

ACTS



Day 154

“What Next”

June 3 - Acts 1: 1-22

Can you imagine how excited the early followers of Jesus must have been when they saw Him alive after his death!? Luke records that He appeared to them over a forty-day period, which proved that He was, indeed, alive. Likewise, I can remember when Jesus came into my life and my friends' lives, how excited we were that Jesus was alive and making Himself known to us. We couldn't help but spread the news about what God was doing in our lives. To some degree we shared the same experience as those early disciples. It was the same Holy Spirit, which Jesus said would be given to the church, Who has worked in the church ever since.

Good news is worth sharing. If some scientist found the cure for cancer, that news would be on every news wire worldwide. When a person discovers the love of God in Christ, he cannot help but spread the word. The book of Acts is all about that enthusiasm. The early church was born out of a group of 120 disciples. From them, the message of the gospel has spread worldwide and continues to our day to have an impact on its hearers.

Can you imagine how empowered the first disciples must have felt as they walked with Jesus and witnessed the variety of miraculous events that He created? I'm sure they had an "I'm with Him" attitude. At one point Jesus sends out 70 followers to go and spread the news in nearby cities, and to heal the sick and cast out demons. When this group returns they are sky-high. They begin to recount how wonderful it was to have the same power that Jesus had been operating in all along. The funny thing is that Jesus

downplayed their success and told them that rather than focus on the miracles, they ought to rejoice that their names were written in the Book of Life. Why this focus? Because that was Jesus' primary mission—He came to bring salvation from sin and death and the devil, and He wanted His followers to have a firm foundation in that salvation before they got too caught up in the miracles.

Acts is all about spreading that message of salvation. It chronicles the impact of the message on people's lives, and how they in turn took it to others. It recounts for us the spread of the Word to the Gentiles. Up to that point, only Jews had embraced the message. It was during a Jewish feast, the Day of Pentecost, that the Spirit filled 120 believers with a power that radiated throughout the streets of Jerusalem. They were so excited and spoke in such an unusual way that some of the spectators thought they had been drinking in the morning.

Luke, the writer of Acts, makes it clear that the power in the early church was a direct result of the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had promised that they would be able to do greater works than even He accomplished. This was beginning to take place by means of the all-encompassing ministry of the Spirit.

Acts, though not a book of teaching per se, is a very motivational book. I don't know if you are motivated by family history. Maybe there is some famous person or some event in the life of your family that really makes you stand up and take notice, and also propels you into action. Acts is kind of like that. It gives us the "What's next?" after the gospels' informa-

tion. It is the beginning of the fulfillment of the Great Commission Jesus gave, ordering His followers to take the message to the ends of the earth, so that all may know that God sent His Son.

Does history repeat itself? You bet. Over the centuries since these events the Spirit has been actively motivating and empowering men and women to take a stand for the gospel. You will read about the most unlikely heroes, like the Apostle Paul, who was an adamant hater of Christianity before he met Jesus while on a trip to persecute them. You will also see ordinary human beings, like you and me, whom God used because they submitted to Him and He filled them with the Holy Spirit.

I hope you enjoy the book of Acts, and I trust that you will be charged with new spiritual enthusiasm to take the message to the highways and byways around us and beyond.

May God give you power today, an energy for spiritual truth and practice that you have not felt or exercised for quite some time. He will use us if we only submit to Him. Like the early church, let us be in prayer and anticipation for the filling of the Spirit so that we too might boldly proclaim Christ in our generation.

God's blessings are demonstrated in Acts,
Pastor Steve



“Power”

June 4 - Acts 1:23 - 2:21

Grace To You,
People will sometimes say that they sure wished they had supernatural powers like Jesus. If they had power like that then life would be so much easier. But is that really the way it was for Jesus? Hardly. Hebrews says that Jesus learned obedience through the things He suffered. He was God, but chose to lay aside, temporarily, the attributes of deity in order to fully identify with us earthlings.

Jesus had to pray and study Scripture and share the good news and love his disciples just like we do. He experienced all of the inconveniences of life just like we do. He was not isolated from the world while He was here—just the opposite—He had a reputation for being right in the fray.

Jesus had supernatural power because His life was in tune with the will of the Father. God gives power when our wills are aligned with His. Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than

these will he do, because I am going to the Father,” (John 14: 12).

God gives us power to do his will. The problem usually is that people want power to accomplish their own selfish interests. Let's face it, too often we are just looking out for number one. Jesus isn't always number one and so our interests are divided.

On the Day of Pentecost God gave the gift of Himself in the person of the Holy Spirit. He gave personal power to members of the church. This was not power to glorify themselves, but to glorify God and to do things for God that they would not be able to do on their own. Essentially, the power was given so that they could become instruments to help change the lives of others through the gospel. For example, Peter, once cowardly and ashamed, was now out in the open square proclaiming that Jesus had risen from the dead and that his listeners had to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ in order to be saved. That was quite a change from just a few short months before when

he had denied the Lord.

I love the conclusion of the prayer of the church in Acts 4: “... and now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant your servants to speak your word with all boldness...” (verse 29).

Have you received the Holy Spirit since you believed? If you invited Jesus into your life to forgive your sins and lead you, then the Spirit was given. But maybe you have not realized what He is doing in you.

Open your heart to God and ask him to continuously fill you with His Spirit. The result will be the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22), and the power of the Spirit as you talk to others about your faith in God.

Rejoice in Jesus Always.
God's blessings are powerful,
Pastor Steve



“Save Yourself”

June 5 - Acts 2: 22-47

If there is one clear message from the apostles in the book of Acts, it is that salvation is in Jesus Christ, Who died and rose again. The message is simple but profound; straightforward, yet not understood by those who refuse to come to Jesus.

In our modern era there are so many roads advocated by so many people, it's no wonder that many people are confused about what the truth might be. So many today do not even think there is a “truth,” but merely think that whatever a person feels is true, is true. They think we create our own truth, and that there is no disputing it even if it cannot be corroborated.

The apostles stood up and told a whole generation that they needed to turn from whatever their former way of life was, then believe in and follow the risen Jesus. They made it clear that Christ's death was no accident but the predetermined plan of God for our salvation. And they followed that thought by saying that Jesus was alive. As a matter of fact, they didn't take any personal credit for the miracles happening in their midst, but said that Jesus was the source.

Peter replied to the spiritually hungry crowd: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the

name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit,” (2:38). It was through Jesus that a person could be relieved from the burden of sin and guilt. Once Jesus came into an individual's life, they began living a new spiritual life, led by the Spirit and free from the weight of the penalty of sin. So Peter went on and said, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” In other words, come to Jesus and you will experience liberation from the bondage of a corrupt society. Just imagine how lighthearted Peter must have been proclaiming this message of hope when just a few months before he was watching his Lord and his Friend being tortured.

The generation of the 2010s is no different than the one Peter talked to in the first century. They needed to be rescued from their generation and so do the lost people of our own generation. Maybe there are more distractions today than there used to be; I don't know. But the message is the same: Jesus can give you new spiritual life, a life of love and freedom that the world knows nothing about.

The world has a tendency to eat us alive. If a person doesn't feel like he is on top, then he is on the treadmill of trying-to-please, attempting to get there. I recently had someone ask me what I scored.

He was referring to my golf scores. Well, the truth is that I rarely get out on the course any more, even though at one time I practically lived out there. I sort of hemmed and hawed and gave him a pretty inflated score. He looked at me with a somewhat condescending manner and I could tell he was pleased that he was above me. I didn't tell him that I get out only about two or three times a year. Maybe that would have lessened his glee. Regardless, this is a microcosm of the way the world looks at us. It wants to find a way to spit us out, to make us feel like a nobody, or in Beatle terminology, a "Mr. No Where Man."

Has the world been pulling you away from Jesus recently?

Do you feel the weight of sin, which once was

lifted, putting pressure on your life?

Are you sometimes confused because of all of the conflicting voices out there "competing" to be the supreme truth?

Then come back to the simple message of the gospel, the same one the disciples preached so many years ago. Come to Jesus Himself. Open up your heart today to the crucified One, who gave His life on the cross for you. Welcome Him into all of the areas of your life and pray to Him with open arms.

Keep seeking, keep asking, keep knocking and then...

God's blessings are in the simple gospel,
Pastor Steve



"Not A Dime"

June 6 - Acts 3: 1-26

Good Day—Good God, it seems like we spend a good portion of our lives accumulating things. We earn and we save and we buy things that make us happy. The fatter our wallets, the bigger the grins on our faces. At the same time, the sorer our rear end is from sitting on it. Doesn't it also seem like the more we have, the more complicated things become? We have so many different varieties of things. There are varieties of credit cards. There are varieties of makes and models of things like house products or car parts or food products. If you want to buy some piece of exercise equipment, your choices seem never-ending.

One of the most fulfilling times in my marriage was when Mindy and I were living on almost nothing. I remember that we would have meetings and talk about budget matters, and we'd have to get creative as to how we were going to make ends meet. Those were simpler times for us. We felt an anticipation that

God might be involved in meeting our needs. Boy, did He, and on a regular basis. Our needs have been supplied on a consistent basis over the years. There is a greater awareness of the need for God's provision when our own resources are scanty. All men are dependent on God, but the rich live with rose-colored glasses, and they believe too often that they will always have whatever they need to make things work. That is an illusion.

Spiritual purpose and spiritual focus put ambition in perspective. Have you ever been so excited about something meaningful that you lost all track of the mundane things of life? Maybe you were smitten with someone in high school. Just being able to work with her in science lab made your whole day. You didn't care whether the project was done just right, as long as you were able to sit next to "her" while you were doing the lab. Your love for her, whether real or imagined, drove you to a singular purpose. Your mind and

your heart and your body—your whole being, including your will, were singularly moving in one direction.

If you compare that kind of drive with a time in your life when nothing made sense, then you will realize how powerful it is for a person to find an overarching purpose in life that drives the whole. What if you could latch on to one motivator that would begin to fuel every area of your life? What if there was one source, one inspiration, one guide, one truth that could energize all of the others? Wouldn't life then become unified and whole? Wouldn't it be easier to see why things are as they are? Sure it would. You would be a man or woman with a direction and a reason to live.

Well, that's exactly what a follower of Jesus feels the moment the Lord comes into his life. He goes from spiritual blindness to spiritual light. Like Rip Van Winkle, he wakes up from the longest sleep, rubs his eyes and begins to marvel at the wonders around him. He cannot believe that he has waited all of these years to finally come to life; he is greatly motivated out of appreciation for all that God has done for him.

In Peter's case there is a transformation beyond reason. He went from a denying, cowardly, retreat-minded man, to a man who was boldly telling people about the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus, the man who had been horribly beaten and mocked and whipped and crucified and buried and guarded by a Roman guard, was now alive according to Peter. And on top of that, Jesus was in some odd way in Peter, making Himself known to anyone within earshot of the Apostle.

Jesus turns men. He turns them from a life of futility and vain pursuits to a life of meaning and purpose.

Peter didn't have silver or gold that day he came to the temple, but he did have Jesus. At that moment his faith was all he needed. Peter felt like a million bucks. What would you give to feel like a million

bucks? Is your wallet full but your faith bankrupt? Is your credit line open but your heart closed to God's purposes for your life? Peter went from spiritual bankruptcy to heights of joy after Jesus' resurrection. He now had something much more lasting than money to give and he was willing to stick his neck out to give it.

The lame man, having received the gift of healing in Jesus' name, got up and began a jubilant dance. He could walk! He was free from the restraint of having to be carried everywhere. He was no longer a burden. Jesus had healed him through Peter.

There is something magical about giving to others when you have very little of what the world has to offer. You do not have to have an abundance to give the gift of faith. Simply look for ways to bring the love of Jesus into the lives of others. Recently I was talking with a couple who was in a desperate situation. Neither they nor I had the resources to meet their need. We talked and talked and talked about ways to solve the dilemma. But when all was said and done, it was still apparent that what we had would fall short. Then I related to them a few of the lessons that we have recently learned in the gospel about Jesus' provision in our lives. You know what? I saw a hint of hope. Just a hint, but enough for them to believe that Jesus could do the impossible.

Don't let your own limited resources stop you from reaching out to others in Jesus' name. Jesus will use you to bring healing and hope into their lives. What you have, give away. Take a chance and let it go; be amazed at the grace of God when He uses you right where you are.

God works through those without silver and gold. What counts is a genuine excitement about the resurrection. Because Jesus is alive, anything is possible.

God's blessings bring healing,
Pastor Steve

**“Filled With The Spirit...We Can’t Help It”**

June 7 - Acts 4: 1-22

Birds fly, lions roar; birds do not roar and lions do not fly.

Earthquakes rumble, lightning flashes; earthquakes do not flash and lightning does not rumble.

Water cleanses, honey sticks; water does not stick and honey does not cleanse.

Alligators make for good boots, bears make for good rugs; alligators do not make for good rugs and bears do not make for good boots.

Mosquitoes suck blood, fish breathe water; mosquitoes do not breathe water and fish do not suck blood.

Chickens peck, cows moo; chickens do not moo and cows do not peck.

Christians have the Holy Spirit, Non-Christians have the spirit of the world. Christians do not have the spirit of the world and Non-Christians do not have the Holy Spirit.

You are what you are. That’s why it is so important for people to find their identity. Some people grow up being maligned by their parents or siblings to such a degree that they will form a pseudo-identity. In other words, they really believe they are one thing when in fact they are another. They need someone to come along and help them recognize who they really are. If you have been told all of your life that honey should be used for washing, it will be a real eye-opener for you when you discover that water works much better.

The miracle of new birth as a Christian is that you can be re-made into something different than you were before. Ezekiel says that God gives a person a new heart: a pliable, God-centered, Christ-honoring heart. This heart is the beginning of a whole new life, a life with God in it. Likewise, you also have a new identity. You are no longer the person you once were.

Now God has hold of you and you have all the abilities that come with being His child. Another way to look at it is that you now share in the benefits of all that a child of God enjoys. Remember Romans 8:32: “He that spared not His own Son but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?”

A bird was made to fly. God designed it specifically to take flight. The horse and the lion and the cow were not. A Christian was designed to worship God and serve Him. Those pursuits were not interesting to you when you were broken down—when you had no wings, so to speak. But now that you are in Christ and have your wings, it’s time to fly. Now you can soar because of what God has provided for you.

Much of the Christian life is realizing what God has already done for you. Too often we get discouraged because we do not realize all of the wonderful things God has provided for His children. Once we are aware of who we truly are in Christ, we realize that we have ready access to the equipment God has given us to do spiritual battle. This equips us to handle the attacks of the enemy. In Ephesians 6, Paul gives us a description of the armor of God. He tells us to put it on, and be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. It is a matter of seeing yourself in the power of the Lord.

Peter had experienced the things that we are talking about here. After he is called to account for healing the lame man, he stands very boldly, described by Luke as “full of the Holy Spirit,” and proclaims Jesus has risen from the dead. Peter had a new lease on life. He was no longer the cowardly apostle, but a strong and determined follower. As a matter of fact, Peter says a bit later in his dialogue with the Jewish brass that he couldn’t stop talking about what he had heard and seen. It was too good to hold in; everybody had to know the good news.

Peter was now a new man. He was who he was. He was filled with God and this invasion of the Spirit had a direct connection to his mouth. He wanted to confess Jesus and give others the opportunity to know Him too.

Are your actions consistent with who you are? Sometimes we Christians try to fit the square peg through the round hole by making friends with worldly ways. It never works and it never satisfies. Why? Because we are who we are. We can try to jump to

the moon, but we were not made with that capability. We can try to run as fast as a car, but God didn’t make us like that. We were made for God and it is in Him that we will find we can fly and jump and run. There is no greater satisfaction in life than to be doing what we were made for. Peter said he couldn’t help it, because it flowed out of a heart that had been transformed by the Spirit and was full of the Spirit.

God’s blessings make you who you are,
Pastor Steve

**“Prayer Meeting”**

June 8 - Acts 4: 23- 5:11

God Is In Control,
Jesus said that where two or more were gathered together in His Name, there He was in their midst. Think for a minute about the significance of that promise. I think all of us long to experience God. We want to know that He is with us and that we have access to Him through prayer. The gospel implies this in two big ways: first, that Jesus died for us and has made a way for us to come to the Father. Before the cross, there was no instant access into the presence of the holy God. Second, Jesus is alive; and, being alive, he can be with us wherever we are. He is not detained somewhere in some meeting so that He cannot give us His full attention. God is near.

I have been in some pretty interesting prayer meetings over the years. Some have been pretty straightforward. The leader wrote several prayer requests on a chalkboard and the members systematically prayed through the list. And then I have been at other meetings where there was a lot of shouting and stammering. I have been in meetings where there was much singing, in others where there was prophesying, and in others where people spoke in tongues and interpreted tongues. The meetings I have en-

joyed the most were the ones where I knew the others involved, and each individual could be real with God and pour out his heart. I have also loved the singing times when the melodies lifted your heart to heaven and you could sense that God was near.

When we get to 1 Corinthians we will talk more about the purpose of a worship service, but let’s keep in mind that God is a God of order, and He is less known when there is chaos in meetings. Just because someone is loud or prays in old English or can even speak in a stammering tongue doesn’t mean that he is spiritual. You can sound very spiritual and still be very carnal. All that we do—both to glorify God and to build up other believers—should be done in love, with sensitivity to the people around us.

Another very meaningful time for a prayer gathering is when there is an issue or a fresh experience that makes the intensity of your prayers very real. “A friend in need is a friend indeed,” is an old expression that can apply to God. When we need Him most, He is there. And when we need Him most, our prayers are usually straight from the heart. When the elders of our church go to someone’s home to pray for a serious malady, the prayers are very heartfelt and

meaningful. So often during those times I can feel the Spirit at work in one way or another.

After Peter and John's experience with the lame man, their defense before the Jewish leaders, and the leaders' demand that they not speak any longer in Jesus' name, the enthused men come back to the church with a heart full of praise and the need to pray. The focus of their prayer was not on selfish needs, but for boldness to speak the word of the Lord with even more intensity.

Peter quotes verses that talk about God being in control, even though it looks like His enemies are getting the upper hand. Peter quotes the same verses that we referred to when we talked about the trial of Jesus, discussing how Pilate really wasn't in control even though he felt he was. Man thinks he can stand

in the way of God's purposes, but the attempt is futile. God is working through his servants and spreading His word through them.

Have you been involved in a prayer meeting lately? If so, how significant have the prayers been? Are the prayers riding on the wings of needs that are felt? Do you have a purpose for meeting?

Prayer is powerful when it is focused.

Prayer is powerful when God is praised as Sovereign.

Prayer is powerful when you are united to be bold for Jesus.

Prayer is powerful when the group is of one mind.

God's blessings attend the prayer meeting,

Pastor Steve



"Worthy Of Suffering"

June 9 - Acts 5: 12-42

It was one day back in 1964 that I rode my gold Schwinn Stingray downtown to the dime store to buy the latest craze, a record called "Meet The Beatles." If I remember correctly, I think I paid \$1.65 for the piece of plastic that was going to change my life. I was probably eight. I, along with most of America, had been watching the Ed Sullivan show the evening the Fab Four were introduced on this continent. The rest is history.

In many ways the Beatles' music did have an impact on our culture. We bought their albums, watched their movies and followed their careers as if we were part of their story. Their search for truth and happiness was our search as well. We'd sing their songs and imitate their styles and try to identify with them. Years ago my wife and I got to see an imitation Beatles group, called Rain, who could really bring you back to the Beatles' glory days. I enjoyed them so

much. I actually did see George Harrison in concert back in the '70s. Those were his Hari Krishna days and it was a bit weird, but it was still a treat to see him perform live.

I think the song "Nowhere Man" captures the mindset of a huge segment of our world. Man looks for answers in all of the wrong places. Modern man strives for peace and security and happiness in all of the wrong places. He runs and runs and runs and still feels empty in the end. He is a man without a purpose; he has no point of view because he blows in the cultural wind and adapts to the ways of the current trends. Let's take a look at the lyrics of this classic Beatles' song:

He's a real nowhere man

Sitting in his nowhere land

Making all his nowhere plans for nobody

Doesn't have a point of view
knows not where he's going to
Isn't he a bit like you and me?
Nowhere man please listen
You don't know what you're missing
Nowhere man, The world is at your command

He's as blind as he can be
Just sees what he wants to see
Nowhere man, can you see me at all
Nowhere man don't worry
Take your time, don't hurry
Leave it all till somebody else
Lends you a hand
Ah, la, la, la, la

Doesn't have a point of view
knows not where he's going to
Isn't he a bit like you and me?
Nowhere man please listen
You don't know what you're missing
Nowhere man, The world is at your command
Ah, la, la, la, la

He's a real nowhere man
Sitting in his nowhere land
Making all his nowhere plans for nobody
Making all his nowhere plans for nobody
Making all his nowhere plans for nobody

Some find their meaning by attaching themselves to clubs and social groups that occupy their time and give them interaction with others. My daughter once received a student of the month award from one of our local clubs and we were invited to a dinner and a short award ceremony. The dinner was fantastic and the ceremony was...well...weird. I thought I had entered the Twilight Zone. It seemed like a place where grown men gathered to hide their alcoholic tendencies and legitimize their need for importance. The most hilarious person was the Grand Poopa (not the real title) who presided over the affair. We all want to feel like what we do is meaningful.

Those who were members of the first century

Jewish ruling council felt far more than a club-like connection to what they were doing. They thought they were doing God's business. They were the elite ones, who made the decisions that preserved the traditions of the elders. Ironically, there were factions in the council based on their particular theological views. One thing they were united on was their distaste for the Jesus sect, who went around publicly proclaiming that Jesus was alive. Luke records that they were "filled with jealousy." Why hadn't it been enough to kill Jesus? Now His followers were in the temple courts, praising Him and testifying about the recent events that were changing the lives of those who put their faith in Jesus.

What a time to be a Jesus person! The apostles are thrown in jail only to be let out by an angel. Once they are rounded up and presented to the council, their excitement level had reached a new high. They were experiencing the power of Jesus through the Holy Spirit. God used a Pharisee named Gamaliel to persuade the council to lay off a bit. The rulers still had the apostles beaten. They thought maybe intimidation and physical leverage would silence them. When people do not understand Jesus, they feel threatened, both by Him and by his followers. When people do not understand the truth in Jesus, claims that are made about him seem threatening too. Some people become violent in response. During the time we are reading about in Acts, there was such a man (whether he ever was a member of the council is unclear), a man who treated those of the Way with much contempt and persecution. His name was Saul. He figures in Acts a few chapters ahead.

The beating we read about in today's passage only gave the apostles resolve to continue following the Master and proclaiming His Word. They actually were happy to be associated in their sufferings with the suffering Savior. Their identity with Jesus was something they all wore with great satisfaction. They knew that they would be treated as Jesus had been treated and they welcomed the opportunity to suffer reproach for the Name. The tough times only made them more determined to do as He did.

Let's take some kind of stand for Jesus today.
Let's not fear the rejection of men.
Let's make Jesus clear so that others can understand His love.

Let's walk as He walked.
God's blessings are confirmed in suffering,
Pastor Steve



“Problems, Problems, Problems”

June 10 - Acts 6: 1 - 7:19

God is Good,
The world is broken down. The wheels fell off in the garden of Eden. We have inherited trouble. Solomon said, after considering that the same destiny meets the fool as well as the wise, “So I hated life, because what is done under the sun is grievous to me, for all is vanity and striving after wind” (Ecclesiastes 2: 17). No matter how “perfect” we think we can be or how good we can make things, the truth of the matter is that we are in a world of hurt.

If you are a “bury your head in the sand” kind of person, then you will not be able to cope well with the realities of life. You can hide from troubles and problems, but that will not make them go away. From a philosophical perspective, especially if you disregard the Biblical reasons for the predicament we are in, there is very little to be said for why we are in this pickle. We can deny our problems or avoid them or transfer them to others, but they will always come back to bite us. Probably the stickiest problem is death. Try explaining that one without the help of Scripture, and you will be left like Solomon, to bemoan the realities of life under the sun.

I remember one such brush with hard reality. We sat in a family meeting. My wife and I and two elementary-age kids, along with one preschooler. We had important business to discuss. Our cat, Willy, had somehow gotten one of his eyes poked out. He seemed to be in a lot of discomfort. Do we take him to the vet and pay through the nose (or actually eye)?

Or do we say goodbye to him? After all, he had been a good cat, and all good things must sometime come to an end, right? We sat and stared at one another. I laid out the realities. What should we do? I asked the children what they thought. I wanted them to be in on important matters. My youngest didn't seem to have an opinion either way and my daughter was speechless. When I got to my middle child—he burst into tears. Discussion over. We were going to help Willy the cat. Fortunately, we had the number of a friend who could give some pre-big-bucks advice. We got the goop needed and my nurse wife applied it, and in a while Willy was on the road to recovery.

Problems, problems, problems.

Some people have the idea that the early church was problem-free. You know, they had the Holy Spirit in a great measure and didn't have the ordinary day-to-day inconveniences that we have to deal with. That is as far from the truth as someone thinking that you never have troubles. Is that true? Do you live a problem-free life? No way! We are all in the same boat.

Right off the bat the early church faced a situation that would test their ability to solve relational problems. The Jewish widows with a more Greek background were feeling left out in the food distribution. They were probably feeling discriminated against, because some Jews considered them to be compromisers. Maybe their portion wasn't equal on account of their Greek ways, they reasoned.

The apostles pulled everyone together and made

it clear that they were going to delegate this issue to others, so that they could focus on the spread of the gospel and prayer. They picked men who were full of the Spirit and wisdom. These would be proven people, who could take the ball and run with it. The result was a spirit of cooperation in the congregation, as they confirmed the decision of the leadership. We are not told how the issue finally resolved itself, but we are given a couple of very important tools for solving dilemmas.

First of all, we must enlist the help of others when we are dealing with a problem. Sometimes we attempt to do too much and take on more than we can handle. Finding someone else who has expertise in an area will give us a sense of good management, and will give the person helping the joy of feeling needed.

Second, we need to be careful whom we pick to help with a problem. Sometimes we settle too quickly on a certain professional person even if we have a gut feeling that this may not be the best match. It is always wise to look into a matter more deeply before committing to one solution. I have a friend who had prostate cancer, had surgery, and then was left with a number of questions about his after-surgery treatment. He researched the matter for himself, discov-

ered his options, knocked on some pretty big doors (in the big city) and found a physician who was an expert with years of experience. I'm not sure if he was “full of the Spirit,” but he was wise.

Third, we need to always keep our primary focus in mind. It is all too easy to be wrapped up in the tyranny of the urgent. We must stay focused on our most important track. If you are not quite sure yet what your focus should be, then get some counseling on the matter. It would help to narrow your focus so that your energy is not dissipated in too many directions.

Problems are real. Embrace them; don't run from them. Let them be your friends. They will be the catalyst for great spiritual growth in your life.

By the way, the early church, as we will see when we get to the smaller letters, had many, many problems. Most of these letters are written because a problem or two needed to be dealt with.

What problem is on your plate today? Delegate; choose well; focus.

God's blessings embrace problems,
Pastor Steve



“Stephen's Speech”

June 11 - Acts 7

Hi Friends,
Have you ever heard Billy Graham preach live? I first heard him in the late seventies in San Diego. I was amazed at the simplicity of the message. He spoke directly and challenged the ways of the world. He said that those ways would leave a man empty and that the search was only satisfied by faith in Christ. He talked about Jesus bearing the sins of the world on Himself. He talked about the

resurrection. He told the people that they needed to repent, to turn to God if they wanted to find peace and happiness. I saw Graham again in 1984 and you know what, it was the same message. He hadn't changed at all.

Stephen was a man full of the Holy Spirit. He was one of the fellows chosen to resolve the conflict we talked about yesterday. Well, he was doing many good things among the people and was busy spread-

ing the Word of Jesus. Some Jews were in opposition to him and, using a deceptive tact, brought him before the Jewish council. Once there, Stephen saw an opportunity to teach about Jesus. In response to their accusations Stephen responded by recounting the history of the Jews which, of course, they were very familiar with.

The history Stephen recounts is God's history, it is His story. He reminds them of the calling of Abraham and how his great grandchild Joseph was shown favor by Pharaoh and eventually ended up rescuing his family from the peril of famine. After Joseph died, the new Pharaoh did not know the previous favor bestowed on the Israelites and began to enslave them and put them to forced labor. They were in this predicament for four hundred years until God raised up Moses who would be a prototype of Jesus.

Moses was initially rejected by his people, but forty years later he was sent back to Egypt to lead his people from captivity. He subsequently becomes the central figure in Jewish history. He is the great deliverer. The parallel with Jesus is striking. Jesus came to His own and His own rejected Him, but as many as put their trust in Him were delivered from the greatest bondage of all - the captivity to sin and the devil and death. Ironically, just as the generation Moses led out of the "iron-smelting furnace" (Deuteronomy 4:20) was without faith and only a few ended up believing in the Lord, so Jesus died for the sins of the world, but proportionally very few actually have faith in Him.

Stephen then goes for the juggler when he brings up the fact that their ancestors did not believe the prophets, and he says they were instrumental in their deaths. In other words, they had a history of not listening to the Word of the Lord. He parallels this to their rejection of the Lord Jesus. They had rejected the very one who came to save them. And now they were resisting the ministry of the Holy Spirit who was working through the church. The strength of his argument was overwhelming, but important, because this was the council responsible for the direction of a nation and they held the power to sway their people toward Jesus or away from Him.

More than likely, Stephen's reference to God not dwelling in a man made house reminded them of Christ's statement about destroying "this temple"

and raising it in three days. They believed Jesus and the apostles and Stephen were out to destroy their religion. To them there was no greater place of holiness than the temple of the Lord. They could not accept any change in emphasis even if Stephen had a good Bible verse to show that God is not contained by human ingenuity.

When we put Jesus at the center of our lives, every other structure in our lives takes on a whole new meaning. Everything is subservient to Him. Life is no longer about me, but about how He can be first in all things. How can we glorify Jesus? I think that was the attitude of Stephen. He wanted only to honor the Savior whom he believed was the great deliverer prophesied by Moses himself. That's why it is futile to try and add Jesus to your life in a peripheral way. Jesus does not belong on the outskirts of our lives but at the control tower, right in the middle of everything. He invades every aspect of our lives. He is concerned about our thought life and our social life and our recreational life and our family life and our sex life and our physical life and everything else. Remember that Peter said "set apart Christ as Lord..." Why? Because Peter knew that life only made sense when Jesus was number one.

Many want just a bit of God. They don't want to go all out or commit themselves to serving. They want whatever they can get to make them comfortable and happy. And if having some of God could do that then they are all for it. Years ago I ran across this poem that typifies this attitude:

I would like to buy three dollars worth of God, please.

Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep,

But just enough to equal a cup of warm milk, or a snooze in the sunshine.

I don't want enough of Him to make me love a black man, or pick beets with a migrant worker.

I want ecstasy, not transformation.

I want the warmth of the womb, not a new birth.

I want a pound of the eternal in a paper sack.

I would like to buy three pounds of God, please.

--Wilbur Reese

Why is this? I think it is because we do not want to give the control of our lives over to anyone else, including God. I'll take God as long as He doesn't demand of me anything I want to keep for myself. The problem is that God has always made it clear that He wants our whole heart and He wants us to love Him with our mind, heart, soul and strength. He wants the whole enchilada. If you give it all, you'll find your life. If you hold back you will lose in the end. That's God's Word on the matter.

Stephen's words weren't received well. The truth will sometimes have that effect. They rushed him, stoned him and this propelled a general persecution against the church so that believers had to flee Jerusalem for safety. Taking a stand for Jesus can be dangerous. In some cultures today you can lose your head for proclaiming Jesus on the streets. People don't take kindly to a message that says Jesus is the

only way of salvation. Regardless, the church still preaches Jesus and the results are up to God. Some believe, some persecute and some are indifferent. The church still moves forward and the gates of hell will not prevail against her.

Like Jesus, Stephen prays for his persecutors that their sin would not be held against them. Stephen is ready to fly away; he sees Jesus standing in heaven at the right hand of the Father. This is the only place in Scripture where Jesus is not pictured seated at the Father's right hand. Stephen is welcomed into heaven by the one who loved him and gave Himself for him (Galatians 2: 20).

Let's stand.

Let's resist taking only three pounds of God.

"Lord, I give you my whole heart today."

God's blessings sometimes get us stoned,

Pastor Steve



Day 164

"Do You Understand?"

June 13 - Acts 8: 4-40

Have a Fine Day,

The early days of the church were truly remarkable. There were many fantastic signs and wonders that were verifying the works of the apostles. People were being saved daily and then added by the Lord to the Church. There was a great enthusiasm for reaching new folks with the gospel. There was some persecution because of the emphasis on Jesus, which was unthinkable for strict religious Jews who considered Jesus an imposter, and for Romans who could only hale Caesar and would not be comfortable transferring their allegiance to Jesus.

For some reason the early days of a new believer's life in Jesus is usually pretty remarkable as well. Maybe this is true because God is making Himself so real to him and he is daily experiencing the work of

God in his life. Maybe it is the liberation he feels from the shackles of his old life. Maybe it is the new, good friends he is making in the church, friends who are more real than the ones in his former life. All in all, it is the new life that is so liberating. Truly, all things are new in Christ, including the person who embraces Jesus and makes Him the daily leader of his life.

Whether you are new in the Lord or have been a believer for many years, there is always the hope of a new beginning today. God's power in our lives is not limited and He knows what we need. Are you at the beginning stages of a walk with God? If so, enjoy the ride and be thankful for the works God is doing in you. If you need a new beginning today just ask God for this. Ask Him to refresh you and renew you today. Open your heart to the work of the Holy Spirit and the

filling of your heart with the Spirit. This could be the beginning of something really good for you. More of God is always good.

The Lord directed the preacher Philip to go to the desert and meet up with a man who was ready to receive the good news of Jesus. Of all things, the man was reading from the Scriptures in the book of Isaiah, right in a section of prophecy about Jesus. Philip asked a really good question, he said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" Think about that for a minute. That's a good question for all of us to answer. "Do you understand the book of Genesis or Samuel or Ezekiel now that you have read it? Are you getting something out of the book of Acts? Do you get what you are reading?"

Philip could begin with the very passage of Scripture and start talking about Jesus. Remember, all of Scripture points to Jesus. Remember what we said about Luke 24 and how Jesus showed the apostles that all of the Old Testament pointed to Him. Well, that was Philip's approach too. What if the man was reading from some other part of the Old Testament?

Philip would have begun there if possible and then started to tell him about the work of Jesus and how he could give his life to Jesus and find a new life in Him.

Another interesting note in this account is that the man was immediately baptized after believing in Jesus. He didn't have to go through a class or wait until he proved something, he went immediately into the water and was baptized into Jesus. Have you been baptized? If not, what are you waiting for; if you believe you can be baptized?

Why not try to reach someone this week with the good news? Do you have some 4 Spiritual Laws or a Gospel of John. Give the Word away to someone and then later ask them if they understand what they are reading. Maybe they will have been prepared like the man from Ethiopia and you will end up leading them to Jesus. Try it on for size and see what happens. Who knows, maybe you'll find yourself riding in a chariot.

Rejoice in Jesus Always,
God's blessings make us new,
Pastor Steve



"Least Likely"

June 14 - Acts 9: 1-31

Remember the categories in high school about who would be the most or least likely to be something or do something? Did you make it into one of those categories? For some reason it drives me crazy to be categorized. Fortunately, I didn't make it into any of those recognitions. I can tell you one thing I would have never been pegged as: Most likely to become a pastor. No way, no how. How many of us became something or do something that would never have been predicted? Life takes us down some pretty peculiar avenues.

It is always weird to hear about some radical

thing going on with one of the people I knew in high school. One of the guys became a pitcher for the Houston Astros, and another guy started his own toy company and made a gazillion bucks. One of my old friends who grew up a couple of blocks from me died of a drug overdose, and another one of my childhood friends died recently of skin cancer. You cannot easily predict what is going to happen in a person's life. I think that is why it is important to not let others dictate to you who or what you are going to be. Be yourself. Strive to do your best. Let the other guy worry about the other guy, you take care of yourself. I like

what Paul says in relation to this in Galatians 6: "For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. For each will have to bear his own load" (ver. 3).

Saul of Tarsus, a Pharisee, one of the most renowned rabbis in Israel, would have been least likely to become a Jesus follower and, believe me, that would have been the consensus of every single human being who knew him or knew about him. He was adamantly committed to the proposition that followers of Jesus were deceived and were dangerous to the sanctity of Jewish faith. The fact that thousands were being baptized and added to the church must have created a great deal of consternation on Saul's part, but he was ready to oppose anyone who got in the way of Jewish tradition.

Even today, the most difficult person to bring to Christ is the person who is entrenched in their anti-Christian belief system. Some of these people may even have a view about Jesus, but they have not submitted to the Jesus of the Bible. This can be the case for those who have been involved in a church that is filled with ritual and tradition, but does not see the Bible as the sole source for determining what is true and what isn't. Like these folks, Saul was convinced, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that he was right and that Jesus people were wrong.

Surprise, surprise!! Saul was about to meet the risen Jesus while he was on a mission to destroy the work of the church. Saul was accosted by Jesus. He was snatched by Jesus. I am sure that he was the most surprised of all. How could a man so set against something one minute be so wholeheartedly for it the next? Saul had an encounter with the risen Lord. It is not uncommon today to hear of people coming to Christ and then to hear some remark that they would have never guessed that so and so would give their life to Jesus. This should give us hope for those we have been tempted to cross off our prayer list.

I know of no other Jesus encounter as dramatic as Paul's. He is confronted by a blinding light (and he is literally blinded), falls (maybe a sign of humility), hears the voice of Jesus (His sheep hear His voice, John 10), and is instructed what to do next (Jesus has a definite

purpose for saving him). These steps to one degree or another are not unfamiliar to anyone who has encountered Jesus through the gospel. We all need spiritual light, and we must repent (trade in our old life for a new one in Jesus) and we will hear His voice and be given a set of marching orders. Maybe your experience wasn't identical to Paul's, I'm sure very few have had a like experience, but yours contains elements like his. Think about it and see if there aren't some similarities.

Skeptical? You bet, many in the church thought it was a rouse that Saul was in the faith. Maybe this was some sort of trick. Maybe he wanted on the inside so that he could implode the church from there. Barnabas, who was known as an encourager, had witnessed Saul's testimony in Damascus about Jesus and was convinced that he was for real. And so he comes to his defense before those who doubted. Can you imagine that some of the church members had been personally affected by his persecution, some had possibly lost a loved one to Saul's cruelty.

I recently had a conversation with an alcoholic who had been arrested and convicted of DUI. I listened for a while to the same old broken record about how important drinking was to him and how he did it because others brought pressures to bear on him. Then I reminded him that the night he was driving drunk he could have killed my daughter on the highway if she would have been in the wrong place and the wrong time. He agreed. That thought did not endear me to him. But what if that scenario had actually played out in real life? And what if, hypothetically speaking, I later heard that he had been rehabilitated and was teaching drivers training at the local school where my other kids were attending? That would be a tough pill to swallow.

This may have been the way some members of the church felt. Here was a man bent on destroying the church and now he is in the synagogue and market place proclaiming that Jesus is the Messiah. Even Ananias is skeptical when the Lord tells him to welcome Paul because he too had heard of his brutality against the body of Jesus. Ananias was obedient though and initiated Saul into Christ. He prayed for him and he regained his eyesight and then he baptized him. Also, just before this, the Lord had revealed

to Ananias that Saul would be an ambassador for Christ and carry the message before kings as well as suffer persecution for Jesus' Name.

Is there a Saul in your life?

Do you know someone who is dead set against

the Lord and the church?

Keep praying for him and don't give up, he just might be brought to his knees.

God's blessings are very deliberate,

Pastor Steve



"Good News for All"

June 15 - Acts 9:32 - 10:23

Time will only tell of the impact that Jesus Christ has had on our world. He is the subject of "for God so loved the world." God's marks of love are all over the place. This is true in creation and in the people of God who bare His image, both the original smeared image and the new image in Jesus.

Think about the enormity of what He has done compared with the obscurity in which He lived. He lived most of His life in a little town despised by others as a place known for the least desirables. Do you live in a town like that? I do. I can't tell you the number of times I have heard cutting remarks about my tiny town. Someone once said, "Can anything good come out of His town." On top of that, Jesus was a lowly carpenter. He wasn't from fine breeding. His dad was a carpenter too, and the family probably lived from paycheck to paycheck. We have no record of Jesus' early years until the age of twelve when we see Him on a family trip to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish feasts.

He has changed more lives than any other man and he does it in the most unconventional ways. The people He has changed talk about His death as the highpoint of their connection with Him, and they talk about Him as if He were alive still. Think about how remarkable that is. His name causes more controversy than any other name. Men either love Him or hate Him, but there is very little ambivalence about His person. He is a person who demands our attention and commands our respect.

Now we say all of this to highlight the way God chose to spread His word in the world. As you have already gathered from reading in the book of Acts, there was an explosion of evangelistic enthusiasm in the initial days and thousands were saved. Have you also noticed that all of the original members of the church were Jewish? That's an amazing thing. Jesus also originally brought His message to His own people. But then when they rejected Him, He began to reach out to some non-Jewish folks. In Acts, chapter 10 is the turning point of the good news going out to the non-Jews (Gentiles). And of all people to get this message out, the apostle Peter was the most unlikely; he was Jewish through and through.

God had to do some pretty miraculous things to show everyone that the message of Christ was for Jew and non-Jew alike. Paul, the very Jewish apostle to the Gentiles said, "For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to those who believe, to the Jews first and then to the Gentiles" (Romans 1:16). And so God sent an angel to a Roman centurion. God told him to send for a man named Peter who was in Joppa and he would explain the way of truth. In the meantime, Peter is waiting for lunch up on the roof of a house and, bam, he sees a vision. There's a big sheet and it is being lowered from the sky and it bears all sorts of animals, many of which were unclean to a committed Jewish boy like Peter.

Then God told him to kill and eat. What???????? No, way Lord, I don't eat that, you know that. "Kill, and eat Peter!" Then the messengers, those unclean people, showed up, and off Peter went to share good news with the "unclean."

Let's make some observations and applications:

I'm glad for this because I'm a Gentile and I appreciate the opportunity to know the Lord.

God makes His will clear so that we won't botch things up. God wanted His word and Spirit to reach all men.

We can count on God to make His will clear to us. He wants us to know and do His will and He will not make it a mystery.

God was making a big point here about Gentile inclusion in the church and so we need to get that first

before we try to glean other more trivial points.

God will use angels to accomplish some of His purposes.

Thinking about Peter, we too sometimes need to learn our lessons directly by God making things crystal clear to us, especially if it is a very important lesson.

What do you get out of this chapter? It is important. Peter will go to the other apostles and report what God had done through this incident in his life. And so this story goes through chapters 10 and 11. Let's get all out of it that we can.

Take a moment to go over the account again and we'll pick up our comments on it again tomorrow.

God's blessings are for gentiles too,

Pastor Steve



"Revolution"

June 16 - Acts 10: 23 - 11:18

This month forty-four years ago is when I accepted Jesus. It seems like I should be much more spiritually mature. But look what God had to work with. Sometimes the materials do the craftsman a disservice.

Yesterday we talked about the message of the gospel going out to all peoples. We said that it was initially just the Jews who were recipients of it. God had to work miracles to make it plain that His word was for Jew and Gentile alike. So at the end of the experience, the Jewish believers commented that the "Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles" Acts 10:45.

The Book of Acts is a history book. It is the account of the beginning stages of Christ's church. It is not to be taken as a book of teachings and used to communicate doctrine. The events recorded were not necessarily normative for us. God had a spe-

cific purpose for the miraculous events which were recorded in the book like the ones in Peter's life that we are currently reading. Those who take the book of Acts and weave a normative doctrinal statement from it, I believe, lead people astray. That is not to say that we can't draw applications from what we read or find encouragement from them. But to think that God will do miracles just like the ones in the first century is assuming that we are in the shoes of the apostles. But not to discourage you, I think we need to pray and expect God to do great things in our lives for His glory and honor. But miracles for the sake of miracles is not the point of the ones we read about in the New Testament or in the whole Bible for that matter.

Another important aspect of this is that when we read Biblical accounts of miraculous events it appears that they were happening all the time. This certainly isn't true. The events recorded are the highlights of

what God has done and not the normal day to day stuff that characterized the life of a Biblical character. For example, there were times when Jesus was healing everyone in sight and other times where He was nowhere to be found because He was isolated for one reason or another. So it can be dangerous to give people the idea that miracles in the Christian life are the standard operating procedure.

The greatest miracles I have seen over the past forty-four years have been the changes in the hearts of people. I have seen people who you would never expect to change have such drastic changes that you would say, "It must be a miracle." I have also seen people experience forgiveness and forgive others in situations where you would never think it possible. To me, these events are miraculous. I have also seen the Lord touch people physically and heal them, usually alongside a doctor or two. Remember, the gospel writer Luke, a traveling companion of the apostle Paul, was a doctor. God works through any and every means to do His will.

Back to Peter. Peter finally reaches Caesarea and is greeted by the Gentile Centurion Cornelius who is hanging onto Peter's feet in awe. I love Peter's response: "Stand up, I am just a man." Peter's focus was not on himself but Jesus. That's where our focus should be. Peter simply considered himself the messenger of good news, even though at first it doesn't seem like Peter knows for sure why he was there. Maybe he was just wanting to hear from the horse's mouth the things he had heard from the messengers.

I love the way he describes the gospel. He talks about the cross and emphasizes the fact that he and his buddies were eyewitnesses of the events that happened after that day. He says that God "caused Him to be seen." And he talks about how God had chosen witnesses beforehand for Him to appear to. He points out that they were able to eat and drink with Him. In other words, He was Himself. They were doing things they had always done; it was Jesus and they couldn't be more happy.

While Peter was speaking, his Jewish companions were amazed at the results because before Peter even finished his sermon "the Holy Spirit was poured out" on them and the crowd began to speak in tongues like the group on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. Then they were baptized. Something big had happened. The gospel had come to the Gentiles. Of course, word got around very quickly of these events and the brothers in Jerusalem were anxious to see what Peter had to say. The apostle recounted the events just as they had happened and especially how God had taught the lesson of how he needed to accept those whom he once considered to be outside the scope of God's plan.

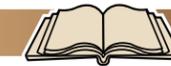
This was all revolutionary to the church. Now the message would need to be taken to the ends of the Gentile world. That's where Paul comes in, but before we go there let's make a couple of applications from chapters 10 and 11.

First, expect God to change the way you view the world. A new world view is part and parcel to growth in faith. We will need to shed our "I know it all" attitude and accept the way of Christ.

Secondly, we need to develop a heart for the people of the world who need Christ. Are you open to being involved in world mission? Let's pray that God will open up doors for us to take part in getting the gospel out to all men.

Lastly, be open to the work of the Holy Spirit in your life. Even though these events in Acts are directly connected to the spread of the gospel, and are a special work of the Holy Spirit, there is a gift of tongues given to some in the church for the purpose of praising God. See 1 Corinthians 14 for more information on this gift. You may have the gift and not even know it. Get alone with God and praise Him and begin to speak to Him from the depths of your heart and see if he gives you this gift. If not, enjoy the time with the Lord as you talk to Him and praise Him.

Rejoice in Jesus Always,
God's blessings are for all nations,
Pastor Steve



"It Must Be His Angel"

June 17 - Acts 11:19 - 12: 19

Life is about people. Think for a moment about all of the various people you are connected to in some way. There are people you are deeply tied to and there are those who just meet your acquaintance. There are people you feel drawn to and there are others that repel you. People though are what make the world go round in a manner of speaking.

I think the secret to success is being able to get along with or at least deal with all different types of people. The closer we get to another person the harder it is to get along with them. This is proven over and over again in marriages. Marriage partners get hitched with the greatest of intentions and then, ka-boom, the anti-relationship missile hits and then they look like too mean cats in a barrel.

The book of Proverbs was written so that we could have insight as to how to treat others and get along with them. Granted, there are times when you have to separate yourself from a fool or a hot-tempered man because of their bad influence, but the bulk of the Proverbs are about how to get along.

One of the many secrets for better relationships is to let people be human. Remember, it is human to err. We make mistakes. We are fallible. We strike out, fumble the ball, hit it out of bounds, throw up an air ball, whiff the puck, and double fault, to put it in sports terms. Too often I criticize others way too soon. I do not give them the benefit of the doubt, but step up and throw them out of the game way too prematurely.

I don't know why some people think that believers in the Bible stories are any different than us. They are, you know? They are made out of the same stuff as us. I think maybe we too often shoot ourselves in the foot by thinking we will never measure up to people in the Word, and therefore we get ourselves discouraged about being doers of the Word. We take on a "I'll never have a walk with God like so and so"

attitude. We'd like to think that Peter and Paul and John and James and Rhoda and John Mark and the rest were somehow over our heads, but the truth is that they weren't, they were human just like we are and they made mistakes just like we do. Let's allow them to give us encouragement when it comes to our own desire to walk with the Lord.

In our reading today, Peter has been cast into Prison, waiting the same fate of his longtime companion, James the brother of John. James had just been executed by Herod as a favor to the Jews. When the king saw how this pleased the Jesus haters he had Peter arrested and was about to try him when, poof, he came up missing. Actually an angel of the Lord had visited him at night in order to help him out. By the time Peter realized what was happening and before he could even thank the angelic guest, the cherub vanished.

The ironic thing, and the thing that I can most closely identify with, is that the church was busy praying for Peter's release, but when the starry-eyed apostle showed up at the house of prayer, no one believed that it was really him. "Na, that couldn't happen," they reasoned. "Sure, we've been praying for his safety and release, but it couldn't have happened so quickly and effectively, there would be no way of that." But there was Peter in the flesh.

There he was, an answer to their prayer and they didn't believe it. How often have I felt the same way?

God listens to and answers our prayers, but how often do we not even believe the very prayers that we are praying? We pray with such eloquence and fervor, we impress others around us with our ability to come to God boldly, but God knows whether we are really believing that He could do what we were asking for. I think maybe the church was praying nervously about Peter's release. James had already been killed and I'm sure there was a bit of discouragement. But they still

gathered for prayer. They knew it was important for them to lift their hearts to God, but could it have been that discouragement had set in to such a degree that they just couldn't believe Peter was off the hook? I think so. I think they were under so much stress it was all they could do to pray. Their leaders were being executed and they were feeling the hurt and weight of that.

On the other hand, I identify with them because so often I have prayed and really didn't expect God to do anything. As I prayed I was more concerned about myself and my problems, much like them that night, that I really couldn't muster the faith to believe that my prayers could really amount to much. I am like them. We are all human. Psalm 103 says that God knows what we are made of; He understands; He knows that we were formed from dust. He bends down and takes care of us even when our prayers are

not really amounting to much. He helps us to pray when we do not have the energy to pray.

If you've ever prayed in a grief state then you know what it means to be real with God. No pie in the sky, super-spiritual hallelujah prayers then, no, just hard line straight forward prayers that are heard and answered, even when you are just pouring out your heart to God.

It is good to be human.

It will be even better to be out of this body and into our heavenly body some day.

In the meantime, be human and pray human prayers.

Someone's knocking at the door.

Could it be the answer to your prayers?

God's blessings are showered through prayer,

Pastor Steve



"The Joy of Glorifying God"

June 18 - Acts 12:19 - 13:12

When I was a young boy I loved Space. I'd stay awake at night thinking about the stars and the moon and going out there. I loved to read about astronauts and rockets and spaceships. To me it was fascinating. I would imagine how fun it would be to blast into the unknown and see things that no human being has ever seen. It lifted me to new heights when I would think like this.

Spaceships and rockets were created by engineers and scientists and managers and other important people to accomplish a specific goal. If they were manned, then they were designed to go into Space, perform a certain number of experiments and then return to earth safely. If the spaceship's creators did their job correctly then it would be mission accomplished. If they missed something it could mean

disaster. One of my favorite astronauts died in a cockpit fire some time in the sixties. I was heartbroken and, with a little kids reasoning, couldn't believe that something like that could happen. What went wrong? How could they have let that happen? He was such a good astronaut.

We were designed to do and be what our Creator made us to be. No more, no less. We have His stamp of authenticity on us and the warranty will run out at His choosing. When we do what we were created to do then we reflect back on our Creator the honor due to His genius. Likewise, when a spaceship does what it is supposed to do it reflects back on its creators. If you took a spaceship and used it as a missile to destroy your enemy you would not get the desired effect because it was not created for that purpose.

Man was made to glorify God. Man was made to accomplish great things for God and to reflect back to God the credit due His name. Because of the fall of man our natural bent is to try and glorify self. Instead of worshipping God and making Him the center of our lives, we are tempted to put self at the center and work hard to make sure he gets all the praise he can get. But because we were not made for this, we will self-destruct eventually. It's like trying to run a gasoline car on diesel. Soon enough the engine will be ruined. And so today we have millions of ruined lives because people are not running on God, but self. Jesus said, "Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me." Deny self, don't glorify self.

In Acts 12 we have a remarkable story of the folly of self-importance and promotion. "On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. They shouted, 'This is the voice of a god, not of a man.' Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died. But the word of God continued to increase and spread" (Acts 12: 21-24).

God does not share His glory. He alone has the

right to it and it is this glory that man was designed to reflect back to God and not take credit for it himself. So Herod had a gift of oratory, so what. It was a gift from God and was to be acknowledged as such. When Herod took center stage and glorified himself he had a little visit from the angel of the Lord. Maybe this was the same angel who let the charge in the book of Exodus. I don't know that for sure.

"God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. Therefore, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord'" I Corinthians 1: 28-30.

Who do you like to talk about?

I admit, the answer to that question is too often "me."

Let's talk about Jesus more and do what we do well for Him.

He is the source of all things and it's for His glory that we were created.

To Him Be the Glory Forever and Ever,
Pastor Steve



"Gospel Anatomy"

June 19 - Acts 13: 13-41

Have you ever seen inside the human body? Years ago I was doing some study for an upcoming job and had stowed away in the recesses of the university library. I loved the old building with its musty book smell and old wood shelves. The new library at this particular school does not have near as much personality as the old one, but is full of the modern conveniences that mark this new millennium. Anyway, while taking a break one day I hap-

pened upon some books with full color cross-sections of the human body. Interesting stuff. I was amazed and surprised how things really looked inside us; I really had had no idea of the way it really was.

This experience was not long after a Dodger pitcher had rotator cuff surgery. When I saw all of the muscle and ligament and other stuff around the shoulder I was taken back by just how complicated it would be to operate on this section of the body. No

wonder there would be a good amount of pain and suffering after surgery. The doctor would be cutting through so much just to get to the place that needed repair. I had a whole new appreciation of the way we have been made.

The anatomy of someone, even though veiled by skin is really the stuff that makes the body function. Take away the brain or the lungs or the heart or the stomach or the reproductive organs or the stuff that makes up the legs and feet and what would you have? Not much. The anatomy needs to be healthy for the person to be healthy. The anatomy needs to have all of its functioning parts to make the body adaptable to its environment. It's all essential in order to understand the movement of the body. The body moves because the insides are telling it to do this or that.

With that in mind, let's take a look at the anatomy of the gospel. In our reading today Paul is busy sharing the good news about the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The head houses the brain which is parallel to the Truths about what Jesus said and did. The gospel has truth statements. Jesus died for our sins and He was buried and He rose all according to the Scriptures. Without these powerful truths there would be no gospel just like a body without a brain. People who say the Christian faith is about humanitarianism or a collection of good moral lessons or a way to live are those who make the faith brainless. If the scarecrow only had a brain he could understand that without Christ's work there would be no good news.

The strength of the shoulders is in the muscles and tendons that make them move and bare great amounts of weight. The shoulders could represent Christ's work for us and the weight of sin that He bore in His body. There are no other shoulders like His. No other shoulders could bear under the weight of sin that Christ bore. Any man who tries to carry his own weight of sin will be crushed by it. Only Christ has the strength and moral purity to carry the sins of the world. "He bore our sins on His body on the cross."

My wife is an R.N. and has had to help people with breathing problems. This is especially true if someone has smoked their entire life. If you smoke for decades you are building up a covering of tar on your lungs that will eventually do you in. The Bible

says that spiritually we were all born with black lungs and so we are spiritually dead (Ephesians 2). What the Holy Spirit does is come into us and make us to breathe spiritually by giving us new lungs to use for God. The renewal of the Holy Spirit is what enables us to breathe in God's life. Then, having received this new set of lungs, we can continue to experience clean and refreshing air and breathe with a renewed life. Anyone who believes in Jesus and receives Him into his life is given the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The heart is the pump house of life for the body. Every day our hearts beat in our chests, receiving and sending life-producing blood throughout our bodies. The motive of the gospel is God's love. Peter was sharing the message of the gospel because of God's love - Peter loved God and the people who were listening to him preach. Without the love of God we would not experience the good news. No one can come to Christ without hearing about His love for the world at the cross (John 3).

Someone has said, "What you eat is what you are." Your stomach will digest what you eat and distribute it throughout your body. The more spiritual food from the Word of God that you take in the healthier you will be in your spiritual life. Several times in the book of Acts it says that the Word of the Lord was growing and expanding. It was moving forward in people's lives, both individually and in whole communities. Jesus said, "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).

Without the reproductive organs there would be no you. God has chosen a wonderful way for the human race to produce after their kind. This is true of the gospel as well. As we have already studied, the gospel is for everyone and when it is explained it has a way of producing fruit. One person is born again and they share with someone else and they are born again and so on and so on. How did you become a believer? Someone told you what the message was and it had an impact on you and you were moved to give your life to Christ, and when you did your life was new and different and changed for the better.

The strength of your legs and feet is governed by muscle and blood flow and a number of other factors. Strong legs are built over time as they are exercised

to bear the weight of the jobs you are asking them to do. Your legs take you where you tell them to go and the message of the gospel, because it is for the world, wants to spread out to all regions of the globe.

I trust that God's good news is in your heart and mind. If so, it will continue to work itself out in your

life. My prayer is that the anatomy of the gospel will get into your anatomy and have an impact on your world.

God's blessings make the gospel real to us,
Pastor Steve



Day 171

"On Track (Windows In Our Lives)"

June 20 - Acts 13:42 - 14:7

Only one life ever lived was full of light from first to last. John said of Him, "In Him was life and the life was the light of the world." The rest of us have a history of darkness, shadows, pitch black, rays of light, baths in light, and walking in the light with memories of the clouds from the previous day. Even the Apostle Paul would later, at the end of his life, lament the years he had walked in darkness.

Remember 1 John 1: "But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus (continually) cleanses us from all sin." And John seems to equate "walking in the light" with confession of sin. Our constant need for forgiveness and for remembering where our sins were nailed continues on our journey throughout our Christian lives. It is not a life of "no sin" but a life of walking in the forgiveness that Christ has given to us when He died on the cross. "All hail the cross of Jesus, from there we see the light!"

Paul had seen the light literally. He saw the glorified Jesus. Indeed, it temporarily blinded him, but he could say later to the Thessalonians, "But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober" (1 Thessalonians 5: 4,5). He goes on in that same chapter to talk about the moral

changes that have marked those who believe in Jesus. The true believer will not enjoy the habits of darkness any longer. He must turn from them. Flee them. He must put on the "armor of light" that Paul describes.

All too often the unsuspecting believer gets sideswiped by the enemy because he is caught napping. He is not in the Word like he has been and is beginning to doubt his own salvation and wonder if the Bible truly is the Word of God. He is a soldier without a weapon and becomes a sitting duck for the enemy to manipulate. I have always been impressed by the description of the "shield of faith" mentioned in Ephesians 6. According to my reading, I understand that this particular shield would be held by a group of soldiers. It would act as a barricade so that the enemy could not penetrate. Picture a group of brave warriors holding up this large shield and warding off the foe. That is the kind of Christian unanimity that God wants from us in the work that we do for the Lord.

Paul's life had taken a one hundred and eighty degree turn. Now He was on mission for Jesus Christ. The very one he once berated is the one he heralds. He and Barnabas had been commissioned by the Holy Spirit through the church (Acts 13: 1f.). Paul's approach was to go into the local synagogue (meeting place for worship among the Jews) and look for an opportunity to talk about Jesus' Messiahship. Paul was boldly talking about how Jesus fulfilled the Old

Testament promises of a suffering savior. And, of course, he was big on the resurrection as well. As he preached Jesus from place to place some believed and others were agitated. The agitators usually found ways to run Paul and his companions out of town. Paul didn't let them deter him though, he simply went right on proclaiming Christ from town to town.

If Paul was saved in the mid-30's A.D and martyred in the mid-60's A.D., then he would have only a three decade window to make his life count. And, boy, did he! His efforts alone have had a sweeping impact on every people group on the planet, barring those who have not yet been reached with the gospel. Paul is read every week in churches around the earth, so far reaching is his influence. Paul could say, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain." Paul was Jesus' servant and it didn't matter to him where he went or how much it cost or even if it would endanger his life. Paul was a man on mission.

Paul's story is a great argument for the truth of Christianity. If the truth was not Jesus, then why did Paul turn from a tradition that had been ingrained

into him from childhood? If not Jesus, then why was Paul willing to suffer persecution because of his belief in the cross (Galatians 6,7) when he could have easily gone along with the crowd? If not Jesus, then why in the world would this man talk about a risen Jesus when just the other day he was dead set against the message of the apostles? If not Jesus, then why was Paul out talking with Jews and Greeks about Him? Jesus had come into Paul's life and was living, by the Spirit, in his heart. What other good explanation would anyone have? We'll see in the letters to the Corinthians that there were some men who came along and tried to upset the faith of some by blasting Paul's motives. Do you know how Paul answered these accusations? He told them that he bore in his body the scars of Christ, that is, the marks he received because he was willing to be persecuted for the name of Jesus and his belief that the cross saves.

How many decades do you have left?

How are you making them count for the cause of Jesus?

God blesses the spread of His Word, Pastor Steve

"I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it. I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven- whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise - whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows - and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses" (12: 1-5). He goes on to say that since he had the privilege of receiving revelations from the Lord, the Lord gave him a humbling thorn in his flesh so that his head would not get too big.

What in the world is he talking about here? Where is heaven one and two, if he was up in the third? Why couldn't he talk about it; in Revelation heaven is described in some detail? Questions, questions, questions; it seems like heaven elicits more questions than answers. Let's give it a try.

Yes, in Revelation we do have some descriptions of heaven; for example, gates of pearls and streets of gold and a throne and no sun or moon and twelve trees for the healing of the nations and flashes and lights of various colors and living creatures and elders and lots and lots of praise, etc, but all of this is still not the whole story. Why? Because our mortal brains cannot fathom the depths of what heaven will be like.

The other day I was invited to talk to a group of high school students on sex. One of my favorite subjects! Anyway, I was trying to tie the subject in with the idea of close relationships. I told them that sex is a picture of the oneness that the Trinity enjoys. The closeness there is beyond our understanding except for the fact that God gives us a picture of it here when we are one with another person. And that oneness could be in a same sex relationship (without sexual relations), when two people get along in a way that makes them feel like they are joined in heart. This was true, as you might recall, in the Biblical relationship of David and Jonathan. I asked them if they thought heaven would be better than the best sexual experience on earth. Kind of a weird perspective, huh? Anyway, the answer is a resounding "yes!" because the oneness we will have in heaven with the Lord will far outdistance any memory of marital

oneness on earth. Maybe that's why Jesus said that in heaven you neither marry or are given in marriage but are like the angels. Also, you will recall, back in John 17, how Jesus made quite an emphasis on the oneness that He enjoyed with the Father.

As far as "third heaven" is concerned isn't it most likely that the first heaven is our atmosphere, you know, the place where birds fly and clouds collect and rain originates and lightning flashes? Then the second heaven would be outer space, which would include the creation of heavenly bodies like the sun, moon and stars. Then the third heaven would be the place where God lives or dwells metaphorically speaking, of course, because God cannot be contained. But maybe heaven, the third heaven can contain God because it too is unlimited. Try that one on for size.

This man Paul talks about, again, probably himself for emphasis, could not describe what he had seen in that beautiful place. Think about this in contrast to the rich man Jesus described who was in hell and in torment. That man wanted to go and warn others about his fate. It was a miserable place. Paul though is in a spectacular place so unlike anything on earth that to try and use earthly objects or experiences to describe what he experienced would have been a crime. He leaves us hanging but excited. Could we someday go there too? Paul's response would be a hearty yes through Christ.

This is the point too, where we need to learn to be discerning about after death testimonies. In the Apostle John's lingo we need to "test the spirits." Any story that excludes the need for Jesus in order to have a happy after-life experience should be rejected as bogus or at best a deception. The person might believe they experienced something magical but in reality it was only the devil giving them false hope. Peter said that only through the name of Jesus could someone be saved from that horrible place Jesus' describes in Luke 16 (also see Acts 4:12). Paul said that his experience was an unveiling or revelation from the Lord. It would be a sentimental and hopeful idea that no matter what a person did or didn't do or no matter what they believed, they would be accepted in the after-life, but that is only deceptive and wishful thinking.

Now let me loosely tie this information from Corinthians with our current reading in Acts. Luke



"Paul Stoned"

June 21 - Acts 14: 8-28

Sometimes it doesn't hurt to make an educated guess. Common sense is better than no sense at all. As a matter of fact, sometimes the common sense guy can act more wisely than the know-it-all college educated fellow. Besides, harmless speculation won't hurt us and it might send us off into thoughts that can really build us up. I know someone is saying right now, "What in the world are you talking about?" Let me continue. I'd like to try and tie a couple of Bible passages together that may or may not be related.

Ideas about the after-life fascinate me, how about

you? When the spirit leaves, what then? Some people have documented that they saw a great light and felt euphoria. Some research doctors say that that experience is the outcome of the brain shutting down because some endorphin is released at that time. But, regardless, what can we expect when the curtain is pulled on the last act of this life? Don't you want to know?

There is a somewhat cryptic passage of Scripture found in 2 Corinthians 12 that talks about a man, presumably Paul, who made his way to heaven and then lived to tell about it. Let's quote it here in length:

records, "They stoned Paul and dragged him outside the city, thinking he was dead. But after the disciples gathered around him, he got up and went back into the city" (14: 19,20). Could it be that the experience he records in Corinthians happened here in Lystra? Look at the supernatural elements here. Paul appears to be dead. Can you imagine being one of the disciples? You'd be in shock and disbelief. You'd have an overwhelming feeling of hopelessness. Your view would be traumatic. But if this is where Paul entered the third heaven, think about the contrast between his view and the other disciple's view. He was in paradise, they were in grief. He was in an indescribably beautiful spot, they were in a horrible spot. He was seeing things better than any earthly thing; they were seeing the depths of human cruelty.

Of course I do not know for sure if these two Bible passages coordinate as clearly as I have intertwined them, but it sure is possible. Regardless, both are quite supernatural.

Paul doesn't wake up and start talking about himself, about his great testimony; he is right away busy about proclaiming Jesus. We need to keep this in mind. The tendency in our day is to make too much out of our experiences and put the gospel in the background. The gospel is the main thing, the star of the show, the main bout; Paul knew that and went on his way making Jesus known.

Let's make Jesus known.

God's blessings are sometimes at a price,

Pastor Steve



Day 173-174

"Meetings, Meetings, Meetings"

June 22, 23 - Acts 15

Some of you spend half your life in meetings. How do you like it? Do you see the value of a good meeting? Are you sick of them? Are you finding it difficult to focus in your meetings because it's just more of the same old stuff? Some of our gatherings feel like meetings for the sake of meetings. Have you ever felt during a meeting like you could be getting so much more done if you weren't in this "boring" meeting?

Some meetings are monumental and life changing or even have an effect on the world. I am thinking of the meeting of JFK with his cabinet back during the Bay of Pigs episode in US history. It was Kennedy's restraint that eventually led to the disarmament by the Soviets from Cuba. Or what about Reagan's meetings with the leaders of the Russians. Now, those meetings had a dramatic impact on the world's landscape. So meetings can be very important. Lead-

ership makes a huge difference in meetings. If you are looking to a leader to guide you down the road of improvement and progress, then you will be much more apt to pay attention during the conference.

The church has had important meetings too. Acts 15 is one of those meetings where positive change erupted from the gathering in Jerusalem. James chaired the meeting. All of the apostles were there. Peter was fresh off of his vision of the sheet experience and the meeting with the Roman Centurion and the guests in his home. There was tension in the air because some of the Jewish believers in Jesus were saying that the new Gentile believers needed to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses in order to go to heaven. Ouch!

This was a turning point in church history. What would they decide? Was Christianity a Jewish sect? Besides belief in Jesus what was necessary for salvation?

There were strong feelings on both sides of the fence. Have you ever been in a heated meeting? Sometimes people are so fired up that they resort to name calling and character assignation to make their arguments. Fortunately, the church has God on its side to make things clear. And when it comes to salvation there was no room for haze.

What I like about the meeting in Acts 15 (from yesterday's and today's reading) is the clear-minded and sensitive thinking of the leadership. The answer to the problem was not to disregard the concern of the more strict Jewish believers nor was it to merely pacify. The truth of Jesus' death and resurrection was going to have an impact on the life of all believers and the message was always going to create controversy because of the unbelievable grace offered by God to fallen humanity.

Peter's recollection of the Cornelius episode and Paul and Barnabas recounting their work among the Gentiles was enough to silence the crowd. James then summed things up by saying that Scripture indicated that God had a plan for the Gentiles to come to Him. James said that they should not make it too hard for the Gentiles but only require them to do what would be good for them anyway. They were to stay away from idols which were operated by demons. They were to abstain from sexual immorality which would reflect God's purposes for holiness in their lives. And lastly, they were asked to not eat the meat of stran-

gled animals or blood. This last requirement would be socially taboo for Jews and would be something that could divide the church if the Gentiles were not inclined to make this commitment. Otherwise, maybe it was for health reasons as well.

Peter had summed things up when he said, "We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we (Jews) are saved, just as they are (Gentiles)" Acts 15:11. The "requirements" themselves were not what saved, God's grace saves. These were things that would help to unite Christ's body into one. Like Paul said in Ephesians, "This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs (with the Jews), members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (3:6). Changes are difficult and the apostles knew that it would take a while before the Jewish brethren were able to accept non-Jewish members into the Church.

From this meeting we get a good picture of God's love in motion in the Church. We also see how God was working behind the scenes to make His will clear to His people. Let's also apply the practice of being sensitive to others who are of a different tradition. It is too easy to lay judgments on groups before we really hear them out to see if they too are saved by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Walk in grace,

God's blessings can happen at some meetings,

Pastor Steve



Day 175

"The Lord Opened"

June 24 - Acts 16: 1-15

To My Friends In Christ,

What role did Jesus Christ play in your salvation? Now that's a loaded question, isn't it? We have already identified that salvation is in His name and in no other. The apostles were very exclu-

sive with it came to the means of a person's eternal destiny, it was by and through Jesus Christ and not another. Peter just said in yesterday's reading that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's take a second and dissect His name.



“You Bug Me!”

June 25 - Acts 16: 16-40

Lord: Supreme ruler (or Exalted Ruler); the one in charge; the Leader. The unquestioned authority who is able to render decisions at His own discretion is the Lord of a place. Those who submit to Him are called servants and bondservants obviously because they are bound to Him. In Revelation Jesus is called the Lord of lords and the King of kings. And in Corinthians Paul says that there are lords many and gods many but to the church there was one Lord and God. “For although there may be ‘so called gods in heaven or on earth - as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”-- yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Corinthians 8: 5).

Jesus: the name means “God saves.” It is the Greek for the Hebrew Joshua which means “the Lord is our salvation.” At His birth the name was given specifically because it identified His mission. His name would be Jesus because He would save His people from their sins. His name is so significant because it is through faith in His name that a person receives eternal life.

Christ: means “God’s anointed.” The Christ would be God’s deliverer as promised through the prophets. He is specifically mentioned in Psalm 2 and in Daniel 7. Paul had always thought that the Messiah would be a political deliverer. Once he met the Messiah on the road to Damascus he soon realized that the prophecies about the suffering servant of the Lord were verses about God’s Messiah fulfilled in Jesus.

Paul’s salvation experience had been very dramatic. Obviously it wasn’t the norm. Yet, when Paul was out and about spreading the Word he sensed the Lord working in the hearts of his hearers. A few chapters earlier he recognized that a lame man had the faith to be healed. And when Paul and Barnabas were on the little island of Cyprus the governor believed after Paul had rebuked a sorcerer and caused him to be blinded. Paul saw the Lord working in the lives of those he was sent to share God’s Word with.

God had clearly called the small band of missionaries to go to Macedonia, the continent where Philippi was located. Paul had seen a vision of a man pleading for him to come over and preach. When he got there the only group he could initially see was a small group of Jewish women who had met at the river for

worship. Paul shared Jesus with them. He noticed that the Lord opened Lydia’s heart so that she could respond to the message.

Interestingly, she was already a worshiper of God, but had not yet responded to the gospel of Jesus. As Paul preached to the women the Lord opened her heart and she put her faith in Jesus. Luke didn’t record what happened to the others but only highlighted her, relating that she then invited them to her home for refreshment after her entire family had also believed and were baptized.

Do you recognize that your faith was a result of the Lord opening your heart? I know that when I first heard the good news I was strangely warmed by the message. I couldn’t believe that God’s love and grace were for me. Yet the Lord was making it clear to me that He loved me and had a plan for my life. My heart was opened like a lid on a jar had been twisted off and I could be poured out before God. Why hadn’t I seen it before? Why hadn’t I grasped the truth of God’s Word in my earlier years? I think it is because of my unbelief and I needed the Lord’s help to unscrew the lid. I needed the assurance that Jesus was real and that He had truly died for me. Once I was able to see that it was not a difficult decision to come to Christ.

Is it possible that there are “worshippers of God” today who have not yet come to Christ through the gospel? Absolutely! Paul had been a “worshiper,” and he was as far from Jesus as possible. “Worshippers” may look very spiritual and appear to have their act together and still be separated from God. The gospels, and now Acts, makes it plain that a person must come to God through Jesus; he may not parade in on the merit of his own righteousness or religious affiliation or association with some “spiritual” person, he must come through the cross and believe in the resurrection of Jesus.

Hardness of heart is remedied by the gospel because once the Lord opens your heart you are ready to do all you can for the sake of the gospel. The gospel becomes the central focus in your life and you are no longer motivated by self-interests and disappointments and bitterness. Now you have a new heart, one that is pliable and tender to God and others.

God’s blessings fill a soft heart,
Pastor Steve

Be Open to God’s Leading Today, I once attended a sports awards banquet where a famous wrestling champion was the featured speaker. Actually he had excelled in wrestling at a national level but was more recently known for his exploits in the Ultimate Fighting cage. Have you ever caught one of those matches on cable? Two men are locked in a cage and fight with all parts of their bodies until one man is left standing or crawling or barely breathing. It is a brutal contest.

He had a couple of really good things to say that evening. He talked about having faith (he didn’t say in what, but at least that isn’t bad advice), then he said to believe in yourself (Ok), and then he talked about taking care of your body because you only had one and you’d have it all of your life (true indeed!). He said that we would all have to deal with difficult people, just the difference between us and him was that he was able to punch difficult people in the face. We all laughed. As a matter of fact, I’m still laughing but maybe I’d better think twice about it.

How often do I “punch” difficult people in the face by treating them as if they needed a good whooping? On the other hand, maybe sometimes a person does need a good “punch” in order to come to their senses. Maybe sometimes I am too nice to those who need a wake up call. How often do I put up with tough people hoping they will clam up and leave me and others alone when I really ought to let them have it in the chops.

I can hear someone saying that they don’t think that attitude is very “Christian.” Most of us equate being “Christian” with being nice. Well, being nice doesn’t usually get you flogged like the apostles. Why was it that Paul was consistently healing from some new wound inflicted as a result of some authority’s attempt to shut him up? What I’m not getting at is that believers ought to be bullies. That is clearly not

a Christ-like way. At the same time though it is very Christ-like to be assertive and straightforward, especially when someone is resisting the work of the gospel. Later we will read in Thessalonians about Paul’s frustration with certain Jews because they were like roadblocks in the way of others hearing the message of salvation. Paul there states that they will be judged by God for this posture.

When Paul and Barnabas are confronted by a fortune telling gal who brought much income for her brokers, the duo knew that they had a heckler on their hands. At first it might have appeared that she was for them because she was announcing that they were servants of God. Her theology may have been right but her technique was nothing but annoying. She went on like this for several days. At some point the apostolic party realized that she was demon possessed. It had been a spirit that was giving her the ability to predict the future. She may have seemed to be a friend but actually she was a distraction to the work of the gospel.

Do you have a difficult person in your life? Have you been putting up with them for too long? Does it appear that they have a different spirit? Is it time to take action?

Paul was at the end of his rope with this and turned and addressed, not the woman, but the spirit in her and essentially told it to get lost. The result was that the woman was relieved of the inward menace and Paul was relieved of the outward menace. Luke records these things with the interest of an artist who is painting his subjects. This was interesting stuff. This was the kind of thing that made for real life drama. I’m sure Luke must have been amazed at the power of the Lord.

Interestingly enough, Paul and Barnabas end up beaten and imprisoned for their efforts. They are not deterred though because they knew that the Lord

would take care of them. Well, He did. Their jail time ended in the salvation of the jailer and his family. There we have one of the most famous dialogues in the Bible: "What must I do to be saved," the distraught Barney Fife says, and then Paul responds, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved and your household."

Have you prayed for that difficult person you are dealing with?

Have you addressed the "spirit" in them before

you "punch" him/her?

Remember, "we wrestle not against flesh and blood," but against all kinds of wicked spirits who are real and who often control the difficult ones.

Make today an adventure - be open to sharing the good news with someone, who knows, maybe you'll end up down at the county jail. If you do, I'll come down and visit you.

God's blessings have a punch,

Pastor Steve



Day 177

"More Noble Character"

June 26 - Acts 17: 1-21

Most people are followers. Their attitude is "tell me what to believe and I'll believe it." "Peer pressure" for most simply means following a bad leader. Did you ever get in trouble because you were going with the wrong crowd? The friends we run with will and have had a big influence on our lives. Proverbs is full of verses that warn about having the right kind of friends. To be wise you need to find wise people and make friends with them.

Why is it that we usually want someone to just tell us what we ought to believe? Simply put, laziness. We don't want to do the hard work of thinking for ourselves and deciding what we think about our own well being. So we trust people and sometimes end up getting hurt or ripped off. A good salesman can make manure smell good. This is especially true in the world of religious scams. Just because someone sounds believable or looks believable doesn't mean he is peddling the real thing. Many false teachers have gone out into the world to prey on the unsuspecting. "But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon

themselves swift destruction" 2 Peter 2: 1.

Some people are inquisitive by nature. They want to know why? Others don't care why, they just want to know what works. If it makes life easier or more convenient or less obtrusive or more fun, then they are for it. This was the philosophy of the drug using generations. They'd say they weren't hurting anyone and were only wanting peace, but it was this same crowd that proliferated the sale of illegal narcotics and set an entire generation on the road of self-destruction because of the escalation of harder and harder drugs. The people who take the time to ask the tough questions are often the ones who avoid many of the pitfalls that others land in.

As Paul preached the message of Jesus, many believed. Some opposed. The ones who opposed usually incited a public outcry against the work of the apostles. When Paul got to Berea, he and Luke were impressed by their eagerness to check their Bibles to confirm the message of the apostles. They weren't going to just believe anyone. Even Paul, who had quite a strict background in Jewish affairs, theology included. They dug in and studied the passages Paul would quote and apply to the life

and teachings of Jesus.

I can remember lining up for class registration in college. The word would get out that if you wanted to skate through a certain course then you needed such and such teacher. So and so was the tough prof, so don't take him or you'd be working your tail off all term. But guess what, I always learned more in a tougher class. I once had a little 2 unit class where the teacher thought he was the only class I had. He piled the work on. I learned more from that class than many of my heavy 4 unit ones. The point is that hard work always pays off and will also keep you out of trouble. If you take the easy road, prepare yourself for a sloppy and less satisfying life.

I'll never forget something my uncle told my cousin after the first day she worked as a postal carrier. She was exasperated and wanted to give up after only one go around. She called her dad and laid the trouble she had had on him. She went on and on about just how impossible it was and how she couldn't find half of the places she was supposed to be and how dog tired she was and so on and so on. My uncle said to her, "That's why they call it work."

It is hard work to stay committed to someone or something. Marriage is hard work. School is hard work. Work is hard work. Reading your Bible and applying it to your life is hard work. The Bereans were of a more noble character because they worked hard to understand what the apostle was teaching. Did it pay off? If you dig into the Word it will always pay off. God's riches in His Word is the greatest treasure there is in life.

Let's work hard today and tomorrow. Why not? Let's take on the attitude that we are going to kick it hard for the next few days. Let's read our Bibles with more enthusiasm, let's take life on with greater trust in the promises of God. Let's believe the Scripture and live like our lives depended on it. What do you have to lose? Nothing! What do you have to gain? Everything! Let's be like the Bereans and dig deeper into the Word and mine out of it the kind of treasure that makes Wall Street look like a sidewalk lemonade stand. Go for it!!

God's blessings,

Pastor Steve



Day 178

"Temples"

June 27 - Acts 17:22 - 18:8

I Hope You Are in Good Health Today,

From the beginning man has erected monuments and built magnificent structures for his gods. Why do we do this? I think there can be both positive and negative reasons. On the negative side would be things like: the need to contain our gods or corral them so that we could understand them; also, we may seek to appease them so that they will not squash us. Our buildings become sacrifices to maintain unity with them; another less desirable reason would be the desire to bring heaven to earth or, in

other words, we may try to make the earthly into the heavenly. So we create our own little heaven on earth and are deceived into thinking that life will go on forever on this planet.

On the positive side might be: to simply show God that we appreciate Him and so we want to have a beautiful place that reflects His beauty and our desire to meet and praise Him there; or, the structures could reflect the gifts God gave to some in order to create masterpieces like those made for worship; or, a place is made to facilitate the gathering of God's people for

worship and the focus is not on the place but on the Creator.

In the early eighties I was fortunate enough to go to the very place where Paul stood the day he addressed the Greek seekers and philosophers of his day which is recorded in our reading today. It was a thrilling feeling to be on that little hill, called Mars Hill and look up and see the famous Acropolis where the ancient Greeks paid homage to their gods. It was here that Paul pointed to the beautiful works of art and construction and talked about the Unknown God. As I stood on Mars Hill with the little tour group I had come with, one of our number got up and recited Paul's sermon by heart to us and others who gathered there. That was a memorable experience. God doesn't dwell in temples made by human ingenuity but He lives all around us and in those who have turned from their old way of life to the living God.

Later on that same trip I was able to visit the pyramids in Egypt and then we were on to Jerusalem which is highlighted by the eye-catching Dome of the Rock, a Muslim holy place that glows in its golden color as the sun shines down on it. In Paul's day there was also a temple in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord God. It was a temple that had been constructed after the Jews' return from captivity in the 400's B.C. and was renovated by King Herod in the first century B.C. There is a model of this temple to scale in the city today and from it you can gather a pretty good appreciation of its former splendor. For many, certain locations and temples and burial chambers are sacred places. When they visit them they feel close to their god or their forebears.

In every culture there is a belief of some sort that reflects that people's view of how we got here and what the "god (s)" expects of us. The basis of a great deal of these views is mythology or fantasy or tradition. Someone at some time came up with the idea and it stuck. In a number of cultures, especially African and Indian there is a belief that god, or the spirits of god, is everything and is in everything. The problem is that the "gods" are not always friendly and so the people live in fear and are constantly trying to make friends with these spirits. This belief is called animism.

Other cultures throughout history have bowed

down to idols and have treated objects as their gods. This was a prevalent practice of the people in Canaan when Joshua led the troops in to conquer the land. Many Old Testament prophets spoke disparagingly of the practice of idolatry and pointed out the absurdity of making your own gods as if they could ever have any true power.

In our world today there is still a wide array of belief systems about deity.

Muslims: worship Allah, the god proclaimed by the "prophet" Mohammed. A Muslim hopes for eternal life and reward based on his commitment and obedience to the Koran.

Hindus: a system to appease the gods while journeying to godhood.

Buddhists: a plan for salvation (an 8-fold path) by the effort of man.

Jews: salvation through obedience to the traditions of their faith.

Mormons: a system built on non-Biblical "revelation" designed to create human perfection and eventually godhood.

Jehovah Witnesses: a system designed to invoke fear and obedience to its organizational leadership with the hope of good works rewarded with a future blissful life right here on planet earth.

Roman Catholics: a priestly system whereby a person can come to God as long as he is obedient to the system and maintains good works. (see my P.S. below)

To the Greeks in Athens and to the members of these organizations Paul would still say the same things: God is outside the limits of human ingenuity and purpose; God is not about the elaborate boxes we give Him to live in; God created all things, placed humans where He wanted them and He governs their lives because He wants men to know Him and worship Him as their Creator. Salvation is not the result of perfect religious form or having a system that seems to "work," it is a result of faith in the resurrected Jesus. A person must turn (repent) from his own futile thinking and lifestyle and embrace the living Jesus. Faith in Jesus saves.

Every religious system, whether it includes elements of Jesus or not, creates insecurity because the focus is not on Christ but on human effort or human

sincerity. A person is left to guess whether they are really good enough to make it into God's kingdom. Usually too, the system has to create a set of documents in order to corroborate their aberrant views.

The believer has not learned Jesus in this way. The believer is saved by grace through his faith in Jesus. He is guided by the sixty-six inspired books (39 of the Old Testament approved by the Lord Jesus and the 27 of the New approved by the Lord Jesus ahead of time; He said that the Spirit would oversee the establishment of His Words once He was gone and that the Spirit would bring back to mind the things about Him that would need to be recorded) of the Bible and is not swayed by the charisma of man or the words of any other "holy" writing. The believer is connected to Jesus as a branch is connected to a vine; he is one with his Lord and can be happy and joyful that the Lord has saved him.

Give thanks today if you are saved by grace!

Continue to leave the system of self-effort that you may have clung to in years past. Instead, look to the Lord for the security you need to follow the resurrected Jesus.

Note in Paul's sermon the simplicity of the gospel - no temples needed, no works trip necessary, no

man-centered philosophy required; just Jesus and Him crucified and resurrected! All praise to His grace!!

God's blessings fall down outside buildings,
Pastor Steve

P.S. Let me try to make something as clear as I can. There can be and often are people who have attached themselves to various religious groups that are not Bible-centered who have sincerely at one time made a commitment to the Jesus of the Bible. In the meantime for whatever reason they may have been drawn away into a system that they are not fully aware of what is being taught by its leaders. For example, I believe Hindus and Muslims are much further off track than a Catholic, but I cannot help but identify non-biblical ideas and practices in the Catholic tradition. The fact that Catholics believe in the Trinity and Christ's deity gives me reason to hope in a common ground with them even though I struggle with their deification of Mary and their "saved by works" mentality. I am aware that this point may raise some eyebrows, but that's ok as long as it spurs us on to search the Scripture to see if these things are so.



Day 179

"Apollos, Mighty in the Scriptures"

June 28 - Acts 18: 9 - 19:13

Recently I was talking with a couple who was having some serious marriage problems. If you are married then you know first-hand how tensions can run high in your relationship. This couple is facing relationship ending issues. One of the partners has addictions.

I could give advice.

I could help the couple to talk openly about their circumstances.

I could give them reassurance of one sort or another.

I could tell them what has worked for me when my marriage was struggling.

I could help them to get organized.

I did a portion of this list but all of these approaches fall short of the importance for them of getting into the Scriptures. It's one thing to tell someone what they should do and quite another to help them

take up the “sword of the Spirit” and wield it against the enemies in their life. You’ve heard the lesson that it is much more productive to teach someone to fish rather than give them a fish. Psalm 119 boldly states, “Thy Word have I hid in my heart that I may not sin against Thee.” The Word has a powerful impact on the inward part of a person so that they can make changes on the outside.

And so I talked about getting into the Word and being filled with the Holy Spirit and the need for Christian fellowship. As I shared these simple truths, their interest level grew and grew. It gave them hope. I gave them something to lean on that was much bigger than me or my advice. It gave them the knowledge that God was bigger than their problem and that through Him they could find answers. We read from Romans 8 together.

Apollos was strong in the Word. He was a student of the Scriptures. He knew the Scriptures and where to take someone to show them the things about Jesus they needed to know. He was teachable because after Aquila and Priscilla heard him they pulled him aside and shared with him some of the essentials of the faith that he had not yet learned. Then Apollos is sent on his way to share the gospel and publicly tell people the things necessary to help them believe in Jesus.

Being a disciple (follower of Christ) means that we are students of Christ. We desire and are committed to following Him and imitating Him full-time. For many believers there is a specific time in their spiritual journey when they realize that being a Christian means not just Sunday and one evening during the week but 24/7. For me I was aware of this commit-

ment from the time I first heard the gospel. The work of Christ on the cross and His love for me means to me complete commitment. How can we give Him only half of our hearts when He gave His all for us?

Apollos is a great role model for all of us. He should encourage us to study the Word like we never have before. What do we have to lose except our ego-tism that only weighs us down anyway. Apollos was mighty in the Scriptures. He knew what the Bible said. He was confident in his understanding of the Word. He could explain it to others as well and help them to come to know the Lord Jesus.

Let’s go a little deeper this summer in the Word. Let’s take more time to look up specific words that catch our attention and see how they are used in other chapters of the Bible. If you have access to a concordance then you can do this very easily. There is some good software or just a copy of Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible would do. By using the concordance you can expand your knowledge of the Bible by going deeper in this way. There are other tools for Bible study that can be helpful. I’ll take some time in the future to expound on these things. In the meantime, take the time to dig deeper into the treasury of God’s Word.

Be an Apollos.

Read, study and think about Bible truth. It will wash your soul and strengthen your heart.

Look for opportunities to share it with others. God’s Word will help them more than we ever could.

God’s blessings,

Pastor Steve



“ Who Are You?”

June 29 - Acts 19: 14-41

I love to see kids pretend and play in the land of make believe. Their little minds are circling away as they venture off into far away places in order to take on horrible creatures or explore new planets. What a gift the imagination is and what a sad thing it is when somewhere along the line we lose our ability to use our minds in a creative way. Some kids can play for hours with a stick and a ball. I remember that I used to imagine myself playing baseball for the Los Angeles Dodgers. I was out there at first base snagging line drives and grounders just like a pro.

One time I had a dream that I was playing short-stop for the Dodgers and we were at Candlestick Park in San Francisco playing the Giants. The dream was so real. Scary real. I can remember thinking that I hoped the ball wasn’t hit to me. The crowd was shouting and the pitcher was winding up and the batter cracked one a mile high in the air somewhere above my head. I spun around a couple of times and fell to the ground before there was any hope of catching the ball. What a nightmare! I soon woke, relieved that I was only dreaming. It was cool to be on the team for an inning, though. That was the extent of my big league play.

I think kids need to really be encouraged to imagine. Pretending is a good thing and a creative thing growing up. I do think it unlocks something in our minds that helps us to think better. Sometimes we get too downright set in our thinking patterns and we need to be jarred out of the rut that we sink into. On the other hand, there are some very important areas where it is detrimental to pretend. When you pretend you are something you are not and try and convince others that you are that thing you can wind up in a world of hurt. Every week in every Christian church across the country there are pretenders. There are those who come to church and go through the motions; they might even look or act more spiritual than the real McCoys. A kid may pretend he is an astro-

naut and sit at the pretend controls of his spaceship and he might make rocket sounds and even spread his arms and zoom around the room, but no one really believes he is an astronaut. But if an adult pretends to be a Christian it can be very hard to spot his guise. He can learn all of the right lingo and he can get baptized and he can even teach a Sunday School class and at the same time be pretending all along. Sometimes the people in this position know they are pretending and sometimes they are so deceived they do not even know it.

The sons of an influential Jewish fellow named Sceva were impressed by Paul’s ability to cast out devils. They thought they would practice the same thing in the way that Paul did it, using the name of Jesus as their trump card against the evil spirits. What they didn’t realize was that the name of Jesus was not like a garlic necklace used to ward off Dracula. They also didn’t realize that you had to be a follower of Jesus to use the authority that came with the name of Jesus. They could pretend as they did but they soon found out that they didn’t have the authority they thought they could access by simply using the Name of Jesus.

They got beat up. They were shamed; the evil spirits even disrobed some of them. Picture the looks of terror on their faces as they flee the seen of their folly. They had pretended to be something they were not and the results for them were debilitating. Jesus said that in the end time some would call Him Lord and try to convince Him that they were true servants of His but He would respond to them that He never had made their acquaintance. Maybe they had even done some things in His name and had impressed others, but in the end it turns out they were only pretending. They were the great pretenders. They were in it for other reasons than the love of God. As a matter of fact, there are some aspects of Christianity that do draw the pretenders: the need to have a fam-

ily - sometimes people come and tolerate the spiritual practice of the faith so that they can be accepted by a Christian church family; answers to prayer - they see spiritual things happening and want to think they are part of it but in reality they have not made a commitment to Jesus, to follow Him; they may enjoy certain aspects of a worship service like the music - they feel inspired to be a better person when they are around others who are worshipping God and they do enjoy the upbeat music but they still have not embraced Jesus; they may want to feel important - many people have made up grandiose stories of how God has done this or that in their life only to be applauded by others. Some have even admitted later that it was all a hoax and that they really did not have the experiences they once claimed; people want to be considered spiritual - they think it is important to have a spiritual M.O. so they put on a spiritual pretend front to feel "spiritual."

Who are you?

A child of God through faith in the finished work of Jesus on the cross?

Have you crossed the line of faith by putting your hope in the work of Christ?

Let's not be like the person in this famous Platters song:

The Great Pretender

Oh-oh, yes I'm the great pretender
Pretending that I'm doing well
My need is such I pretend too much
I'm lonely but no one can tell
Oh-oh, yes I'm the great pretender
Adrift in a world of my own
I've played the game but to my real shame
You've left me to grieve all alone
Too real is this feeling of make-believe
Too real when I feel what my heart can't conceal
Yes I'm the great pretender
Just laughin' and gay like a clown
I seem to be what I'm not, you see
I'm wearing my heart like a crown
Pretending that you're still around
Too real is this feeling of make-believe
Too real when I feel what my heart can't conceal
Yes I'm the great pretender
Just laughin' and gay like a clown
I seem to be what I'm not, you see
I'm wearing my heart like a crown
Pretending that you're still around

Let's live our faith sincerely today.
God's blessings should not be misused,
Pastor Steve

He'd get knocked down and then up he'd pop and then down he'd go and then up and finally the referee stopped the fight. I was glad to see it end because every time he got up he looked a bit more bruised and dazed. The poor guy was getting dominated and no matter what he did there was no relief. He was helpless against his foe.

I couldn't help but think that the poor bloodied man was a picture of so many people today. So many people that we know are getting bloodied and battered in life and they get knocked down and they get up, but when they arise something is taken out of them. The drive is gone, the will to fight is stunned. They have sort of a far away look in their eyes and you can feel with them that they feel doomed. Can you relate? So what do you do when you feel like you are on the ropes or you have a friend who is on the ropes and they appear to have already lost before the fight is over? Can they be saved by the bell? Can they take a time out and get their act together before the next round? Where do they turn when they ache all over?

Remember the Rocky saga? Remember when he is practically out of it and he's sitting in his corner with swollen eyes and he cannot see a thing and he says to Mick, his trainer, "Cut me, Mick!" He was at his lowest low so many times in that five film series that we were always rooting for a comeback even though we were pretty sure Rocky would come through. What I like most about those films was the training segments in them. Rocky was certainly the underdog most of the time, but he trained like there was no tomorrow. He really went for it. Remember when he ate the raw eggs and went for a run through the streets of Philly? That was determination. Rocky had the inspiration of his trainer, of Adrian his wife, his "kid," and others throughout the series. It was these people who gave him the inspiration to go on when he was low. All of us need ENCOURAGEMENT to fight the good fight.

A good part of Paul's ministry was about encouraging the church. He wanted those who had received Jesus to go on with Him and continue to grow with Him. He was consistently revisiting believers in various cities and encouraging them in their faith. He was also constantly contending against adversaries

who would spread false reports about him in order to discourage the faith of new babes in Christ.

Paul's letters were meant to encourage also. So that is a major purpose of the Bible. It was written to encourage you in your faith in Jesus. If you get discouraged then you should be able to find encouragement from the pages of your Bible. One of my favorite verses about Scripture is found in Romans 15. It says, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (verse 4). Do you need hope? Do you feel like you're headed for the canvas? Are you dazed by life's ups and downs? God invites us to find help in the Scriptures. We can go there and drink as if from a living well of spiritual nourishment and life-giving energy.

We all need encouragement. We all are bombarded by spiritual foes who seek to bring us down. We all need to be cleansed and refreshed daily by the forgiving grace and blood of Jesus. We all need to stay alert to the temptations that can stir us off course. Where do you go when you are down? Do you get up, ready to fight again, but in the back of your mind you know you're going down again? If so, regroup. Take a one time defeat in order to go back to the training room and train like you've never trained before.

Rocky and Adrian had just had their first baby, but in the process Adrian almost died and was barely hanging on to life. Rocky, against his own will and desire, had decided not to fight any longer in order to please her. He's leaning over her at her hospital bed and she whispers for him to bend closer so she can say something to him. "Win." Rocky, in his fumbling way says, "Huh?" "Win." Mick, standing by the bed says, "What are we waiting fer?"

Let me say to you today, "Win." "Go back into training and go to battle again with more determination and fight than you have ever had. Don't allow past defeats to discourage you."

"What are we waiting fer?"

God's blessings happen in the ring of life,
Pastor Steve



"We All Need It"

June 30 - Acts 20: 1-38

My son and I used to watch boxing. I know some of you think I have a screw loose somewhere but isn't it better that I just tell you about my problems rather than hide the truth. Sometimes we watched Classic ESPN where they showed old big time fights like with Mohammad Ali or

George Foreman (you know, the guy who sells hamburger grills now) or Joe Frasier or Mike Tyson. It was a point of connection for my son and I - that justifies it, doesn't it?

Well, once we were watching a kickboxing match and this one guy was getting the tar beat out of him.

**“Even If”**

July 1 - Acts 21: 1-26

People with a singular focus are a pain in the neck. Why can't they talk about anything else but what they are into? Why can't they listen to what you are into for a change and lighten up a bit? Why is it that every time you are around them they have to be talking about...you know...what they are into? They don't care if “their thing” is difficult, dangerous or offensive to others. They are into it and that is that!

Even if a person like this bugs you, you have to admire their drive for what they believe in, don't you? They are not wishy-washy or unclear. Everyone around them knows what they are about. When I was in high school I had a golf club in my hand all of the time. Any one who knew me knew I was driven to be the best I could be at it. When I wasn't playing golf I was thinking about it, even though I would admit I thought about girls too. But golf was most important. I ate, slept and breathed golf.

Some of you might think that was an inferior goal. That is the usual response by those who do not see the importance of what you think you are doing. Everyone has a right to their own opinion. But it is still, to some degree, a good thing to be focused, directed and energized in a way that produces results. Even if golf was an inferior pursuit it still gave me something to shoot for and a purpose to get out of bed in the morning and pursue. I think this happens to quite a number of people. They dedicate themselves to something and then later in their life find a higher purpose but they already know what it means to be on a mission for something so they insert that same kind of enthusiasm into the thing that makes their motor run.

The Apostle Paul was like this. He says in his letters to the churches that there was really no one like him in his pursuit for the traditions of the Jewish elders. He was an ardent advocate for Judaism's road

to salvation. He lived for it and stood up for it and persuaded others to do the same. So when Paul was found by the risen Lord he immediately applied his fervor to the service of Jesus.

Some liberals in our day think that the things recorded by the evangelists in the first century were made up later, maybe in the second or third century A.D., as a way to promote their ideas and religion. They would say that the experiences of Paul and others were made up as teaching tools to help us become good people. Those thoughts are a thousand miles south of bogus. Every credible eyewitness in the first century who knew Paul would be able to attest to the fact that this man was now obsessed with the crucifixion and resurrection of the Man from Galilee. If a first century person were to sit down with a modern critic and talk about these things the eyewitness would be looking at the modern scholar with a quizzical expression thinking, “Is this person nuts or something?” Who would know better: a first century associate of Paul like Luke or Barnabas or a modern “scholar” who is looking back after two-thousand years? You be the judge.

But putting all of that aside there are really bigger fish to fry in this section of Scripture we are reading today. The question is: Why would Paul journey to Jerusalem knowing that he would most likely be persecuted or killed for his testimony about Jesus? The answer is merely an echo of what we were saying above. Paul was on mission. He had a singular purpose and that was to bring the gospel to all men. It didn't matter to him regarding his own safety because he knew the Lord would be with him no matter what. And even if the church was, out of deep concern for him, trying to persuade him to not go he would go anyway because he felt he needed to talk in Jerusalem about the grace of God.

I think there is another reason as well. I think

Paul wanted to clarify for the Jews that he was not anti-Jew. How could he be, he was one, but he has been so misunderstood because of his stand for Jesus. He also knew that the church in Jerusalem, led by James the brother of the Lord, needed the affirmation that Paul, the well-known revolutionary for Jesus, was not trying to make a Jew into a Gentile. Paul's mission was to bring Jesus' Messiahship into the forefront of Jewish life and religious practice. This idea was met with opposition by the elders of the Jews.

Where are you going?

What do you stand for?

When people think about you who or what do

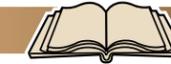
they associate you with?

Is it time to make a greater resolve about your connection to Jesus?

If so, let's begin in prayer and let God know that we want Him to be the center of our lives. With Christ at the center, before you know it, He will work in your life from that place and make a way for you and I to make Him known to others. Not all of us will have the influence of a Paul, no doubt, but all of us can be inspired by his life. Let's be.

God's blessings push us to do the unthinkable,

Pastor Steve

**“ Paul's Mission”**

July 2 - Acts 21:27 - 22:21

I have always admired artists. I also marvel at the people who have been involved in creating great things like giant ships or large suspension bridges or tall buildings. The brain power and creativity behind these projects is pretty amazing. All of these feats are a picture of the God who made the men and women who make the things that dazzle us. I think we have to be careful too, because remember what happened when the Tower of Babel was built as a monument to man's greatness? It stood as an indication to the builders and those who watched it that man could be his own god and that he really didn't need his Creator.

Museums are made so that we can admire the more amazing things in life. There is a museum for almost any pursuit man has endeavored. They say that at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington D.C., you can spend days walking the hallways and gawk at all of the things on display from history. Museums can glorify God or they can glorify man. When we admire we are not far from worship, are we? We admire and

we allow our will and our passions to move toward the object that we are looking at.

Religions, like museums, are halls of fame where the most “spiritual” among them is exalted. Religion promotes competition and rivalry. The reason for this is that the ladder for success is based on a person's standing and progress in that particular religious system. The more a person excels in the system the more esteem he receives from his fellows. Pretty soon after he has reached the top of the ladder he becomes the object of admiration and envy. He has arrived. He has demonstrated that he can achieve spiritual superiority over the rest and so he is worthy of museum-like status. He has become the Jack Nicklaus of his religion. So when he is dead the things associated with him are also memorialized along with his memory.

This is true because religious systems are based on performance. It's a gold star mentality. Depending on the amount of effort you put out you will be able to earn stars. Hopefully, but not assuredly, you might



“ The Lord Stood Near ”

July 3 - Acts 22:22 - 23:11

make it through the pearly gates as long as you have enough stars in your “works bag.” This was Paul’s mentality too before he came to Jesus. He would have been in the Who’s Who of religious zealots. If salvation were measured by works then Paul would have been first in line. Many times through the letters to the churches he has to appeal to his former life to make sure people know that his boasting was not in himself but in Christ. As a matter of fact, Paul thought all such boasting was vain.

In our reading today Paul’s arrest and speech on the steps of the prison are recorded for our benefit. Paul was using this very volatile situation as an opportunity to proclaim Jesus to his Jewish brothers. What I’d like to focus on is the mission that the Lord entrusted to him at the time of his new found faith in Jesus. We can learn much from this speech about boldness and using opportunities for the Lord, but today let’s zero in on the apostle’s call.

Ananias was used by God to send Paul on his way. I find four elements in the commission of a man who would change the world. First of all God would show him what His will was. Later in the letters Paul would say that the mystery of the gospel was made known to him through revelation. God would clarify over and over to him the message and application of the gospel. God’s will became a central theme and would dominate his life. This was also a theme in Paul’s prayers. He wanted to know and do the will of God and wanted the church to do the same.

Secondly, Paul would “see the Righteous One.” Think about that. A number of times throughout his ministry he would meet up with the risen Jesus. Whether through a vision or a personal encounter, he would have the privilege of having personal instruc-

tion by the Master. In 1 Corinthians 15 he says, “And last of all He was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time.” When Ananias met with him he had already had his experience on the road where he had seen Jesus, but now he was referring to future times when he’d see Jesus.

Next, Ananias said that he’d hear words from His mouth. He’d hear the voice of Jesus. Audibly? Probably. In his heart or spirit? For sure. Spiritually by the Holy Spirit? Certainly. Jesus spoke to Paul. Jesus led him from one place to another and gave him instructions so that he could admonish the church and give the church words that would later guide the church for centuries. Paul would refer to spiritual understanding when he prayed for the church. This, no doubt, would come as a result of hearing the Word of the Lord from the mouth of the Lord Jesus.

Lastly, Paul would be a witness of his experiences with Jesus. He’d have opportunities to share with others the good news of salvation through the Messiah Jesus. This was exactly what he was doing that day in Jerusalem when the crowd went crazy with hatred of him and wanted to kill him. We too can take the opportunity to tell others about what Jesus has done in our lives. Has the Lord given you hope? Has He given you security? Do you now know the peace of God that passes human understanding? Do you enjoy the gift of eternal life that Jesus earned on the cross for you? If so, you will not be a museum piece, you will be a living disciple of the Master who will reflect His glory to others and boast in the cross and not in your own righteousness.

God’s blessings put us on mission,
Pastor Steve

My girlfriend was going to meet me in about a half hour at the bandstand in Disneyland so that we could spend the night celebrating our high school graduation. In the meantime I was goofing around with a few friends and was really enjoying the frivolity of it all. There was no better feeling than finally being finished with school and books and teacher’s dirty looks. Well, this one girl who had been a friend of mine for some time ran up to me and landed in my lap. I was laughing and she was laughing and...you guessed it, my girlfriend came along. She bee-lined it straight ahead and away and I just assumed she’d cool down and come around. She didn’t. I sat and waited for a while. My other friends were already away too, waiting in line for the rides, etc. Now you can really feel sorry for me. Yep, I spent the night circumventing the labyrinth called the “happiest place on earth.”

I think rejection and loneliness are two of the cruelest devils one could come up against. It’s kind of like being kicked when you are down. When someone puts you off, along comes the blues to rub it in. They are also pretty unrelenting kind of like the grip of a pit bull. You can try to do stuff to feel better but actually it will take some time to get over the intensity of the emotion of it all. Look at me; I’m still crying the blues after forty years. I was robbed of a good time at a time in my life when a good time was what it was all about. You’d think I would have met up with someone that night I knew, but no, I spent the entire night with me, myself and I. The park was so crowded with grads from schools all over that I didn’t run into a single soul I knew. About two in the morning I think I began to hallucinate because I thought I saw my girl in other’s faces but every time I zeroed in I was wrong. I spent the whole bus trip home glaring at her. I was ticked!

If you have ever met these beasts (I mean rejection and loneliness, not a girl) then you too un-

derstand the hopelessness they provoke. We were meant for fellowship with friends and family and it is cruel when we are isolated from human love and affection. We need others. We need to be connected to others. If not, I think eventually we will dry up in some way. How many people do you know who have isolated themselves from others and spend most of the time entertaining themselves and getting intoxicated? Loneliness is an ache that needs a healing ointment, it doesn’t just go away on its own.

Most of us begin with our relationships with others before we even consider a relationship with God. All human relationships are just a small picture of the fount of all relationships which springs from the heart of God. That is why Jesus spoke of God in such personal terms. He was to be addressed as “Father.” He was not some abstract out of the way deity, He was a “Daddy.” He could be approached and related to in closer terms than we would look to our own fathers for, for our identity and security.

The Apostle Paul was a man who knew the difficulties of life. In his Corinthian letters he chronicles some of the hardships that he encountered. He went through it all and we’ll save our thunder for when we reach those books. For now let’s simply state that Paul was a man who had a rugged way. He also had a big heart for people as well. It just killed him when they resisted the gospel. His mission was to save them but so often they only ridiculed him and the message of the gospel.

Did Paul need encouragement? Who doesn’t? We all need it and the apostle is not exception. After the tumult in Jerusalem “the Lord stood near Paul and said, ‘Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.’” Paul knew at that point that Jesus would deliver him from the hungry wolves who were making vows to do him in. The Lord stood by him and spoke to him just like

Ananias had said He would do in the beginning when Paul received his initial orders from the Lord.

Friend, take courage in Jesus because He is standing next to you as well. Don't let the world or the devil or your wandering mind lead you off course. Jesus is standing by and He will encourage you. He will infuse you with courage. Don't you find it interesting that Luke records that the Lord was standing by Paul? Jesus lived in him but at this juncture Paul needed to know that He was standing by and would guide him on his way.

He will guide you as well. He is not finished with you. He has plans for you and will speak to you and show you the way to go.

Why not trust that the Lord will be your strength on the right and on the left? Why not stake your faith on the solid rock of God's love and grace in Jesus. Jesus had you in mind when He was being crucified and when He was raised He raised you with Him forever. Rejoice!!

God's blessings are standing right by you,
Pastor Steve



Day 185

"Hungry Yet??"

July 4 - Acts 23: 12-35

Have you ever hated someone so much you wished they were dead? Some must because people end up that way; dead, I mean. I don't think I have ever really hated someone that much but there was a girl; she left me for someone else. That was a devastating time in my life. It felt like the glass of my soul was shattered. I don't think she even realized how much damage she had caused. I cannot say I didn't have brutal thoughts about her demise. Then as time and forgiveness teachings passed by, I didn't want to see her harmed any longer.

The Apostle Paul was hated because of his stand for Jesus. Paul could not and would not keep his mouth shut when it came to talking about the risen Christ. In Jerusalem this became a more acute problem because of the anti-Christian sentiment among the Jews there. You have to wonder what the other apostles were enduring as well. There were various persecutions which drove many believers out of the "City of Peace." And actually in Paul's case, he was trying to be careful about not offending the Jewish brass. It didn't work because

they were ready to kill him. They could not accept the teaching that Jesus was alive from the grave. It didn't set well with them because they realized the ramifications of making a commitment to Jesus. In some cases it would mean rejection by their families. As you may know from experience, Jews are a very tight knit people and very proud and very slow to make any major shifts in their belief system. Jesus didn't fit their thinking and that was that.

More than forty men had made a vow not to eat or drink until Paul was dead. And so they formed a conspiracy to kill him in ambush the day after he entered the prison barracks. Unbeknownst to them though Paul's nephew got wind of the plot and blew the whistle. The Roman commander then made plans to transport Paul safely up north to the Roman governor for a fair trial. What a surprise this must have been for the conspirators. I wonder how many died of starvation. You know, in their culture if you made a vow, you kept the vow.

It wasn't Paul's time to die. God has our times in His hands. He knows when we'll be born and

when we will die. No one can change the plans of the Lord when it comes to life and death; Jesus holds the keys to life and death. It was not Paul's time. During Jesus ministry, he said several times that His time was not yet. In other words, Jesus knew what God's timetable was and the plans of man would not interfere with the divine plan.

One of my favorite Psalms is the second one. It pictures man plotting against the Almighty. He makes his plans in secret to undo the will of God and the Lord God is in the heavens and he laughs because He knows the end of all men and He sees the arrogance of man and all his plans but knows that His plans will stand no matter how fearsome man may be. Listen to how the Message describes Psalm 2:

Why the big noise, nations?
Why the mean plots, peoples?
Earth-leaders push for position,
Demagogues and delegates meet for summit talks,
The God-deniers, the Messiah-defiers;
"Let's get free of God!
Cast loose from Messiah!"
Heaven-throned God breaks out laughing,
At first he's amused at their presumptions;
Then he gets good and angry.
Furiously, he shuts them up:
"Don't you know there's a King in Zion? A corona-

tion banquet
Is spread for him on the holy summit."

Man plans his way and the Lord directs his steps. The group of 40+ were hot in pursuit of doing their own will and didn't realize that God had different ideas. God still had work for Paul to do and until God was done with him there would be no murder.

Do you trust in the daily sovereignty of God in your life? Do you realize that nothing can happen to you today without the Lord first going before you to guide your steps? For God, all of history is on delay mode. Once a friend of mine was at a baseball game at Anaheim Stadium in California. I was talking to him on the phone and watching the game at the same time on TV. It struck me weird that he was calling the action about 5 seconds before it was shown on TV. There was a delay. My friend wanted to bet me on what would happen next because, of course, he knew what would happen before I did. Well, God knows the end from the beginning. The difference is that He can work in the hearts and minds of the players and give the players certain abilities and affect the judgment of the ump. And God is more involved in the game of life than we really know. Remember how big and smart and mighty He really is.

We can trust in His sovereignty because He loves us in Jesus Christ.

God's blessings,
Pastor Steve



Day 186

" A Clear Mind"

July 5 - Acts 24: 1- 27

I Hope Your Day is Bright,
Someone once said that "the mind was a horrible thing to waste," and I think I'm with them on that. Scientists say we only use a very small portion

of it and I have found that the portion we do use can sometimes play tricks on us. The mind is one more indication that God is the Creator of all things. God thinks.

We were made in the image of God.

We think. Unfortunately, not at God's level.

Like a healthy body, a healthy mind doesn't just happen. It needs to be fed and exercised in order to function at maximum capacity. The mind is like the control center of the soul. I define the soul as the person. So the soul encompasses the mind and conscious and sub-conscious, spirit, and body. We call people "souls," don't we? We'll say things like, "that poor soul is really going through a tough time." When we say this we mean the person. Anyway, the mind is like control central for every other function of the person. When the mind is being used productively then the person will be successful. When the mind is being wasted then the person will waste his life.

How do you think? How's your brain? What's playing on the screen of your conscious mind? Are you happy with the way you think or do you get discouraged because your thoughts sometimes get out of control? What have you been feeding your mind lately? Let's take some time to think about the way we think. In our reading today the apostle Paul gives us a line about his own thinking that will help us to refresh our minds.

Some people have disturbing thoughts on a regular basis. If this is true of you I feel for you and would encourage you to seek out a qualified pastoral counselor who can help you work through this problem. Most of us have disturbing thoughts on an intermittent basis. If you've ever been driving along and had a thought like, "I could drive this car right into opposing traffic and cause a horrible accident," you are not the first to think this way. Now most people who have that thought will immediately get a grip on their senses and not allow their brain to connect with their arms and hands. Instead they will say something to themselves like, "that's a dumb thought, I'd never do something like that; where in the world did that thought come from?" Those who get these aberrant thoughts on a more regular basis can begin to consider following through and doing something tragic. But even if they don't there is still a struggle just because they had the thoughts. They think there must be something wrong with them.

One of the things that has helped me more than anything is to remember that you can only have

one thought at a time. Admittedly, some get these singular ideas one after another in rapid-fire motion and find it hard to control them, but they are still only thinking one thought at a time. Why this is helpful is that if you can corral the thoughts one at a time and examine them then you can do something about them. A person struggles when his thoughts seem to be out of control.

And you can also redirect your thoughts down other more healthy avenues when you realize that you have detoured off into murky territory. It is amazing to me how that sometimes in the morning I will wake up and be so off in my thinking that my mind feels like it is on a roller coaster. If I do not have the capacity to say something like, "wait a minute, that's not the way I want to think, I'm going to change my way of thinking about this so that I am not going down a destructive path; I want to think God's thoughts from His Word and not thoughts that would be hurtful to me or others." If I could reason like that, then I'd be much better off.

It is also helpful to bounce your thoughts and ideas off of someone else who you can trust. They act like a sounding board so that you can clarify the way you are thinking. A trusted friend can save you a lot of heartache by helping you to crystallize the direction your mind is going. When we have mentally backed ourselves into a corner we often need a loving hand to guide us back on track. Do not be afraid to run things by someone you trust. That's why they are your friend, and they will save you from the misery of being a captive to your own bad thinking.

Another helpful mind matter is learning to roll thoughts over in your mind before you jump on a bandwagon and take a bumpy road. In other words, you do not have to accept every thought that knocks on the door. Step back and think about whether you want to entertain what you see through the eye hole. Don't panic. Don't go with the first idea in knee-jerk fashion. Rather mull over what presents itself. You be in control of your own control center. You are the king of your own castle. Now it is also very helpful to start your day off with prayers of commitment to Jesus. Then you can turn over to him the throne of the castle so that He can rule in your heart and mind and help you deal with the predatory thoughts that

are thieves and cruel.

In Paul's defense statement he says to the ruler, "So I strive always to keep my conscious clear before God and man." There is nothing more healthy than living with a clear and clean conscience. When your conscience is not bothering you there is so much more freedom and you will be able to think much more clearly because you do not have that pesky voice constantly reminding you of what a bum you are. Let me add a couple of other Bible verses into this discussion. The first is from Hebrews, which says, "How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (9: 14). The death of Jesus frees us from the guilt that has weighted us down and gives us liberty from the accusations against us. The Bible is clear that those transgressions were nailed to the cross when the loving Savior died for our sins. The blood of Jesus brings us to God and concurrently washes us from all defilement of the conscience. Be free!

Secondly is a passage of Scripture in one of John's little letters at the end of the Bible, "Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him, for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and He knows everything. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us we have confidence before God, and whatever

we ask we receive from Him because we keep His commandments and do what pleases Him" (1 John 3: 18-22). Your conscience may be upsetting you even when you have already asked for forgiveness. At that point you have to trust that God knows it all and that He has forgiven you and you can from that point go on and serve Him. The more you serve the more your heart will be assured that you are a forgiven person.

Paul desired to keep his conscience clear. He didn't want his mind to be a distraction in his work for God. Therefore, he kept things right with God through confession and forgiveness and he treated those who hurt him with the forgiveness that God had given to him. He would often commit a tough person to the Lord so that the Lord Himself could deal with them and then he went on to do his business.

Before we go here is a couple of other brain strengtheners:

Read.

Write out your thoughts. Keep a journal.

Memorize Philippians 4:8.

Bounce your thoughts off of the Word rather than your experience.

Know your mind. Then make allowances so you can exercise it on a regular basis.

Relieve your guilt to God and a trusted friend who will pray with you.

God's blessings help our mental state,

Pastor Steve



Day 187

" At A Loss"

July 6 - Acts 25: 1-22

I waited my turn in line. I wouldn't admit that I was nervous but really I was. After all, I didn't want to embarrass myself in front of twenty-five junior high kids. We were on a week long field trip at the Catali-

na Island Marine Science Institute. What a place! We snorkeled, petted sharks, handled all kinds of sea life like sea anemones, star fish, and more; we discovered the hidden world of plankton, and wondered through

museums replete with shark and dolphin and whale skeletons. It was a wonderful learning experience.

Everyone was anticipating the nocturnal animal lesson and then the simulation of an experience that would take you into the world of a night creature. You know, the ones like bats and owls where they do their thing at night while the rest of us should be sleeping? We all lined up outside what looked like a little house or maybe more accurately described as a large shed. On the outside was two doors, one for entry and one for exit. To go in you had to bend down and crawl on your knees. The man in charge would open the door and let one student in at a time and then he'd shut the door until that student was a ways in then he'd let someone else in.

In line, the kids were asking me if I'd be entering and I gave them no indication that the butterflies were at work inside me. "Sure, no problem," I said, as I watched another student disappear into the dark world within. When you entered there was a sudden realization that you were in a tight and pitch dark place and there was no turning back unless you wanted the razzing of the crowd outside. Besides, they'd never let me live it down.

Bam, the door shut behind me. Now I was committed. My claustrophobia kicked in and I could feel the narrow walls moving in on me. I was feeling warm and nervous. Determined not to be humiliated I crawled onward and upward. Yes, there were ups and downs and slides and turns and other kids in there making weird sounds, but I kept on going sometimes having to push myself through very narrow places. All the time you couldn't see a thing, not even your hand if you were to hold it up to your face. Finally I made it to the end and maintained my hero status. I was not going to let the darkness and narrowness of that place humble me. But, O, what a feeling when I stepped out of darkness into the moonlit evening and breathed again the fresh air of this little island in the Pacific.

We start our journey in life in much the same way as I looked in that dark place. John says that men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil (3: 18). I was crawling around in the darkness and that is not unlike the way most of us navigate ourselves through life. We crawl and we squeeze and we struggle and we seek and we feel like

there is darkness all around us. So we get used to the darkness and even begin to appreciate it for what it is and then even start to love it. It is amazing how we can adapt to the only environment that we know.

In John's gospel the evangelist says that Jesus taught the necessity of a new birth by the Spirit of God before a man could come out of the darkness and have a new spiritual life. Until then he was destined to live in darkness, surrounded by all of the obstructions to finding light. Paul mentions to Timothy in one of the pastoral letters that men who oppose the gospel are being led along by the devil and are taken captive to do his will. It is a perilous condition. Man may think he is free but in reality he is a pawn in the devil's hand. Paul says that the only way to penetrate this darkness is to share the truth and pray that God would grant the person repentance so that he might come to the truth and escape the grip of the evil one.

After Festus took the ball from Felix he began to govern and found that he had inherited Paul's case from his predecessor. Paul's case was a mystery to him. In regard to Paul's claims about Jesus and the resurrection "he was at a loss how to investigate such matters" (Acts 25:20). These kinds of questions were foreign to him and he would much rather send his famous prisoner back to Jerusalem where they could more accurately deal with the issues he was raising. Paul knew that if he went back south the Jews would kill him and so he had appealed to Caesar in Rome. It was the right of a Roman citizen to do this and so Paul would be on his way there as soon as a sailing vessel was available.

Spiritual matters are only understood by those who are spiritual. Festus was not capable of even beginning deliberations when it came to the kinds of things that set Paul against his countrymen. Today this is just as true. Most men are oblivious to the truth of God's Word. When they hear of the resurrection of Jesus and the need to receive Him as their forgiver and leader, they are put in a quandary. But if the Holy Spirit moves on their hearts then they will be born again (born from above, or born anew) and will be able to understand the things of the Spirit.

Sometimes people will say that they don't believe in Jesus because they cannot see Him. If he'd appear to them and talk to them then they'd believe they say.

But the truth is that the vast majority did not believe in Jesus even after they saw Him do many miracles. How could this be? Why didn't so many more come to Him? I believe because they were lost in darkness and didn't want to come to Christ and have their evil deeds exposed. They loved darkness. The truth is that when the Spirit works in a child of God's heart he knows internally that God is real and is alive. He then submits to God and wants to follow after Him. Until then, he will wallow in his own unbelief and selfish ambition and pride and moral depravity.

If you have already come to Christ and are experiencing Him at work in your life then you have much

reason to be grateful. You have come out of darkness and are now in light. You can understand truth and the message of the gospel and the Bible. You are a spiritual person. Paul has much to say about this in the book of Corinthians. We'll get there before you know it and will take up this discussion there. Until then, be grateful that the light has dawned in your life and you have been given light through God's Spirit. Jesus said, "No man can come to me unless the Father draws him" (John 6).

God's blessings are a powerful force in our lives,
Pastor Steve



"Goads"

July 7 - Acts 25:23-26:23

When you look back over your life can you see signs that God was at work all along? For example, I can remember praying at a very early age, even before anyone had ever instructed me about prayer. Why would I do that? Does a person just up and pray out of wishful thinking in the hope that maybe there is someone out there or does he pray because God has built into him a need for God? I believe it is the latter. Our conscience is always at work trying to push us towards God and truth and right. That's why we would cringe when we did wrong or were under the disapproving eye of some adult as we grew up. I hated to be feeling guilty. I wanted to do the right thing even when I would deliberately choose the wrong thing. I, like the typical child at many points, was rebellious.

In Romans two, Paul alludes to the gift of the conscience. He talks about how we are all at the mercy of our own conscience because it does a good job accusing us when we are in the wrong. It can acquit us as well, but it is those times when it points its bony finger

at our heart and warns us not to go "there" again. We then know that we have done wrong and are in the danger zone of life. Not a good place. Paul uses the conscience not to highlight that man is innocent before God; rather, he points out that even before we knew Jesus or understood why He came, we were guilty, all of us, of doing the very things we knew were wrong and contradicted the will of God that we knew instinctively because we were made by God.

Our conscience can act as a goad and punish us until we move in the right direction. The problem is that we often have already done enough damage already before we begin to turn the ship around. Paul says that Jesus told him he had been getting goaded for some time before that fateful day on the road to Damascus. Before we discuss this let's get a good description of what a goad was in Paul's day: "It is a strong pole about eight feet long and two inches in diameter. At one end is a sharp point for pricking the oxen when their movements became intolerably slow, and at the other end is a broad chisel like blade,

which is used to clear the plowshares of the roots and thorns which impede it, or of the stiff clay which adheres to it. The pointed end of the instrument is alluded to in Acts 9:5 and 26:14" (Manners and Customs of the Bible, Freeman). Have you ever felt poked by God? Paul did?

We do our best before finally coming to Jesus to ignore or minimize or complain about the goads. We have had prodding by the Holy Spirit throughout our lives; sometimes they came through observation and sometimes through conscience and sometimes through the Word and sometimes through the lives of others. In Psalm 19 David said that the voice of God has gone out in all the earth. In Romans 1 Paul says that man is without excuse because God can be known in His creation. Goads, goads, goads, there are goads everywhere. Just the fact that man has been designed by God ought to make him curious about his roots. How did my body become so complex? Why does it feel like I have a soul or an inner person who feels deeply and thinks purposely and desires longingly?

Maybe one of Paul's goads was the stoning of Stephen. Paul never says he was a witness to the crucifixion of Jesus; I would think that he would have mentioned that if he had been. But he was there as a young man when his leaders took up stones and began to bash the erudite preacher. Remember, Stephen prayed for his accusers, like Jesus, asking God to forgive them for what they were doing. Could it be that the kind of peace and tranquility Stephen was experiencing at the time could have been a goad in Paul's side? Did it get him thinking about how this man could act this way under the most extreme pressure? It probably impressed him greatly even though at that point the budding Pharisee would not have been able to admit his impression.

It's also possible that Paul had done some studying regarding the church's claims about the

Old Testament's statement about the crucifixion and resurrection of the Messiah. Once Paul is saved by the grace of Jesus he wastes no time opening up these scriptures to others who did not believe in Jesus. He seemed to know right where to turn almost immediately. Could he have been burning the midnight oil some days while pouring over the prophecies of Messiah and thinking how in the world he would contradict the Christian claim that Jesus was the fulfillment of them? It's possible.

Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. These are three powerful goads that are at work in the lives of your friends and family members who have not yet heeded the good news. It would be good to pray that they would turn to Jesus and stop resisting the prods that the Spirit has put in their life.

God will also use us to lovingly goad our loved ones who need the Lord. Through a variety of means God will remind them that they need Him. You can pray. Prayer is a powerful invisible force that goads a person without their knowing where the poke is coming from. You can give them the good news. The message of the good news is another powerful goad. Look for opportunities to talk about why Jesus died and how He is working in your life today. Creation goads. When people begin to consider their origins they will have to go back to their Creator sooner or later. Love goads. People need to experience what it feels like to be loved in an unconditional way.

Paul said in one of his letters that we, the church, were all able to "admonish" one another. Welcome to the fellowship of the goads. How about that for a church name: The Fellowship of the Living Goads. Now that would raise some eyebrows.

God's blessings will sometimes be preceded by a sting,

Pastor Steve



" In A Corner"

July 8 - Acts 26:24 - 27:12

I can tell you quite a bit about my sixth grade teacher. After all, I spent a whole year with him and was enamored with him. I remember that it was fun to be in his classroom and I believe most, if not all, of his students felt the same way about him. If you were a fifth grader you waited nervously at the next year's classroom assignment schedule to see if you'd be in his classroom. If not, there was always a grimace of disappointment on the faces of those who would be in Mrs. So and So's class. All of the students knew who the number one teacher was and all of us wanted to walk through his door and do all we could do to please him.

Mr. Nagaoka was of Oriental descent. I think he was Japanese. He was about 5' 9" and was probably about thirty pounds overweight. This gave his face a jolly sort of look. He wore black thick rimmed glasses and when he became animated it looked like his eyes were going to bug out of his head. He was a great listener. Maybe that was the secret to his ability to connect with others, I don't know. When he listened, those big eyes were focused intently on you and you just knew that he wanted to hear where you were coming from. His hair was jet black and cut in flat top fashion; I think he had a kind of hit-or-miss stash. He spoke constantly in an excitable tone. It was as if his next words were already out before he finished the ones before. As I look back now I realize that he was a passionate man who loved what he was doing. I loved being his student.

We didn't have any pet names for our master. He was just Mr. Nagaoka. He wasn't "Nag" or "Eggnog" or "Okie" or any other name, he was who he was and we all respected that. He was always involved in our day, even outside of the classroom. He'd get right in there at P.E. and play with us. I can still picture him pitching the softball to us and yelling and cheering as we ran the bases. He was our advocate. He made

you feel like you could accomplish your goals. I also remember that sixth grade was the year the president instituted the Presidential Physical Fitness Award. Mr. Nagaoka would be out there pushing us on to earn the right to get that patch. I never did. I accepted the fact that I could not do enough of this or that or run fast enough. He egged me on but never threw eggs when I didn't succeed.

I knew this man pretty well. I learned to love and admire him based on the interaction I had with him on a daily basis for one school year. I would have been able to defend him if someone came along and made a false claim about him. "That Nagaoka doesn't give a rip about his students, he teaches for the money!" If someone said that I would have probably knocked their block off, but in reality I could have simply told them that they didn't know what they were talking about. No one was going to make a false statement about this man in my presence and get away with it. But as well as I knew him I could have known him much better. I never visited him at home. I never rode in his car. We never went out for lunch off campus. I didn't know his wife or kids. I never did anything recreationally with him nor did we ever go on vacation together. Yet despite all of these things I would still say that I could be a pretty good witness of who he was.

The disciples, who became the tellers and writers of the life and times of Jesus, were far more intimately acquainted with their Master than I ever was with that beloved sixth grade teacher. That small band of Jesus followers became an excellent source of eye-witnesses to the life that would change the course of history.

Over the course of three years the twelve traveled hundreds of miles with Jesus. They ate together constantly. They served a common mission together under the direction of Jesus. They rubbed shoulders with one another sometimes having to squeeze

through large crowds who were trying to reach the Lord. They touched Him and held Him and beheld Him on a daily basis for years, not days, or a year, but years. They saw the miracles first hand and they were often part of what was going on when Jesus would work his graceful work. They also knew the pain of rejection and opposition. Public controversy was not foreign to them because Jesus would often be the source of ridicule and false accusations.

When Paul is giving his defense before Festus and Agrippa he makes the comment that the things concerning Jesus of Nazareth were not done "in a corner." In other words, the events that were being spoken of by the apostles were not things that had been cooked up in secret. They had all been done out in the open for all to see. Paul alludes to this so that his accusers would have the opportunity to give their lives to Jesus. Paul wanted all who heard him to have what he had minus the chains he wore.

Jesus had been publicly taken and tried and beaten and scourged and crucified right there on the streets of Jerusalem. These were not stories that some "holy" person was making up in a cave somewhere. These were not rules for right living or steps to making things work or helpful tips in order to find

health and happiness. These were nitty-gritty, down to earth, real life events involving a real man who made claims that would need to be verified or discredited because of the enormity of their consequences. Well, the apostles came along after the crucifixion and said that Jesus was now alive and able to save their souls from all sorts of bad stuff.

If you've ever wondered why the apostles bravely went to their deaths for the belief that Jesus was alive from the grave then consider how close they had been to Him and how much a resurrection would impact their resolve to stay the course even unto death. They gave their lives for the things that were done in front of all. They were not a secret society with beliefs that could not be corroborated. They would point to the events that were common knowledge much the same way an historian points to crucial events in history in order to make his points.

Peter said earlier in Acts that they could not help but talk about the things they had seen and heard. These are the things that meant the most to them and endeared them to Jesus, the Master, to whom they belonged and were willing to give it all.

God's blessings are not in a corner,
Pastor Steve

were happening in slow motion. I was trying to get up from my seat when I realized what was happening, but it felt like I was glued there. The poor woman hit the cement with a tremendous thud. She had a deep gash in the area between her eyes. As this was going on I heard a lot of swearing and yelling from just behind the scene. It was her husband who was flipping out and cussing her out because she fell. He was blaming her and swearing at her and saying how clumsy she was and how she was going to ruin the party by doing this. As someone took him away to try to calm him down, my nurse wife applied first aid before another family member took her to the hospital.

She had to have thirty-two stitches, half of them inside and the other half outside. Her husband made a fool out of himself that day. I hope he finally came to his senses and realized that he was the one who needed to feel ashamed because of his behavior. But under pressure, instead of being helpful or empathetic, he acted like a nit wit. The pressure of the circumstances sent him over the edge and it ended up that he was no help at all.

Paul was a leader. Paul was a man with a mission. He wanted to make Jesus known to as many people as he possibly could before he died. He was on his way to Rome when a violent storm made it necessary to unload the ship of its cargo, probably so that it wouldn't sink, and try and find a place to dock before they all drowned. Paul had courage. He had been visited by the angel of the Lord who told him that all of the lives on the boat would be spared. He took charge, encouraged the crew to eat, and told them what the Lord had conveyed about their end. He was courageous and he encouraged others to

be the same. He was an example. In Philippians he says that if the church would follow him as he follows Christ they would experience the peace of God. Paul knew where his strength came from and he knew the power of the message he had to share. Paul was a man's man. You just have to love the man.

Paul's life was an adventure. Life for him was dynamic. No re-runs of Gilligan's Island for him, no, he wanted to be out and about making the good news known far and wide no matter where it took him. He knew that eventually he would reach Rome because God had already told him about that, but in the meantime there would be difficulties that would only test his leadership resolve and give him the opportunity to make a difference in others' lives. When the pressure was on Paul prayed and trusted God and His Word and spent his time reaching out to others. You do not hear him complain or bicker or rage against God. Paul had a conviction about the love of Jesus and the fact that the Lord was alive and working in his life. With that knowledge he could keep on going and doing what the Lord wanted him to do. You go, Paul!!

Do you play it safe too much? Do you take few risks because you are afraid of the consequences? Do you all too often isolate yourself from the adventure of life because of fear? Let me ask you this: what is stopping you from letting go and letting God take you on the ride of your life?

Life is an adventure, let's live it with all that is in us.

God's blessings can take us to out of the way places,
Pastor Steve



"Adventure"

July 9 - Acts 27: 13-44

This is the Day the Lord has Made,
A man's character is always proven in adversity. Who we are on the inside really comes out when the heat is on. Someone once said, "If you can't stand the heat stay out of the kitchen." Sometimes, though, the world feels like a kitchen. We may try to escape the pressure, but no matter which way we turn there seems to be only more trouble.

I was at a friend's kid's birthday party, sitting out

in the backyard, enjoying the fine weather and the company of my friends. For some reason the patio leading out from the house had two tiers. Well, out came Aunt Mable, smiling and waving to those she knew when, all of a sudden, she tripped at the ledge of the tiers and began a descent that I had never witnessed before. I saw that she was going to fall flat on her face, which would be devastating because she had wired rim glasses on. As she tumbled I felt as if things

“ Snake bit and time in prison”

July 10 & 11 - Acts 28

(My disconnected thoughts at the end of Acts)

Let's Continue the Acts Story in our own Experience,
Are you superstitious? The closest I got was in junior high when I wore the same unwashed socks for probably six or seven weeks in a row because I had been winning games. Remember the silly ones when we were kids like “step on a crack and break your mother's back”? If we weren't getting along with mom we'd be stepping on every crack in the sidewalk on the way to school. It was all malarkey.

Oftentimes, religious folk are very superstitious. Maybe you know someone who uses a cross to ward off evil spirits. Or, they think that unless they pray a certain way or for so long they will somehow be out of God's favor and won't be putting a protective covering over someone. And in a number of cultures religious relics are said to have special powers and can guarantee special favors from above. I think when people claim to have seen the face of the virgin Mary in some object like a tortilla or a painting, that they are hoping for a special blessing from her if they will only be in the vicinity of the manifestation. More malarkey.

Paul ran into some superstitious people on the island they were shipwrecked on for when he had been bitten by a snake they all judged that he was probably a notorious sinner who was getting his just desserts. But then when Paul didn't fall over dead they all hailed him as some form of deity. Fickle, fickle, fickle. This is the kind of thing Paul describes in one of his letters when people appear to be spiritual but deny the true power of God. God wants us to know him in personal terms and not in superstitious ritual form. These kinds of things do not impress Him whatsoever.

Isn't Luke detailed in his description of the voyage and the circumstances of the final destination to Rome? He was there and could record accurately the things they were facing. I'm surprised that he didn't

record some of his own emotions on that trip. I think he was so caught up in the purpose of it all that he didn't think his own comfort or lack of it was all that important. What a privilege that time in the life of the missionaries would have been.

Paul's prison time in Rome was not horribly confining. He was guarded but was allowed liberties like being able to have visitors. After calling together the Jewish leaders, he laid out the message of the gospel to them. After they reject the message, Paul quotes a familiar verse that Jesus once stood on when dealing with the same attitude, and then he declares that the message would be acceptable to the Gentiles.

Paul stayed there for two years preaching Jesus. Then...

the story goes on but the scripture that records it ends. According to church tradition Paul is eventually beheaded by Caesar Nero.

Now the story continues with us. The Spirit is now at work in ordinary folks like you and me to bring His Word to others.

Now we turn to the letters. Mostly they are Paul's. Don't forget as you read them where he came from. All of his writing reflects his background and highlight the wonderful experience of salvation in Jesus. The letters also reflect his love for the churches he either began or encouraged at one time or another. Romans and Colossians were exceptions since when he wrote those letters he had not yet visited the churches in those locations. The other letters address pertinent issues among the believers in the various locals.

If you love the gospel and you are excited about the work of the Spirit in the church then you will be delighted at the application of the gospel in Paul's letters. Sometimes people will say that there are so many different interpretations of the Bible and so you really can't trust any one interpretation. They

are mistaken because Paul is the interpreter of Jesus. He takes the gospel and tells us how to accept it and internalize it and use it in our daily lives.

God's blessings continue throughout the whole Bible,
Pastor Steve