about salvation through Jesus Christ. Yes, it may cost them their lives, but that is what Jesus also did for us, so we ought to be willing to do that for Him also. It is not every Christian that will be called to live in such dangerous circumstances, but God does allow some of His precious children to suffer and even die for the sake of the gospel. This is because God loves all people, even those who most fiercely oppose His grace. Paul knew that the Jews were the most hostile to the gospel, and that his life would be at great risk to be in Jerusalem, but he still went there, because the love of God was burning in his heart for the Jewish people, and for the city of Jerusalem. God was himself pleading with the Jews, and he used His servant Paul to make his appeal for the Jews to repent and believe in Jesus.

We should not foolishly put ourselves into dangerous situations, as though voluntary suffering is somehow dignified or meritorious. Certainly not, if there is no particular reason for it. But if for the sake of the gospel a person is suffering, they can recognize that this indeed might be the very means for God reaching someone with the gospel. The suffering itself is not good, but if the suffering should have the effect of bringing others to saving faith, then a Christian can rejoice in God's purposes being fulfilled.

As we study carefully the book of Acts we shall learn that while Paul was willing, for the sake of the gospel, to put himself in harm's way, that did not necessarily mean that he wanted or welcomed any harm to befall him, but quite the opposite. He resisted and fought against those who would beat him without cause. He did not just surrender to suffering, but avoided it whenever possible. This is important for every Christian to notice, for while in the course of serving the Lord, we recognize there are sacrifices to be made, and potential dangers, that does not mean that we are wanting and welcoming of any ill-treatment that comes our way. It is always wise to resist any harm or danger that might come our way, even though risking danger for the greater good of the gospel.

*"And I will very gladly spend and be **spent** for your souls..." 2Corinthians 12:15a*

LESSON III
Paul's Defense at Jerusalem
ACTS 22

In our last lesson we learned about Paul's determination to go Jerusalem, even in the face of great danger to himself. We saw how he was taken by an angry mob that would have killed him, except for the intervention of a Roman captain. Today we shall hear how Paul defends himself before the Jews, and their response to his speech.

From our last lesson we recall that Paul is standing before a large crowd of zealous Jews in Jerusalem. They have just tried to beat him to death, but a Roman captain has rescued him from the crowd, and allowed him to speak to the people. Paul addresses the crowd in the Hebrew language, which would have impressed the Jews, so they listened to what he had to say. Paul begins by telling them that he was a Jew, from Tarsus, and had trained under the Rabbi Gamaliel, and was taught the Jewish law, and had always been zealous towards God. Paul admitted to a time in the past when he persecuted those of "The Way", which was how some referred to the Christians. He even went to Damascus with letters seeking to find and imprison any of the Christians that could be found in that city. Then Paul tells them of how he saw a vision and heard a voice while on his way to Damascus, and how the voice identified himself as Jesus. Paul was struck blind by the vision, and had to be led into Damascus by others. He told the crowds how a man named Ananias, himself a zealous Jew, had met Paul and was able to restore his sight miraculously, and how he submitted to be baptized by Ananias. The Lord had spoken to Ananias about Paul, and said that Paul was a chosen vessel to testify of what he had seen and heard to all people. Paul then continued his testimony before Jews, by telling them he had been in prayer, and fell into a trance and the Lord spoke to him that he should leave Jerusalem, and that He would send far away to the gentiles.

Now the crowd listened attentively until Paul mentioned the gentiles, and that was more than they could bear, and they began to throw the clothes off and cast dust in the air. They were greatly upset by this statement, for they had such a strong conviction that Jews should have no dealings with gentiles. This hatred of the gentiles was developed because of their sense of loyalty to God. Certainly God had told the Jews throughout the old testament period to not intermarry with other nations. This was because God did not want them to be corrupted by the ungodly practices and idolatry of the nations. However this did not mean that the Jews were to hate and despise the gentiles, in fact God loved them and wanted them to hear and respond to his grace. Foreigners were certainly welcome to be among the Jews, if they would convert and worship the God of the Jews, such as was the case with Ruth the Moabitess, and the Ninevites to whom Jonah was sent to preach repentance. God loves all people, but the Jews could not see or understand how any other people besides the Jews could be God's chosen people. Paul's remark about going to the gentiles made the crowd ready to kill Paul. The captain did not understand why the crowd was suddenly getting so agitated, and thought it would be necessary to have Paul beaten. While he called his soldiers to tie Paul up for a good public lashing, Paul asked the Centurion near him if it was lawful to beat a Roman who was not condemned. When hearing this, the Centurion became very concerned, and reported to the Captain that he should be very cautious how he dealt with Paul for he was a Roman. When the Captain asked Paul about this, Paul confirmed that he was indeed born a Roman citizen, which surprised the Captain for he had purchased Roman citizenship at a great cost. Now the Captain and the other soldiers were very worried that they had bound Paul, because they knew this was not proper according to Roman Law. The Captain perhaps thought he could ease the offense by giving Paul the opportunity to speak with his accusers face to face, and so made an arrangement for Paul to address them the next day. Our next lesson will follow the outcome of this meeting, and God's hand upon Paul to protect him from His enemies.

Today as we heard Paul give his defense before the hostile Jews, let's take notice of the fact that Paul was careful to give his personal testimony. This is an excellent way to share the gospel with others, for it relates the facts, that no one can deny, and is our real experience. Paul was careful to speak the truth. He did not give his opinions, but just told them the facts about what had happened to him. In these circumstances we might expect Paul to be cautious about saying anything that would get the Jews upset, for they had already tried to beat him to death. However Paul, while trying to be somewhat tactful in his speech, does tell the plain facts of what God had shown him, and what he asked him to do. Paul likely understood that to speak of the gentiles would bring a bad reaction from the crowd, but he felt that he should speak honestly, even though it would offend the Jews. This is because he was not willing to conceal the truth and mission which God had given him. They might not like to hear it, yet it needed to be said, if they too would ever understand and believe in God's grace and salvation. When telling others about the bible and salvation, we should not be shy to declare the whole truth, even if we think some of that truth is offensive to those we speak. Telling someone he is a sinner might sound offensive, yet all people need to hear this truth if they are to repent and believe the gospel.

"So I answered, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.'"
Acts 22:8

Today's Bible Question:

Today we learned about Paul's defense before the Jews, and how they listened carefully until he mentioned the gentiles, at which point they became very angry and wanted to kill Paul. Someone might ask the question, "Why does religion so often cause hate and violence?"

Not only do we see from today's lesson how the Jew's religious zeal made them hostile towards Paul, but we have seen this tendency throughout history. When it comes to religious views, it seems that men are willing to kill and hate to prove their religion is the correct one. Even today with all of our advancements in technology, perhaps the greatest threat of war and annihilation is due to fear over religious hatred. Many non-believers who do not subscribe to any formal religion are so disgusted with religious bigotry and hate that they are driven far away from God and any hope of salvation.

When we consider the issues of religion we recognize that these deal with the deepest issues that face mankind, such as where do we come from, why are we here, and what happens to us when we die? When religion tries to give answers to these questions and people place their trust in these beliefs, they do not want to believe they are wrong, for that will take away their hopes for blessings after they die. So often religious teachings are intolerant to other beliefs, so that once you adopt that religious view point, you have to condemn any other view point as wrong. This leads to passionate debate, and even violence and war. Certainly God is a god of peace, love and forgiveness, and wants to reconcile all men to himself, but that does not mean that men who believe in God think or feel the same way. So often men make religion into something that God never intended, so that religious people breed hatred, and are willing to act in violence towards others who do not share their views. Today we see how some radical Muslims in the Middle East are violently opposed to Israel and to the USA. Their motives appear to be religiously motivated, for in their passion to follow their religion they believe that the infidels (non Muslims) are worthy to die, because they have not followed their own beliefs. This must come from Satan himself, for he is a murderer and seeks to kill and destroy, as Jesus said. Sadly some who call themselves Christian also breed hatred towards others who disagree with them. There have been very sad chapters in the history of the church, where so called Christians acted in violence towards other non Christians. This is certainly not the teaching of the bible, for Jesus calls on us not to use the sword, but to pray for our enemies and bless those who mistreat us. Violence and hatred are the results of sin in the heart, and the depraved condition of mankind. The only remedy to this situation is to be born again by the Holy Spirit. When a person becomes a true believer in Jesus Christ, God gives them a new nature, that learns to love, and not hate. A true Christian should be marked by love, and not just for the people who love them, or believe and think they way they do. A Christian will learn to love all people, even those who would be considered enemies, and those who think and believe differently. This is the beauty of the gospel, for it has power to change the evil heart of man, to be kind and loving towards all men. True Christianity should be noticed by it's goodness and mercy. Where true Christianity spreads, it should also spread love and kindness to all people. This is one way in which we can discern between that which is true and false Christianity. The bible says that if a someone says they love God, and yet hate their brother, the love of God is not in them. What this means is that no one has any claim to being a true Christian when they can harbor hatred towards their fellow human beings. You see Jesus died for us, when we were enemies of God, and gave us peace with God. So if God is willing to pay such a great price to his enemies, then his children must also act in a similar manner and be willing to forgive and be reconciled to his enemies also. This can only be done by the power of the Holy Spirit living within them.

As long as men walk by their old sinful nature, even if they should call themselves Christian, there will always be hatred, violence and war. Only when the Prince of Peace comes, and puts down all the rebels who refuse to submit to God's rule, will their be true peace in this world. We might hold out some hope for peace. We might think that maybe men will one day learn to live peacefully with one another, but the bible would reveal to us that the nature of man is evil at it's core, due to sin and rebellion against God, and so long as men are unwilling to repent and believe in Christ, the madness and constant cycle of hate and violence will just continue. The only answer for you and I, was what Paul was trying to preach to the Jews, and that is salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. Why not surrender yourself to Him in faith today, and find true eternal peace with God.

"If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?." 1John 4:20

Paul's Deliverance from the Jews

ACTS 23

In our last lesson we learned about Paul's defense before the hostile Jews in Jerusalem, and how they tolerated his speech until he mentioned his mission to the gentiles and then they reacted violently. Today we shall see how Paul is delivered from the Jews after they conspire to kill him.

When Paul addresses the high priests and other Jewish authorities, he said he had always lived with a good conscience before God. This provoked Ananias the high priest to command someone to strike Paul in the face. Paul responded roughly to him, by saying he was a white-washed wall, for he was judging him by the Law, and yet would strike him contrary to the Law. One of the others standing there, ask Paul if he was reveling God's High Priest. Paul quickly humbles himself when he learned that the man was the high priest, explaining that he did not know he was high priest. Paul knew that it was wrong, according to the Jewish Law, to speak evil of the ruler of your people. Paul demonstrates such a great respect for God's law, and wanted to be sure to always keep a good conscience before God. It is rather ironic that while Paul is being so careful to follow God's law, the high priest, who should be most careful to observe God's law, was actually the one not following the law, by mistreating Paul. Such is the blindness and hypocrisy of pride.

Paul perceived that there were both Pharisees and Sadducees among his accusers, and was rather clever to ask them if it was due to his belief in the resurrection that he was being judged, since he and his father were Pharisees. This was not of course the issue at hand, but it was enough to get the Sadducees and Pharisees fired up into a debate with each other. The Pharisees now were defending Paul for Paul had identified and agreed with their teachings. Paul was not still following the traditions of the Pharisees, for he had found something much superior in the gospel of Jesus Christ, but he knew that by bringing this up, he would distract his accusers from focusing on him, and to their own doctrinal differences. It was a clever tactic, and it worked well in protecting him from these blood-thirsty men. The commander saw the commotion and ordered his soldiers to take Paul out from among them, and place him in the barracks. This was a safe place for Paul to stay, for the Jews could not harm him while he was in the Roma prison house. The next day the Lord stood near Paul and assured him by saying, "Be of good cheer, Paul, for as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome."

Forty of the Jews bound themselves to an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. These men asked the chief priests and elders to arrange for a meeting with Paul, so that while he was being escorted from the Roman barracks they could attack and kill him. However the news of this conspiracy was heard by Paul's nephew, and he went and reported it to Paul. Paul had his nephew tell the Roman commander about their plot to murder him, and the commander said the young men should not tell anyone about the Jews secret plan. The commander then arranged 200 soldiers and 70 horsemen to escort Paul on his way to Caesarea by night, and thereby rescuing Paul from his enemies. The commander wrote a letter to Felix the Roman governor at Caesarea about Paul and how the Jews had plotted to kill him over some issues related to the Jewish Law. He wrote that he had rescued Paul from the hand of the Jews, and having learned of their intentions to kill Paul, sent Paul to Felix for a fair hearing and to face his accusers. The 200 soldiers did accompany Paul for part of the journey in the night, and then the 70 horsemen delivered him safely to Felix at Caesarea. When Paul was presented to Felix, and he learned that he was from Cilicia, he had Paul kept at Herod's Praetorium waiting for his accusers to come from Jerusalem and make their case against him.

It is amazing to behold how Paul was so well protected from harm. The Jews first tried to beat him, but the Roman commander rescued him from them, and then when he heard about the Jews secret plot to kill Paul, he sends him with a small army of soldiers to safely make his way to Felix, who held him in a Roman fortress. There was likely no other place in Israel as safe as the Roman Praetorium in Caesarea, for this was entirely under Roman control, and where the Jews would have no access to him or opportunity to kill him. We can see how God protected his servant to ensure that he could complete his mission to preach the gospel, whether to the Jews in Jerusalem or to the highest Roman authority. We see here God's sovereignty to accomplish his purposes in the gospel. No matter how much the Jews may have hated and wanted to kill Paul, he was invincible while doing God's bidding. If we would also learn to submit ourselves to the will of God in our lives, we would also realize that God will protect us and bless us. In the midst of Paul's trials in Jerusalem, and with angry Jews all wanting to kill him, we read that the Lord stood with Paul and encouraged him. This would have been such a comfort to Paul in his trial. It would be so easy to become discouraged and fearful in these circumstances, and the Lord knew that Paul needed an advocate, a friend. I wonder if you have found Jesus to be your advocate, and your friend? Why not trust in Jesus today as your personal Savior, and you will discover that Jesus' love is greater than the hatred of your worst enemies.

"The next night the Lord stood by Paul saying, "Be of good cheer, Paul, for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome." Acts 23:7

Today's Bible Question:

Today we learned about Paul's deliverance from his blood-thirsty enemies as God sovereignly uses the Roman authorities to protect him, and give him opportunity to testify of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Someone might ask the question, "Can I count on God's protection at all times?"

It is really delightful to hear how Paul was faithful to the Lord in Jerusalem, even knowing that his life was in great danger. Paul testified to the truth he had both seen and heard, and went right into the hornets nest not fearing what man might do to him. Because God had determined Paul's mission, and intended Paul to go even farther abroad to testify about the gospel, he protected Paul from all harm. We see in this chapter in Acts, the way God used hundreds of armed men to protect his servant, and placed him in a fortress where no one could harm him. We can praise God for his loving and protecting hand upon Paul. But does this mean that we can count on God protecting us in at all times? Well certainly God has our best interests at heart, and can and will protect us from harm in most cases. However sometimes God uses harm, injury, sickness or persecution to teach us, or to discipline us. So, in that sense, we are not always protected. Also we must be aware that God is not obligated to protect us from the consequence of sin, or our own foolish choices. It is important that we make choices in life that are pleasing to God, and fit with his divine purposes. It is when we walk with God, and not contrary to him, that he will move mountains to ensure that we are kept out of harms way. That is what we need to understand and learn from this story about Paul the apostle. The reason God sovereignly overruled the Jewish plans to kill Paul, was because Paul was faithfully testifying according to the mission God had given him. So just ask yourself, if you are fulfilling the mission that God has given to you in life. Are you doing the will of God in your life? If you are doing the will of God, and He is pleased with you, then he will ensure that your needs are met, and that He fulfills all His purposes through you, until the time he is ready to take you home to heaven. In fact no one can harm you when you do the will of God, except if God allows it for some purpose.

We must remember that it is not always God's will to spare us from harm or injury. This might seem a strange idea to us, but God looks at the larger and eternal consequences. It might be that some Christian has to give his life for the gospel in some country where Christians are hated and persecuted. But God uses there testimony and faithfulness to spread the gospel further, and to provide courage and faith to other believers who are suffering. So though we know God is able to protect us from danger, we should trust Him, even when we are not protected and harm comes upon us, for God may have a purpose for it. I have seen some Christians become sick and die, and we might wonder why God would allow that to happen. However if we see others learning about Christ, and turn to Him in faith, because of the trial and sickness, then we can appreciate that suffering maybe permitted by God for a higher purpose.

We should never take unnecessary risks, or put our life in harms way, and then say "God will protect me". Remember God is not obligated to spare you from the consequences of your own bad choices. If I know that the bus driver will drive too fast and unsafe, then I have a choice as to whether I will get on board or find another way to travel. If I choose to travel with an unsafe driver, then God may not protect me from suffering in an car accident. God expects us to use our common sense, and to make due diligence to protect ourselves from dangers. I often see people take all kinds of risks, especially when driving, and I suppose they might be thinking that God will watch over them, and prevent them from any harm. It is true that God loves us, and will in most cases protect us. But it is also true that those who travel too fast on the highway, and overtake, are more likely to be in an accident and die, and so we need to be sensible and not put God to the test by taking unnecessary risks.

Courageous faith does not equate to stupid faith. When Paul knew his life was in danger from the Jews who were plotting to kill him, he sent his nephew to the commander to inform him. This was because Paul knew that if God was going to protect him, he would likely use this Roman commander to do so, and that is exactly what happened. That is just good common sense, and looking out for one's safety at least where it is possible to influence the circumstances.

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." Psalm 46:1

ESSON 113
Paul's Trial before Felix
ACTS 24

In our last lesson we heard how the Jews were trying to kill Paul, but the Roman commander rescued him and sent him to Caesarea to appear before the Roman governor Felix. Today we continue following the story as Paul meets his accusers and presents his case before Felix.

It only took five days for the high priest and elders to arrange with a hired lawyer to come to Caesarea to bring their case against Paul. It is clear that they were very anxious to get rid of Paul, and stop his preaching. They hired a man named Tertullus, and eloquent lawyer to present their case, perhaps thinking his smooth words will influence Felix's decision about Paul. Tertullus was first to speak and used plenty of flattering words to try to gain the favor of Felix, telling him what an excellent leader he was bringing peace and prosperity to their land. The bible says, "A man who flatters his neighbor spreads a net for his feet" (Proverbs 29:3). In other words what follows flattery are hidden motives to take advantage. Tertullus accuses Paul of creating dissension among Jews from all over the world, and that he was a ringleader for the sect of the Nazarenes. He uses language to conjure up the most negative picture of Paul. Nazareth was considered a despised town, and calling him a ringleader, makes him sound like a rebel against their nation and religion, saying he belonged to sect, sounds like he belonged to deviant religious group. He also accuses Paul of defiling the temple area, and when the Jews tried to seize him and judge him by their Law, the Roman commander Lysias violently intervened rescuing Paul, and commanded that Paul and his accusers should be brought to Felix for judgment. Lastly Tertullus said to Felix that he could confirm all these accusations by examining Paul for himself, meanwhile all the Jews were affirming Tertullus' charges.

Then Paul spoke in his defense, and said he was glad to speak before Felix, knowing that he had been a long time judge in Israel. Paul first pointed out that it was less than 12 days previous when he came to Jerusalem to worship, and when he was found by his accusers he was not disputing or inciting any riot, whether in a synagogue or in the city. He asks the governor if his accusers can prove their charges. Paul does confess that he does worship God according to the Way, which his accusers called a sect. He says he believed all that was written in the Law and Prophets, and had his hope in God, and in the belief of the resurrection from the dead for both the just and unjust. Paul said he had always sought to have a conscience free from offense towards God and men. He tells Felix that after an absence of many years he had returned to his own nation to bring alms and offerings, and when found in the temple area by some Jews from Asia, he had been purified, and was not with a mob or tumult. Paul said that the Jews, who found him in the temple, should be present to make an accusation of wrong doing. He added that perhaps if for this one reason the Jews have found fault, because I cried out, "concerning the resurrection of the dead am I being judged by you this day?"

After hearing both Tertullus and Paul speak Felix deferred the case until he could hear testimony from the commander Lysias. Felix was familiar with the teachings of the Way, and was curious about the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, but also was eager to please the Jews, so it was convenient for him to just stall the case for the time being. Felix along with his wife Drusilla called for a private meeting with Paul to question him about faith in Jesus Christ. Paul reasoned with him about righteousness, self-control and judgment to come, and as he spoke it seems that Felix was coming under conviction, for we are told he became fearful. But rather than submit himself to Jesus Christ as Lord, he chose to send Paul away, and say to him, "when it is convenient, I will call for you". This is unfortunately what many people have done with the gospel message. Just when God is speaking to their heart, the devil comes along and convinces them that now is not convenient. Or perhaps the devil convinces the person that they will have to give up so much to be called a Christian. They may say in their heart, perhaps some other day I will turn my life over to the Lord, but for now it is not convenient. Believe me, if you are waiting for a more convenient day, that day will never come. This is because turning your life over to Jesus will never seem convenient. It is absolutely necessary to have your sins washed away and to gain eternal life, but the devil is very clever at distracting our attention from the gospel, because we fear what we shall lose if we follow Christ. Felix as far as we know never found that convenient day to call upon Paul to hear the gospel message, but God certainly gave Felix his opportunity to respond to Jesus in faith. Have you been putting off a decision to accept Jesus Christ as Savior? Be very careful that you are not rejecting God's love and grace, for your opportunity will soon be gone, and you may find yourself cast into the flames of God's judgment in Hellfire.

Felix often called for Paul, not to hear the gospel, but in hopes that Paul would offer some money to him, so that he could let him go free, but Paul did not bribe the governor. God hates bribery, but men so often use their position and authority for taking bribes, and certainly God will judge all such evil practices. Paul was left in prison for two years, but was given freedom to see his friends whenever he wished. Felix kept Paul in prison as a favor to the Jews, and after two years Procius Festus succeeded Felix as governor.

"Now as he reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and answered, "Go away for now; when I have a convenient time I will call for you." Acts 24:25

Today's Bible Question:

Today we learned about Paul's trial before governor Felix at Caesarea and how Felix was interested to learn about the gospel. When confronted with the gospel Felix was fearful but and thought he could leave his decision to follow Jesus Christ to a more convenient day. Someone might ask the question, "Should a Christian give or take bribes?"

It is always wrong for a Christian to take a bribe. This is when someone is trying to pay you off to get what they want. They will try to step around the proper and normal way of doing business and buy a favor with their bribe. The bible says, "A wicked man accepts a bribe behind the back to pervert the ways of justice" (Proverbs 17:23). If a person offers some gift, and it is a true gift, with no strings attached, then that is not a bribe, but when someone hands you cash with the intention of receive special favors, then it is a bribe, and is wicked in the sight of God.

But what about paying bribes. Clearly if the bible says it is wrong to take a bribe, it would seem to follow that giving bribe money is also wrong. The Christian must avoid having to pay bribes whenever it is possible. There are some situations though where it becomes very difficult to get something done, without paying some additional money (a bribe). For the most part the Christian should just refuse to pay bribes and stand against corruption. Living in a society where much business is done by way of bribes, makes some tasks very difficult to accomplish without paying a bribe, and might even be impossible. A Christian needs to be very careful to consider the implications of paying a bribe. They should ask themselves, is the thing I am going for necessary and important enough to justify paying off someone with a bribe. Some people are very clever at using their authority or position to hold others at ransom, until they get what they want. This happens all the time, and is a very sad plight on society. Let's just imagine that I am going to a certain government office to receive documents that I need. I have completed all the requirements and paid all fees, but the person holding my document is not prepared to release my document until I give them some additional bribe money. If I pay them their gift I get my document and I am on my way, but I have supported corruption and God is not happy about sharing in wickedness. On the other hand if I don't pay the money, my document will be help ransom until I do pay. If the document is required to run my business, or for other legal matters, then I am stuck until I can get the documents. I would not advise anyone to pay bribes, but I would say that in some cases we may have to allow our conscience dictate what is the right action to take. Sometimes a greater good is served if I just pay the money, even though I know I have just been robbed by some corrupt official. If someone comes to my home and holds a gun to me until I give them my money, we all recognize this as a criminal offense. I don't want to give up the money to a thief, but I am forced to do so because he is threatening to kill me if I don't do it. If we look at giving a bribe in a similar way, then we can see that we are just forced at times to give way to criminals in order to operate in a wicked and corrupt society. We should at all times try our best to avoid paying bribes, but some situations will force us to do so. By doing so we are not necessarily agreeing with the wicked conduct of those who take bribes, we are simply submitting to a thief who is holding us ransom till we pay what he wants. Of course we can in many cases just refuse to pay the bribe, and suffer the consequence. It can be very frustrating, especially when there is no alternatives available, and we really need to get what is being held ransom. In some places the police and other authorities can be appealed to when someone is trying to take bribes, because the law of the land is supposed to protect us from corruption. But there are some places where every level of society suffers from corruption, and appealing to government authority will only prove futile. It is a difficult world for Christians to live in, when they want to honor and please the Lord, but corruption is everywhere. If you live where you do not have to encounter bribery, you are fortunate, but for those of us who face this reality daily, we need God's wisdom and help to avoid supporting corruption however possible, and show by our own example that we hate what God hates.

"You shall not pervert justice; you shall not show partiality, nor take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous." Deuteronomy 16:19

Paul's case continues

ACTS 25

In our last lesson Paul had his trial before Felix, and though the Jews hired a smooth talking lawyer, they did not get their case settled, and Paul was left under prison guard for two years. Today we shall see how Paul's case continued under the care of Festus, the governor who replaced Felix.

When Festus became the new Roman governor at Caesarea, the Jews quickly organized themselves to protest against Paul. Even though two years had past and Paul was limited to a prison, they still considered him a threat and wanted him killed. They asked Festus if he would allow Paul to be sent up to Jerusalem for trial. They did this, not because they wanted to provide a fair trial for Paul, but they thought that if they could get him away from the prison and guards they could ambush him on his way to Jerusalem and kill him. It is hard to imagine the hatred and viciousness of these Jews, who thought they were acting in the best interest of their God and nation. Festus refused their request and said that if Paul had done any wickedness, they could come to Caesarea and bring their case against him there. Ten days later Festus returned from Jerusalem to Caesarea and had Paul brought before his judgment seat with many of his Jewish accusers present, who brought many grievous complaints against Paul, but none could be proved.

Paul spoke in his defense, saying he had not offended the law of the Jews, nor the temple, or Caesar. Since Festus wanted to please the Jews, he asked Paul if he would be willing to go to Jerusalem to stand trial before him there. Paul said that he was before Caesar's court, where he should be judged for he had done nothing wrong. Paul also added that he had not done anything worthy of death, and if he was worthy of death, that he was willing to die, but if there was nothing to the charges against him no one could hand him over to the Jews, and so Paul appealed to Caesar, and Festus consented with Paul's appeal to go before Caesar. Caesar of course was the ruler of the entire Roman empire, and so the most powerful ruler in the world at that time. We can see how Paul's case was being used by God to make the gospel known throughout the Roman world, as his case became more and more widely known.

King Agrippa and Bernice visited with Festus in Caesarea and were told about Paul's case, and how the Jews were insisting on a judgment against Paul. They were told that the charges made against Paul were concerns about their Jewish religion, and about a certain man named Jesus whom Paul claimed had come back from the dead. Festus explained to them how he had asked Paul if he was willing to face his accusers in Jerusalem, and how Paul had made his appeal to Caesar, and was now being kept until he could send Paul to Rome. Agrippa asked Festus if he could hear Paul, and so Festus arranged for another hearing the following day, with some of Paul's accusers also present. Agrippa and Bernice arrived with great splendor, showing off their greatness and wealth. They listened to the chief priests and principle men accuse Paul, and then Festus had Paul brought in, and explained to all present that Paul's case was brought to him by the Jews who wanted Paul dead, but he had not found anything worthy of death in Paul, and since he appealed to Caesar to hear his defense, he was now ready to send him to Caesar. He further explained to King Agrippa, that he did not know what to write in a letter to Caesar, so he brought Paul in, so that after examining him he might have something to write, for it was not reasonable to send a prisoner without writing down what charges were against him.

Festus did not seem interested in the gospel message, and did not think much of the Jewish religion, which he called a superstition. He did want to please the Jews, but also honored the Roman law and would not just hand over Paul to his enemies. It seems he was afraid to make a decision about Paul, because he did not want to lose favor either with the Jews, or with Roman authorities. He was glad to pass the case off, but also did not want to just send Paul without some just reason to do so. He therefore asked King Agrippa what he should write to the Emperor of Rome. This shows us that Festus was a weak leader, for he was afraid to execute a judgment that might work against his political career. He was not interested in justice, as much as pleasing others. Unfortunately this is still the case with many who are in a position of authority, and so justice becomes perverted when leaders make judgments that favor their own popularity.

Paul wisely made his appeal to a greater authority. This not only rescued him from the blood-thirsty Jews, but freed Festus from having to make a decision in his case. It would also afford a greater opportunity to share the gospel in Rome. God used Paul's life and testimony to bring the gospel message before kings & governors and over all the Roman Empire, because he not only believed the gospel, but was willing to give his life if necessary for the sake of the gospel. If the gospel is not worth living for, then it is not worth dying for. Is the gospel important to you? Have you considered sharing the gospel with your family, friends, co-workers, and classmates. It might be costly for you to share the gospel, but the salvation of souls is worth any price you are willing to pay.

"For if I be an offender, or have committed any thing worthy of death, I refuse not to die: but if there be none of these things whereof these accuse me, no man may deliver me unto them. I appeal unto Caesar." Acts 25:11

Today's Bible Question:

Today we saw how Festus was confronted with dealing with Paul's case, but was not willing to make a decision, and was therefore happy when Paul requested that his case be brought before the Roman Emperor. Someone might ask the question, "How should a Christian treat civil authorities?"

Paul often had to face the Jewish authorities, as well as various Roman authorities. In each case we will notice that Paul respected the position of authority. Even when the high priest was acting contrary to the Jewish Law, Paul still felt his personal responsibility to respect his position as high priest, as the Law required. Paul definitely found himself disagreeing with authority, but that did not prevent him from respecting and obeying the authorities of the land. We might think that if someone in authority is acting wickedly and not obeying the law, that we do not have to obey them or respect their authority. This is because we find it difficult to distinguish between a man's authority, and the man's character. The authority that is given to govern, rule or police is intended for the good of all and to uphold what is just. Therefore it is important that we always respect and obey civil authorities.

There is nothing wrong with using the civil government and authorities to carry out the law, and seek justice. Paul certainly did not find anything wrong with appealing to the higher Roman court of the Emperor, even though the Romans were not God fearing people, but idolaters. God used the Roman laws to keep order and maintain peace throughout the kingdom. The bible tells us that we should obey and submit to all human government and authority. *"Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good"* (1 Peter 2:13). Rebellion against the civil authorities is rebellion against God, and no Christian should engage in any unlawful resistance to the government. Someone might say that the government has no right to act in a certain way, for instance, increasing taxes, or failing to provide adequate social assistance to the needy. The Christian may feel it is their God given duty to fight against the government, and even overthrow the government. But what we must always remember is that the government, and all human authority, is under God and will answer to His higher authority. A Christian might seek reforms by working cooperatively with the government for better laws and policies which improve society, but should never insist with violence that the government act according to their demands. This would be rebellion, and the government will exercise its authority to suppress all rebellion. Rebellion against authority can lead to anarchy, as we have seen in some countries where the government has been overthrown by the people. The society then degrades into a state of chaos, where there is not authority and no law enforced, so crime increases. Though a government might be corrupt and even act wickedly, a bad government, is better than no government at all.

For Christians, God expects that our influence would be for the benefit of society by our good deeds, and care for the less fortunate. Christians will do themselves no favor when they work contrary to the government, and claim they are following a greater authority than the civil government. This reveals a lack of appreciation for the fact that God has given authority to the governments and rulers, for our benefit. The only instance where it would be reasonable to not obey human authority, is when it comes into direct conflict with the stated will of God in the bible. For instance when Peter and John were commanded by the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem to stop preaching in the name of Jesus, they responded by saying, "you judge whether it be right to obey God rather than men."

It is not usual that a government will make laws and policies that go directly in opposition to the commands of scripture, for most governments recognize the benefit of righteousness, whether they are aware of the bible's teachings or not. In places where Christianity is openly opposed, the Christian will need much discernment to know when and how he can carry out the commands of the Lord, while also trying his best to maintain the laws of the land. If a Christian is a good law-abiding citizen, and is benefitting society through kind and benevolent works, then most countries will be happy to allow him to live peacefully among them. A proper respect for authority goes a long way in making the gospel acceptable, even in countries where Christianity is opposed.

"Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God." Romans 13:1

Paul's defense before King Agrippa

ACTS 26

In our last lesson Festus had Paul brought before King Agrippa to hear about his case and determine what he should write about Paul when sending him to meet Caesar in Rome. Today we shall hear Paul's defense before King Agrippa, whom he almost persuaded to become a Christian.

When King Agrippa gave permission for Paul to speak for himself, Paul said he was happy to have the opportunity to answer the charges made against him by the Jews, because he recognized Agrippa as someone familiar with Jewish customs and laws. Paul describes himself as a faithful Jew from his youth, having observed the law as a strict Pharisee. He said that he was judged due to the promise and hope given to their Jewish fathers. Paul asked "Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?" Paul further explains how he once fought against those who followed Jesus of Nazareth, putting some in prison, consenting to their death, and even seeking, with letters, to bring them from other cities. While traveling to Damascus Paul relates how he had seen a vision of a light from heaven brighter than the sun, and had heard a voice asking why Paul was persecuting him, and Paul's response to the voice was "who are you Lord?" and the voice replied to him "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but rise and stand on your feet; for I appeared to you for this purpose, to make you a minister and witness of the things which you have seen and which I will reveal to you." It is interesting for us to notice in Paul's speech to Agrippa he mentions that Jesus would provide him more revelations, and this we find in the New Testament writings. Revelations such as the mystery of the church, the rapture, and the glorified body were given to Paul directly by the Lord during the course of his ministry, and have been recorded in the bible for us. Paul continued before Agrippa telling him that the Lord promised to deliver him from the Jews and from the Gentiles, in order to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, from Satan to God, so they could receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance with those whose faith set them apart for God. Paul concludes his defense by telling King Agrippa, that he was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, and had proclaimed from Damascus, Jerusalem, Judea and to the gentiles that all should repent and turn to God. He said this was why the Jews had seized him and try to kill him. Paul said, by God's help he had witnessed to both small and great, saying only what the prophets and Moses said would come, that Christ would suffer and rise from the dead, and proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the gentiles.

As Paul was speaking Festus charged Paul in a loud voice saying, "Paul you are beside yourself, much learning is driving you mad!", but Paul said, "I am not mad most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason." Most people will not take their religious beliefs so far as Paul did, risking their lives to convert others, and expending all their time and energy to propagate their beliefs. So it must have seen to Festus that Paul had simply gone off the deep end, and was no longer mentally balanced. To live faithfully for the Lord Jesus Christ, should cause others to take notice and say similarly that they think we have gone a bit mad. The path of the Christian makes no sense to the fleshly mind, for it forsakes all ambition in this world, to secure treasure in heaven. Most people think their treasure is in this world, but the gospel reveals a far greater treasure, and Paul was willing to forsake all to gain that heavenly treasure.

Paul asked King Agrippa if he believed the prophets, realizing that the Christian message was not hidden from him, but was widely known. Paul is convinced that Agrippa believes the prophets. King Agrippa said to Paul, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian." To this Paul replies, I would to God that not only you, but all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains." We see here again how Paul's testimony is having a great impact on others, and how even kings were made to consider the gospel message. King Agrippa said he was almost persuaded. These sound like hopeful words, but they also are rather tragic. There are many who are almost persuaded to follow Christ, but something holds them back. Perhaps a lack of faith, a fear of losing their status in life, or a fear of rejection from family or friends. Whatever the devil uses to snatch away the seed, many have lost their opportunity because they were only almost persuaded. If you are not fully persuaded then you will pass by God's salvation and will be lost forever in God's flames of wrath and judgment. I would plead with you, as Paul pleaded with Agrippa and others, to become altogether persuaded to become a Christian. Why not place your trust in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior today?

After hearing Paul's defense, king Agrippa spoke privately to Festus, saying that Paul had done nothing deserving of death, and had he not appealed to Caesar he could have be set free. Though King Agrippa recognized the injustice of Paul's imprisonment and trial, God was using these circumstances to bring the gospel message before kings, governors, and the Emperor. While they thought Paul was on trial, it was God who was putting them on trial, to see if they would submit to Christ's authority through the gospel.

Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian." Acts 26:28

Today's Bible Question:

Today we heard Paul's speech before Festus and King Agrippa. While Festus thought Paul was going mad from all his learning, Agrippa was very close to becoming a Christian. Someone might ask the question, "Why do people respond differently to the gospel message?"

Today we observed two men who listened to Paul give his testimony of how he had become a Christian, and went about telling everyone the gospel message, even though he was persecuted by the Jews. Festus heard Paul and concluded Paul was a madman. Perhaps he was shocked by the idea of someone raising from the dead, and just could not believe something so incredible. On the other hand we have King Agrippa, who believed in the prophets, and therefore had more knowledge about the coming Messiah and what to expect when he would come. He was nearly persuaded to become a Christian. He knew that Paul's testimony was consistent with the Old Testament scriptures, and therefore might be lead to believe that Paul had actually met with the risen Messiah in the person of Jesus. When we compare these two men and their backgrounds we can see why they responded differently to the message they heard from Paul. Undoubtedly, from the context of what we read, King Agrippa was someone who had his hope in the coming Messiah, and therefore was looking for the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. Paul's message was rather convincing, if he recalled the passages in the Old Testament that supported the doctrine of resurrection from the dead. Festus was a Roman official, and the Jewish religion was to him a superstition, and the idea of resurrection for the dead was a delusion of madmen. So even while Paul spoke, these two men were responding quite differently to the message, because of their prior beliefs and backgrounds.

When sharing the gospel it is always good to think about the background and beliefs of those we are trying to reach. A Christian sharing the gospel with a Jew, as Paul was with Agrippa, should lean upon the Old Testament promises of the Messiah, and how he was destined to suffer, and be raised. The Jew will certainly acknowledge the Old Testament as God's word, though he may find it difficult to accept the Christian interpretation. If a Christian is trying to share the gospel with an atheist or agnostic, he will have to choose a different approach and first seek to demonstrate that the bible is God's revelation, and God's existence is deduced by the orderliness and complexity of creation. Knowing where a person is coming from will help the Christian to decide on the best approach to preaching the gospel. A personal testimony of how God brought us into his salvation is always an excellent approach for sharing the gospel. A personal testimony shows others that the gospel is not just a theory, but a personal reality in our experience. This helps others to see how the gospel impacts a life and changes the sinner into a saint.

While Paul presented a clear gospel to both Festus and to Agrippa, and Agrippa seemed more disposed to believe the message, in the end both rejected the message and were lost. So while many respond differently to the gospel due to their knowledge and prior beliefs, what really matters is whether a person will respond to Jesus in faith and surrender to him as Lord. Many like Agrippa might be closer to faith in Jesus, but close is not salvation. Salvation only takes place where a person hears the gospel, and responds to Jesus in faith, and surrenders themselves to him as Lord of their life.

I have preached the gospel to many people, and have seen that there are varying responses to the message. Many would think of themselves as a believer and on their way to heaven, or at least hope that they will get to heaven. These are usually people that do not have a clear understanding of the gospel, and though religious, are as lost as any wicked sinner. Sometimes we meet people who are arrogant and indifferent to the gospel. They think they have worked out their own beliefs and they do not want someone else telling them what they should believe, so they resist hearing or responding to the gospel. Some are just violently opposed to the gospel because they already have very well defined religious convictions. But on some rare occasions it is possible to meet those whose heart is open and ready to respond to the wonderful gospel message, and turn to Jesus Christ in faith. Perhaps that is you! It is clear from the scriptures and from experience that most people will not respond to the gospel, by placing their faith in Jesus as Savior for there are many things that keep us away from God's salvation, namely the world, the devil, and our own sinful desires. I hope you can overcome these obstacles and receive Jesus by faith.

"And the Gentiles hearing this, rejoiced, and glorified the word of the Lord: and as many as were disposed for eternal life, believed." Acts 13:48

LESSON 116
Shipwrecked but Saved
ACTS 27

In our last lesson Paul defends himself before King Agrippa and Festus, and Agrippa saw no reason for Paul to be imprisoned or put to death, and was almost persuaded to become a Christian. In today's lesson we shall follow Paul's journey by ship towards Rome, and how they nearly lost their lives in a shipwreck.

Paul is sent on a ship under the guard of a centurion, by the name of Julius. The ship traveled from Caesarea northward, around Cyprus and along the coast of Turkey landing at Myra, where Julius found another ship to transport Paul to Italy. Julius was kind to Paul and allowed him to visit with his friends. As they sailed west the wind was against them and they struggled to get into the harbor at Cnidus. Then they sailed slowly south towards Crete and found shelter as they passed the East side of the Island of Crete. Then they struggled to sail along the southern shore of Crete to a place called Fair Havens. Since the sailing was going slow, and the stormy season was now upon them, Paul was advising Julius that it would be advisable to find a safe place to harbor for the rest of the winter season. Paul said he believed that disaster would fall upon them if they tried to proceed with their journey and they would suffer much loss to the cargo, ship and even their lives. However Julius was not convinced by Paul's warning, and listened to the ships crew and owner instead. The captain and crew wanted to travel further along the Southern coastline of Crete to a harbor called Phoenix, which they thought was a safe place to moor the ship for the winter. As they proceeded they had a gentle south wind, which they thought would bring them safely on their way, but a short time later a great wind from the northeast hit them head on, and they could not sail against it, and were forced to allow the wind to drive them southward into the raging sea. They found some shelter near the island of Clauda, where they managed to secure their life boat, and use ropes to surround the ship's hull to reinforce it's strength. As the storm carried them southward they became helpless to the fierce elements and took down the sails and let the wind and waves drive them along. They feared to run into some sandy bays along the shores of North Africa, that would trap the ship, and so they began to toss overboard any tackle to reduce their weight. The storm continued to toss the ship about in the waves, and for 14 days those on board the ship did not see the sun or stars, and at last gave up all hope of being saved. Then Paul stood up among them and encouraged them, saying they should have listened to him when he warned them, but now God had spoken to him through an angel and said that Paul must appear before Caesar in Rome, and therefore he would spare his life and all those aboard the ship, although the ship would be lost.

It was at midnight when some of the sailors sensed they were nearing land and took soundings to measure the depth and found that they were in about 120 feet of water, and then when they measured again they found the depth was now 90 feet. Though they could not see the land in the darkness, they knew the land was very close to them, so they cut off four of the ships anchors, and hoped daylight would come very soon. Some crew were trying to escape on the life boat, but Paul warned the centurion and soldiers, that unless these men stay on the ship they would not be saved. So they prevented the men from escaping by cutting the ropes for the life boat and letting it go. Just as dawn was approaching Paul encouraged everyone to take some food to help them survive this ordeal, since many had not eaten during the past 14 days. Paul took bread, broke it and gave thanks in their presence, and ate. This encouraged everyone, and they also ate some food. The ship had 276 passengers, so it was a large cargo ship. After the ate their food they again lightened the ship by throwing overboard the wheat they still had on board. As the day dawned they saw the land but did not recognize where they were. They saw a bay with a beach, and hoped they could direct the ship to run aground on the beach. They cut off the remaining anchors, and raised the sail to the wind so the ship could drive towards the shore, but the ship hit a reef and got stuck. The waves were now beating on the ship and breaking it into pieces. The soldiers wanted to kill the prisoners unless they escaped, but the centurion wanted to save Paul and ordered that the prisoners should not be harmed. Julius gave the order that those who could swim should jump overboard and swim to shore, and others should grab onto any floating boards or pieces of the ship and make their way to the shore. Remarkably all 276 passengers managed to get safely onto the shore.

This remarkable story reminds of God's sovereign power to protect his children from harm. All the lives on the ship were spared because Paul had a mission to fulfill. This would teach us to respect and cooperate with the Lord's servants if we want God's blessing to follow us and protect us. We can also learn that even in the valley of the shadow of death the Lord is with those who trust in Him. Certainly everyone on board that ship must have had great respect for the God whom Paul worshipped, when they realized that Paul's words of salvation were fulfilled just as he had said. Perhaps many of them became believers, trusting in Jesus as their savior. God can also rescue you, and spare you from being lost forever, if you will turn to the Lord Jesus and ask Him to save your soul today.

"Therefore take heart, men, for I believe God that it will be just as it was told me." Acts 27:25

Today's Bible Question:

Today we learned about Paul's journey towards Rome by ship, and how he, and all the passengers with him, were spared after facing a fierce storm at sea. Someone might ask the question, "Why does God allow storms in our lives?"

Since we know that God wanted Paul to appear in Rome before Caesar, we might wonder why God did not just allow the ship he was on to make a safe voyage without having to face a storm at sea. Certainly God could have changed the weather for a few days to ensure a safe journey for Paul. So why did God allow this storm to toss them around the sea for two weeks, until everyone had lost all hope of survival? This question may not be so easy to answer, but clearly God is in control, and allows storms to come into our lives for some particular reason. We may not always understand the reason, but it is a good exercise of soul to ask why we have to face hardships, sorrow, and losses. We might consider that God is trying to get our attention, or perhaps trying to humble us and make us more dependent upon Him. If we look at Paul's storm, we could imagine that God was demonstrating to Paul, that even in the face of the most difficult trial, that God is with him to help and protect him. This certainly would have encouraged and strengthened Paul to face the Emperor of Rome and preach the gospel to him faithfully. We might also consider the impact upon the others on board the ship with Paul, and what this did for them. They came to realize that it was the God, whom Paul served, that had assured them of their survival, and this may have directed them to also place their trust in God, and believe in Jesus as their Savior. Then we might also see that God had a plan to take Paul to Malta where these people would also learn about the gospel, and have opportunity to turn to Jesus in faith. We cannot be conclusive, for the bible does not comment on why God allowed these circumstances. It might be that the normal course of events is that storms happen each year on the Mediterranean sea, and those operating the ship were simply unfortunate to get caught in the storm, for time and chance happen to all of us (Ecc 9:11).

While we cannot determine with certainty why God allows storms in our lives, we can take time to ask ourselves a few questions. We could ask, is God trying to teach me something through these circumstances? We might ask, is God using this to help others learn about Him and His salvation? We could also ask is God unhappy with something in my life, and therefore bringing judgment upon me? These questions will help us to respond in a positive way to the trial, so we do not become disheartened or discouraged. We should always remember that God may allow certain things to come into our lives that are very painful and sorrowful, and not provide any explanation. Through the trial though our faith will be tested and it ought to have the effect of strengthening our relationship to God, and not driving us away from Him. If you can think of the most difficult times in your life, you will probably admit that those were times when you felt most dependent upon God for help, and you drew close to Him through prayer. Perhaps God wants to deepen our trust and intimacy with Himself, and therefore allows us to experience storms that drive us into His loving arms for comfort and help.

When we look through the bible, we shall see that those who were closest to God, were those who often suffered great pain and loss in their lives. Think of Abraham when he was called upon to offer his son Isaac to God. Think of Moses when he had to flee Egypt. Think of Joseph who was cast into a pit by his brothers, and think of David who was hunted through the wilderness by King Saul. We could think of other examples also, but notice how the trials these men faced made them greater men of God, trusting in God and walking in humble dependence upon Him. This teaches us that trials and storms are God's tools to shape us into the man or woman of God he intends us to be.

It certainly is not pleasant to go through storms. Perhaps you have gone through some bad storms, or currently you are in the midst of some storm in your life. Maybe you are struggling to find work, or a place to live, or advance in your education, but obstacles are preventing you from moving forward. Perhaps you have been sick, or you know someone who is sick, or someone who died. Whatever storm you are going through, be sure to trust the Lord for his help, and know that no matter what may happen to you or your loved ones, God knows about it. He cares about you, and wants what is best for you. Don't allow your circumstances to convince you that God does not care, or will not answer your prayers. Remember God permits storms for our good, even when we do not understand why they have come upon us.

"And there will be a tabernacle for shade in the daytime from the heat, for a place of refuge, and for a shelter from storm and rain." Isaiah 4:6

LESSON 117
Paul Finishes His Course
ACTS 28

In our last lesson Paul was taken onboard a ship that was going toward Rome, but when the ship got caught in a terrible storm at sea for many days, they were shipwrecked on an island. Through God's promise to Paul all lives on board the ship were saved. Today we shall follow Paul's course from the island of Malta to Rome, where he remained a prisoner, but was given freedom to preach the gospel.

Last time we learned about how the ship that Paul was traveling on was driven onto a reef near an island. As the ship was breaking apart all the passengers swam to shore or floated on pieces of the ship until all reached the shore safely. They had come through a fierce storm and everyone on board thought they were going to die, but Paul assured them that God had spoken to him, and they would all be saved. Just as Paul had said, they all made it safely onto the island of Malta. When the people of Malta found the passengers on the beach they showed them much kindness, welcoming them, and building a fire to warm them because of the rain and cold weather. Paul gathered some sticks to put on the fire, but a poisonous snake came out from the bundle of sticks and bit Paul's hand. Paul shook off the snake into the fire and was not harmed by the snake. When the local Maltese people saw the snake on Paul's hand, they thought he must have been a murderer, for although escaping the sea, yet justice was not going to allow him to live. This showed that these people were superstitious, believing that bad things happen to bad people. However when they saw that Paul was not harmed they changed their mind and thought he was a god.

Publius was a chief of Malta, and kindly welcomed Paul and others into his home, taking care of them for three days. Publius' father was very ill, but Paul prayed for him and healed him. When the Maltese people saw how Paul could heal, they brought all their sick folk to him and he healed them. The people treated Paul and the others very well and gave them plenty of provisions when they departed from their island, after staying there for three months. Although we are not told that Paul preached to these people, it is clear that his presence left a lasting impression on these people. We can be rather certain that Paul used preach the gospel to these people, since Malta has been a strong center for Christianity ever since that visit by Paul so long ago. The Jews in Jerusalem despised Paul, wanted him dead, rejecting the gospel message that he preached, and soon Jerusalem was destroyed and the nation scattered over the face of the earth. But in Malta Paul was well treated, and undoubtedly many were converted, so that even up to this day there remains a strong Christian witness on this small Island in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. This teaches us to be very careful how we treat God's messenger and the gospel message.

After their stay in Malta, when the stormy season had passed, Julius took Paul on an Alexandrian ship headed towards Italy. This time it was clear sailing, and after passing by Sicily they made their way through the narrow channel between Sicily and Italy and northward until they reached Puteoli. Paul met some Christians in this coastal city and stayed with them for seven days before traveling to Rome. Some of the brothers from Rome had heard about Paul coming and went to meet him as he was entering Rome, and Paul was encouraged and thanked God. Paul was still a prisoner but was permitted to dwell on his own, but always had a Roman soldier to guard him. After some days Paul called leading Jews to meet with him. He explained that he had done nothing against Jewish customs, and yet was delivered as a prisoner to Rome. Paul said it was due to the hope of Israel that he was bound in chains. The Jews listened to Paul, but admitted they had not heard anything about his case, and they wanted to hear more about his teachings, for they had heard people speak against Christian teachings. They appointed a day to listen to Paul, and many came to hear what he would say. Paul spoke to them from morning until evening persuading them from the Old Testament scriptures about Jesus, and the kingdom of God. Some were persuaded, and others did not believe. When Paul could see their contention and disbelief he quoted from Isaiah, "Hearing you will not hear, and not understand; seeing you will see and not perceive." Paul applied this scripture to the Jews who were hearing the message of salvation, but still refused to commit themselves in faith to Jesus as Lord and Savior. Today it the same when people hear the gospel. Many will listen with interest, but they are not prepared to submit to Jesus as Lord of their lives. They still want to be in charge, and so they don't allow Jesus to take over as ruler of their lives. I hope, all of you who are listening, will be wise and surrender yourself to Jesus in faith, for without a relationship to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior you will be judged and cast out into the eternal flames of God's wrath. Paul spent two years in his own house preaching freely to all who came to him, and thus he finished his course, and the ministry which the Lord had given to him. The Christian life is to be lived in faith, and that means being faithful to the end of our journey on earth. Paul sets a good example for us by finishing his course well, being faithful to Jesus Christ and the gospel. Now that we have concluded our study of the book of Acts, I hope the Holy Spirit has taught you, and now lives within you, through your faith in Jesus Christ.

"So when they had appointed him a day, many came to him at his lodging, to whom he explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets, from morning till evening." Acts 28:23

Today's Bible Question:

Today we learned how Paul, and the other passengers from the shipwreck, were well received and kindly treated by the people of Malta. We also followed Paul on his voyage to Rome where he preached to the Jews, and though some believed the gospel message, others did not. Someone might ask the question, "Why is there no ending to the book of Acts?"

The book of Acts finishes simply by telling us that Paul was in his own rented house in Rome for two years and preached the gospel without fear or hindrance. While reading the book of Acts we can get excited, and wrapped up in all the fascinating stories, and look forward to what God is going to do next to spread the gospel across the Roman world of the 1st Century. As we follow the apostles, and then Paul, on their journey's we have seen the hand of God use these simple men to spread the Christian faith across three continents, and bring many souls into the kingdom of God. But then suddenly the story seems to end in mid sentence. We are left to wonder, "well, what happened, next?", "Was Paul finally judged and executed?", "Did Paul travel any further, or did the other apostles travel further?" We are not told more about the story, but left hanging. The reason for this might simply be practical, since Luke, who wrote the book, had finished his work, and wanted to send the writing to Theophilus to whom he was writing. It does seem as though the Spirit of God has purposely left the story hanging in the air, reminding us that the work of the Holy Spirit, which began in the book of Acts, is still going on today. At one point the writing was finished, though the gospel work would continue to grow and expand even to this present day.

If we look at the unfinished ending of Acts as a message in itself, then we might imagine that God is trying to say to us, "Keep the work going, and take the gospel to the ends of the earth". Our mission is not yet complete, there are still cities to visit, and people who need to hear about God's love and salvation through Jesus Christ. What are you doing to finish the book of Acts? Are you allowing the Holy Spirit to direct you and use you to win more souls for the kingdom of God?

Tradition would tell us that Paul eventually was executed in Rome, but the bible does not record that for us. If God had recorded Paul's death, then we might think the story had ended, but it certainly did not end even though Paul was taken home to heaven. Others like Timothy were to carry on with the gospel work. While Paul was finishing his own course in ministry, and completing all that God have given him to do, that did not mean that God's work would stop. We must remember that we only have a short time to live in this world, and soon we shall have to depart. Soon we will finish our own course, and if we know Jesus as our Savior, then we shall be taken to heaven. Since we shall depart this world soon, we should do our best to contribute to the on-going work of the gospel in our generation.

We should recognize that the book of Acts records for us many wonderful works of the Holy Spirit as the church spread the gospel far and wide. This does not mean that all the details of that time are given to us. We heard about Peter and John early in the book, but later the focus is almost entirely on how Paul took the gospel to the gentiles. We might wonder what Peter and the other apostles were doing during this time, and most certainly they were also busy spreading the gospel message and teaching the church. These other works are not mentioned in Acts, because it was enough to tell us how the gospel spread to the gentiles through the efforts of Paul. God has provided only certain details, and that is because God is not simply informing us about the early history of the church, but selecting details that will challenge and inspire us to do our part in completing the great commission. There is a whole world out there who need to hear the gospel. Many of the gentiles nations have not yet heard about God's salvation through Jesus Christ, and so let us learn from the book of Acts that we also have a part to play in taking the gospel to the nations.

If you are a Christian, are you willing to go wherever the Lord would send you, so that the gospel can reach more people? As we finish our study today of this historic book of the bible, let me challenge all of you to do your part in completing the work of the Holy Spirit in the world today, by taking the gospel to any people who still need to hear how Jesus came to save their souls.

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." 2Timothy 4:7