



Faith Connections

Bible Study Guide

Spring
22

*From Tragedy
to Victory*

*The Ministry of
Paul in Acts*

Bible Study Guide

Contents *Spring 2022* Volume 45, Number 3

Perspectives: The Rest of the Story 3

Unit 1: From Tragedy to Victory

- 1 Mar 6 **A Longing Heart** 4
(Psalm 63:1-11)
- 2 Mar 13 **Sinful People and a Loving God** 8
(Psalm 36:1-12)
- 3 Mar 20 **Forgiveness** 101 12
(Psalm 32:1-11)
- 4 Mar 27 **Whom Shall I Fear?** 16
(Psalm 27:1-14)
- 5 Apr 3 **Confidence for Living and Dying** 20
(Psalm 31:1-10, 14-24)
- 6 Apr 10 **He Has Become Our Salvation** 24
(Psalm 118:14-29)
- 7 Apr 17 **Deliverance from Death** 28
(Psalm 116:1-13, 17-19)

Unit 2: The Ministry of Paul in Acts

- 8 Apr 24 **Set Free by Christ** 32
(Acts 16:16-34)
- 9 May 1 **Keep on Speaking** 36
(Acts 18:1-18)
- 10 May 8 **The Life-Changing Power of the Gospel** 40
(Acts 19:1-20)
- 11 May 15 **The Power of a Clear Testimony** 44
(Acts 20:17-37)
- 12 May 22 **The Vision that Transforms** 48
(Acts 26:12-29)
- 13 May 29 **The Gospel in the Most Unlikely Places** 52
(Acts 28:16-31)

Key Verse Memory Back Cover

Bible Study Guide is one of several Faith Connections companion products designed to help adults discover what it means to be holy people in today's world. To order, call 1-800-877-0700.

Mike L. Wonch

Editor

Judi King

Editor, *Illustrated Bible Life*

Bonnie J. Perry

Director of Editorial

Mark D. Brown

Publisher

Cover Photo: © unbannot/Shutterstock.com

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version (NIV)*. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

All Scripture quotations marked † are the author's own translation from the original languages.

We believe in the full inspiration of the Scripture and encourage the comparison and use of several translations as part of the discipline of Bible study.

Bible Study Guide is published quarterly by The Foundry Publishing®, P.O. Box 419527, Kansas City, MO 64141. Copyright © 2022 by The Foundry Publishing®. Canadian GST No. R129017471.

Perspectives

The Rest of the Story

Paul Harvey was a nationally-known radio broadcaster from 1952—2008. Millions of people tuned into his program each week. In one of his most well-known segments, he would begin a story about someone or an event that you most likely would not recognize at first. He would not tell the full story all at once. Just when he had you hanging on his every word, intrigued by the story, he would stop for a commercial break. After returning, he would say, “And now, the rest of the story.” You were always amazed how the first part of the story had you thinking one thing, but the “rest of the story” had a completely different ending than you expected.

God is a God of “the rest of the story.” For example, I have encountered people whose life seemed to be heading down the wrong path, and you could most likely tell where his/her life was eventually going. However, this person has an encounter with God and his/her life takes a new direction. The first part of his/her life told one type of story, but with God this person has a “rest of the story” experience.

One of the lies of Satan is to tell someone there is no hope of change, no hope of a life transformation, no hope for a better tomorrow. However, the good news is that God offers a different message. God says give me your life and I will make it abundant, to the full (see John 10:10).

The Bible is full of “the rest of the story” people—those whose life trajectory was changed by God. One prime example is seen in the life of Paul. His mission was to persecute Christians; however, after his encounter with God, his mission became to spread the gospel, pointing people to Christ and how to become a Christ-follower—a Christian.

During this quarter, we are looking at “the rest of the story” good news found in Psalms and the book of Acts. We will see that sin does not have the final word, your past does not determine your future, and with God all things are possible. In each session you will see how God is a God of “the rest of the story”!

May God bless you as you study His Word this quarter!

MIKE WONCH

Editor

March

6

A LONGING HEART

God satisfies the spiritual hunger of those who seek Him.

THE WORD

**PSALM
63:1-11**

KEY VERSE

You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water.

²I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory.

³Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you.

⁴I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands.

⁵I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you.

⁶On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night.

⁷Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings.

⁸I cling to you; your right hand upholds me.

⁹Those who want to kill me will be destroyed; they will go down to the depths of the earth.

¹⁰They will be given over to the sword and become food for jackals.

¹¹But the king will rejoice in God; all who swear by God will glory in him, while the mouths of liars will be silenced.

ENGAGE THE WORD

Psalm 63 acknowledges the fundamental yearning in every human and testifies to God's loving response to it. The psalmist tells how the Lord transformed his longing heart into a singing and victorious

heart. When his restless heart found God, it found true rest.

THE THIRSTY HEART **Psalm 63:1**

Psalm 63 identifies this psalm with David “when he was in the Desert of Judah.” This could have been during the time David fled from Saul into the wilderness along the Dead Sea, which is recorded in 1 Samuel 24—26. But since David calls himself “the king” in verse 11, the occasion for this psalm seems more likely Absalom’s revolt described in 2 Samuel 15—18. David retreated from Jerusalem into the wilderness as his son Absalom plotted to take over the kingdom. Undoubtedly devastated by his son’s betrayal and the fickleness of his people, David may well have composed this psalm while he determined the next steps of his life.

We can sense in this psalm how deeply David felt the weight of disappointment and hurt this world often puts upon us. Too often we can identify with David’s feelings of abandonment. In such moments we, like David, become acutely aware of our need and longing for God. Though it has always been there, the ultimate emptiness of wealth, status, and our own sense of security exposes our true reason for pursuing such things. It is to fill the spiritual vacuum deep within that only God can fill.

We do not always recognize why our hearts feel so empty or what we are actually seeking. We often think our search is for happiness or significance or security or something else. But, the truth is, our deepest longing is actually for God. We were simply created this way by our Creator.

So, David describes his heart’s desire for God as a desperate thirst that almost causes him to faint. The kind of intense thirst his body felt in the “dry and parched land” of the Judean desert reflected the feelings of his heart. He realized just how much he truly needed God, the One he knew personally as “my God.” That is the value of life’s deserts. They remind

Did You Know?

The Desert of Judah receives less than 2 inches of rain a year while temperatures regularly reach 90-100 degrees Fahrenheit. With very little water, and plant or animal life, dehydration and starvation are very real threats there.

THE SINGING HEART

us of how desperate for God we really are. They awaken our deep longing for the Lord and recall us to that primal pursuit.

Psalm 63:2-8

According to this psalm, David's longing heart found satisfaction in God. Even in the midst of great loss, his heart could sing because he reconnected with the One whose "love" was "better than life" to him (v. 3). That made all the difference in his situation. It was like feasting on "the richest of foods" at a big banquet (v. 5). God's love made his hungry heart feel like a well-fed stomach.

When David spoke of God's "love" he wasn't just thinking of the warm affection of the Lord (v. 3). He had in mind God's unwavering loyal love that never goes away. He used a Hebrew word for love that describes the kind of love that does not demand perfection or a right response. It simply continues to care deeply for the beloved regardless of performance. It is like a parent's constant love for a child, only more intense and more steadfast.

This is the kind of love that fills the vacuum in the human heart. Only it can give rest to the restless heart. We long for someone to love us, warts and all. We need someone who will keep loving us in the middle of our messy lives and reckless decisions. Our hearts crave this unconditional love that only God can offer.

Under "the shadow" of such love, David could sing praises even as he lay awake through "the watches of the night" contemplating his circumstances (vv. 6-7). Questions of an uncertain future likely mixed with reminders of his failures as a father and a leader of people. Deep into the night Satan can try to strip God's people of their confidence and joy with constant reminders of their inadequacies and uncertainties. Yet, David grasped hold of God's unfailing love and clung to it for strength and courage. In return, God's powerful, life-giving and loving "right hand" upheld him (v. 8).

Think About It

In his spiritual memoir entitled *Confessions*, an early Christian writer named Augustine addressed the following words to God: “You have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you.” (Saint Augustine. *The Confessions*, translated by Maria Boulding. New York: Vintage Books, 1998.)

THE VICTORIOUS HEART

This is what keeps us steady through our most difficult hours. God’s unrelenting love becomes an anchor for the troubled soul. It holds us fast while life whirls about us. It may even enable us to sing praises in the midst of those dark nights, like it did for David.

Psalm 63:9-11

As this psalm draws to a close, David tells us that his longing heart eventually became a victorious heart. The light of God’s love generated glimpses of hope for his thirsty soul. David came to see that in time God would take care of his enemies. They would “go down” (v. 9) and their mouths would be silenced (v. 11). David could envision a day when he would “rejoice in God” along with others who honor the Lord (v 11).

To David, the defeat of his enemies was only further confirmation of God’s steadfast love. He knew that a loving God would not allow wickedness to prevail. Like a loving parent, God thwarts those who seek to harm His children. He understood that more was at stake with Absalom’s coup than a mere political power struggle. The designs of David’s wayward son threatened God’s ultimate purposes for His people. But the Lord would protect His people and His plans, because He loved them.

Life can become like a desert some days. Disappointment, loss, betrayal, and any number of other adversities might send us there. In such an environment we may well discover that the deepest craving of our souls is really for God, as David did. It has been all along. We just needed a desert to remind us of that.

REFLECT

In what ways do you need God to satisfy your spiritual hunger?

JIM EDLIN is professor emeritus of Biblical Literature and Languages at MidAmerica Nazarene University. He authored *Daniel*, *Ezra*, *Nehemiah*, *Haggai*, *Zechariah* and *Malachi* in the *New Beacon Bible Commentary* series.

March

13

SINFUL PEOPLE AND A LOVING GOD

God's love is greater than human wickedness.

THE WORD

PSALM 36:1-12

I have a message from God in my heart concerning the sinfulness of the wicked: There is no fear of God before their eyes.

²In their own eyes they flatter themselves too much to detect or hate their sin.

³The words of their mouths are wicked and deceitful; they fail to act wisely or do good.

⁴Even on their beds they plot evil; they commit themselves to a sinful course and do not reject what is wrong.

KEY VERSE

⁵Your love, LORD, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies.

⁶Your righteousness is like the highest mountains, your justice like the great deep. You, LORD, preserve both people and animals.

⁷How priceless is your unfailing love, O God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

⁸They feast on the abundance of your house; you give them drink from your river of delights.

⁹For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.

¹⁰Continue your love to those who know you, your righteousness to the upright in heart.

¹¹May the foot of the proud not come against me,
nor the hand of the wicked drive me away.

¹²See how the evildoers lie fallen thrown down, not able to rise!

ENGAGE THE WORD

THE SINFULNESS OF THE WICKED

Psalm 36:1-4

God's message to sinful people informs them that He knows exactly what they are like. The most basic description of a wicked person is that "there is no fear of God" in them (v. 1). Proverbs 1:7, along with other scriptures, tells us that "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge." That is where it all starts. Respect for God and His wisdom for life sets people on the right track to making good decisions and doing the right thing. But that is just what wicked people do not do.

Actually, David suggests that the problem with wicked people is about more than just not respecting God. He uses a different Hebrew word for "fear" than the one found in Proverbs. He says they lack *pahad*, which connotes trembling or terror. This is something the Lord never asked from His people. It was what pagan gods demanded. But wicked people do not even make this lower level of response to the Lord, let alone humbly acknowledge His wisdom.

The reason for lack of fear among the wicked is foolish overconfidence. "In their own eyes" they feel very capable (v. 2). Their biggest cheerleader is themselves. But one might wonder if this is not really overcompensation rather than overconfidence. Arrogant people are usually trying to cover up feelings of inadequacy and failure. They do not want anyone to know how incapable they really are. Unfortunately, they do such a good job that they cannot even "detect or hate their sin" as they should. At this point David uses the word for "sin" that connotes brokenness, which fits the context well. Pride-filled people are simply broken people trying to act like they are not.

Out of a broken life a wicked person speaks "wicked and deceitful" words and does stupid things (v. 3). According to David, their conversation creates trouble and misleads, while their actions amount to the big-

Did You Know?

Wings often symbolized security in the ancient world. Egyptian artists regularly depicted their kings surrounded by the wings of deities, such as Horus the sky god, who was believed to provide special protection and comfort to pharaohs.

THE LOVE OF THE LORD

gest failure of all. They fail to do wise and good things. Ironically, insecurity about their failures causes them to fail in the most important things of life. They are seemingly stuck in “a sinful course” in life (v. 4). They forge ahead on this path and do not pay attention to God’s detour signs. They even make plans to create more trouble when they should be resting at night.

Psalm 36:5-9

After painting such a bleak picture of the wicked, the message from God goes on to announce that their situation is not hopeless. As strong as the pull of evil can be, there is something even stronger. The rut of the wicked can be overcome by the “love” of the Lord (v. 5). This love knows no rival and overcomes all obstacles. From the heights of “the heavens” and “the skies” to the “mountains” and “the great deep” (the oceans) of earth, God’s love moves about freely rescuing “both people and animals” (vv. 5-6). As the apostle Paul said, “Neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39).

Throughout this psalm David refers to God’s love with one of the most beautiful words in the Hebrew language. He uses the word *hesed*, which denotes unfailing love. More than a caring feeling, this love is committed to care regardless of response to it. So, David further defines it with words like “faithfulness,” “righteousness,” and “justice.” The first word underscores God’s consistent commitment to care. We can always count on our heavenly Father’s love. “Righteousness” refers to that which is correct. God’s love always does the right thing in all cases. “Justice” is about fairness. God’s love pronounces fair judgments for all those involved.

Of course, the love of God includes much more than reliability, rightness, and fairness. But these expressions of God’s love highlight the trustworthiness of God in particular. This challenges the wicked person,

Think About It

God's "unfailing love" (v. 7) is not one divine attribute among many. Rather, it is the essence of His character. Love is the sun around which all His attributes orbit. It is the artesian well from which all His actions flow.

—C.S. Cowles

described in verses 1-4, who chose to trust himself rather than God and failed in life. The love of God invites a person to surrender to the One who will never let them down.

Such love cannot be too highly valued. The sense of security and life it provides is absolutely "priceless" (v. 7a). People find safety during life's greatest challenges. God's love makes them feel like a young chick safely tucked under the "wings" of a mother bird (v. 7b). It also makes them feel like an honored guest sitting down to an abundant feast and drinking the pure waters of paradise (v. 8). Indeed, God's love is "the fountain of life" that energizes our existence (v. 9a). The light of God's love enables the sinner to see who he/she really is (v. 9b).

A PRAYER FOR PROTECTION

Psalm 36:10-12

In response to God's message to sinners, David requests God's love continue to be manifest among "those who know" God (v. 10). He asks that they experience what is right and not be afflicted by "the proud" or "the wicked" (v. 11). He even envisions his enemies "thrown down, not able to rise" (v. 12). This must be something David knew about firsthand, for he refers to "me" for the first time in the psalm.

David's request is not for retaliation, but for further manifestation of God's love. He is convinced that a loving God does not let evil triumph. He understood how destructive sin can be from the first four verses of this psalm. God's love for His creation means its destroyers will be brought down.

God's message to the sinner in Psalm 36 is a message of love, the same one repeated over and over again throughout the Bible.

REFLECT

Consider how you can experience God's faithfulness, righteousness, and justice this week.

March

20

FORGIVENESS 101

God offers forgiveness, freedom from guilt, and continual guidance to all who confess and repent of their sins.

THE WORD

**PSALM
32:1-11**

KEY VERSE

Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

²Blessed is the one whose sin the LORD does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit.

³When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.

⁴For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.

⁵Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.” And you forgave the guilt of my sin.

⁶Therefore let all the faithful pray to you while you may be found; surely the rising of the mighty waters will not reach them.

⁷You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance.

⁸I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.

⁹Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you.

¹⁰Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD’s unfailing love surrounds the one who trusts in him.

¹¹Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!

ENGAGE THE WORD

THE BLESSING OF FORGIVENESS

Psalm 32:1-2

Of all the blessings God bestows upon His children there is none better than forgiveness. The Hebrew word for “forgiven” connotes the idea of lifting a burden (v. 1). It suggests the image of a heavy load being carried away and taken on by another. The burden is not just relieved. It is transferred to another. In this case, God takes the burden of sin upon himself. This picture of forgiveness is most dramatically accomplished in the crucifixion of Jesus.

The psalmist also explains that forgiveness includes having “sins covered” over, buried, and forgotten (v. 1). When God forgives He forgets. He does not keep bringing up the offense. It is done away with. According to Psalm 103:12, “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.”

A third description of forgiveness in this psalm uses an accounting term. The psalmist says forgiveness means God does not “count” our sins against us (v. 2). There is no ledger with plus and minus marks on it, no scales with our sins on one side and our good deeds on the other. We do not, indeed we cannot, balance the scales with enough good to offset the bad of sin. When God forgives, He reckons us blameless. He sees us as faultless, not as failures.

Finally, the psalmist indicates that forgiveness means a person has become totally honest with God. There is “no deceit” in them (v. 2). Forgiven people have hidden nothing from God. They admit they have been wrong. Their sin has been fully acknowledged, no partial or false confession.

Three different Hebrew words for sin are used in these verses in order to express the depth of what God forgives. In verse 1, “transgressions” have to do with intentionally going where one should not go, while “sins” denote the idea of willingly missing God’s goal for life. The word “sin” in verse 2 is often translated

Did You Know?

Ancient Egyptian gods did not offer forgiveness to worshipers. Instead, they demanded payment for misdeeds. In the after-life Osiris weighed a person's good deeds and bad deeds on scales in order to determine reward or punishment.

THE BURDEN OF UNCONFESSSED SIN

ADVICE FOR THE FAITHFUL

ed “iniquity” and conveys the perverse state to which sin takes a person. All of this, as evil and ugly as it is, God forgives when we humbly confess to Him.

Psalm 32:3-5

Having relished the blessing of forgiveness, the psalmist now describes the burden of unconfessed sin. He shares his personal experience when he “kept silent” and tried to hide his sin (v. 3). It affected him physically as well as spiritually. He felt like his “bones wasted away” and his “strength was sapped,” as if the hot summer sun was bearing down upon him (vv. 3-4). His days were filled with such deep pain that he groaned constantly. Such is the power of the Spirit’s convicting hand on our lives. Spiritual welfare always impacts physical well-being.

Once the psalmist came to his senses, everything changed. When he confessed his sin, God forgave it. He decided to “acknowledge” his sin and “not cover up” any longer (v. 5). He must have realized that God already knew everything anyway. We cannot hide anything from God. The psalmist must have also realized that only God can cover sin, as he noted in verse 1; we cannot. Somehow unconfessed sin always finds a way to manifest itself in our lives. It is like a simmering pot ready to boil over.

We might wonder what his sin was. We do not know. But it does not matter. No sin is beyond God’s forgiveness. The only unforgivable sin is an unconfessed sin.

Psalm 32:6-11

As a result of his forgiveness, the psalmist offers some words of advice: confess sin immediately. Though he begins by speaking to God, he clearly intends for his audience to hear and respond. He asks that “the faithful,” those intent on honoring God, pray (v. 6). His experience had taught him to stay in communication with God and not be silent about sin. So,

Think About It

God made [Jesus] who had no sin to be sin for us," says Paul, "so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). That is why the psalmist can say, "Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart" (Psalm 32:11).

—C.S. Cowles

he urges others to confess their sin before it settles in and God seems hard to find.

The psalmist had found God to be safe when he admitted his sin. The Lord was like a secure "hiding place" for him (v. 7). God had not been vindictive. He had responded by not allowing the sin to get him into further trouble. In fact, it was as if the Lord put him in a victory parade with people singing "songs of deliverance" around him (v. 7).

Turning to address his audience more directly, the psalmist comes to his main point in verse 9. He admonishes them to avoid being stubborn as he had been. People should not resist God "like the horse or the mule" resists its master (v. 9). Such animals will do as they please unless jerked into submission with a bit and bridle. That is the way of "the wicked," which only leads to the kind of "woes" he described in verses 3-4 (v. 10).

On the other hand, those who submit to the Lord get to experience His never-ending love. This is the kind of love that stands ready to forgive any sin, anytime, anywhere. It "surrounds the one who trusts" God enough to confess sin honestly (v. 10). They are the "righteous" and "upright in heart," not because they have lived perfect lives, but because God forgave their sins and reckoned them righteous and upright.

Forgiveness like this is truly reason to "rejoice," "be glad," and "sing" (v. 11). When the burden of sin is lifted, our spirits can rise up in praise to the Lord. Forgiveness puts a new song in our hearts.

REFLECT

What if you could be forgiven for your worst offense in life? What if God did not hold that against you for the rest of your life? How would that change the way you live now?

JIM EDLIN

March

27

WHOM SHALL I FEAR?

*In our fear, we can confidently seek God's help,
knowing He will respond.*

THE WORD

**PSALM
27:1-14**

KEY VERSE

The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?

²When the wicked advance against me to devour me, it is my enemies and my foes who will stumble and fall.

³Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then I will be confident.

⁴One thing I ask from the LORD, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple.

⁵For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent and set me high upon a rock.

⁶Then my head will be exalted above the enemies who surround me; at his sacred tent I will sacrifice with shouts of joy; I will sing and make music to the LORD.

⁷Hear my voice when I call, LORD; be merciful to me and answer me.

⁸My heart says of you, “Seek his face!” Your face, LORD, I will seek.

⁹Do not hide your face from me, do not turn your servant away in anger; you have been my helper. Do not reject me or forsake me, God my Savior.

¹⁰Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me.

¹¹Teach me your way, LORD; lead me in a straight path because of my oppressors.

¹²Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes, for false witnesses rise up against me, spouting malicious accusations.

¹³I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.

¹⁴Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.

ENGAGE THE WORD

SECURE IN HIS STRONGHOLD

Psalm 27:1-3

The psalmist says that he remained fearless before his enemies because the Lord was his “light,” his “salvation,” and “the stronghold” of his life (v. 1). These three images of God made him feel secure. Though enemies brought on the darkness of uncertainty and confusion, the Lord shined the light of truth upon his situation. The Lord enabled the psalmist to see who was really in control of this world and who would ultimately win the battle between good and evil.

In addition, the Lord was the psalmist’s rescuer from danger, his “salvation.” If David composed this psalm, we can imagine the nature of this salvation much better. Multiple times throughout his life David depended upon God to save him. From his days as a shepherd to his years as king, God had been there for him. Though threatened by preying lions, the giant Goliath, the jealous king Saul, or hostile armies of Philistines, Ammonites, and Arameans, David found God to be his deliverer in each case.

Thus, the Lord had become like a “stronghold” for the psalmist, a place of protection where he could fight life’s battles. A stronghold describes a location that soldiers sought in order to gain advantage in war. It might be a walled fortress or a rocky outcropping above the position of the enemy. From such a place, they could fight while remaining secure from attacks. The Lord was that kind of place for the psalmist and He can be for us as well.

Did You Know?

Ancient people fortified their temples with extra thick walls and strong gates since they stored significant wealth from worshipers' offerings. Temples served as the final stronghold for a city under siege.

SAFE IN HIS SANCTUARY

AT PEACE IN HIS PRESENCE

Psalm 27:4-6

It is not surprising then that the psalmist determines to live “in the house of the LORD” (v. 4), because it was the strongest fortification in the city. God’s house was the psalmist’s safe place. It was a sanctuary away from the chaos of this world, a place like a child might find at a grandparent’s home. There the psalmist could ponder “the beauty of the LORD” (v. 4). That is to say, he could reflect on and remind himself of the goodness of the Lord as well as His unrivaled power. In such an environment, the psalmist could confidently “seek” the Lord’s help.

In God’s house the psalmist felt safe, as if he were hidden away for the moment from “the day of trouble” (v. 5). He speaks of being sheltered under God’s “sacred tent” (the tabernacle) and having his spirits lifted, “set ... high upon a rock.” Rather than defeated, he felt “exalted,” even joyful (v. 6). In the midst of his troubles, the psalmist could “sing and make music to the LORD” (v. 6). A safe place can be a place of joy even on our most disquieting days.

Psalm 27:7-10

Living in God’s house is not just about the place though. More importantly it is about the One who lives there. Just as people in a house make it a home, so the Lord’s presence makes the temple a sanctuary. Thus, the psalmist’s heart urges him to pursue a personal encounter with God, to “seek his face” (v. 8). In the ancient world, being able to see the face of a king signified entrance into a royal court and the presence of a monarch. It indicated full attention from one who had power to affect change and implied his disposition to do so.

The psalmist would not settle for just being in a sacred space or only hearing from a messenger. He desired personal connection with God. This was a big ask, for he recognized his unworthiness to experience such friendship. So, he pled for mercy and petitioned

Think About It

Psalm 27 provides a model of daring trust in God. The psalmist began this psalm with a profound sense of confidence, worked through issues of doubt, loneliness, and despair, and then returned to courageous, optimistic trust in God.

CONFIDENT IN HIS GOODNESS

God to answer, all the while knowing that the Lord would do just that. The Lord had been a “helper” and “Savior” to the psalmist in the past (v. 9). He knew that God would no more forsake him than his parents would.

This is the kind of God we serve, One who remains present with us through our most trying times. Even “through the darkest valley” (Psalm 23:4), we can experience peace because He is with us.

Psalm 27:11-14

Having reminded himself of who the Lord is, the psalmist has full confidence that he will see “the goodness of the LORD” (v. 13). This is not a distant hope beyond this world, but a present hope “in the land of the living.” The psalmist fully believed that God would not withhold good things from him. As evidence of his trust, he asks for God’s instruction and guidance, beseeching the Lord to “teach” and “lead” him, and requests protection from his enemies once again (v. 11).

A final line in the psalm sounds like a note-to-self. The psalmist reminds himself, and us as well, to “wait for the LORD” (v. 14). The Hebrew word “wait” suggests waiting in confident expectation, knowing that the goodness of God will prevail. One only needs to hold on till the Lord acts. In the meantime, the psalmist challenges himself to “be strong” and not fear in the midst of a frightening world (v. 14). God is worth waiting for.

REFLECT

Where is a safe place for you? Do you feel the security of God’s presence in a particular room in your home, in a church sanctuary, or out in nature somewhere?

JIM EDLIN

April

3

CONFIDENCE FOR LIVING AND DYING

*Trust in God alone gives us confidence
for both living and dying.*

THE WORD

PSALM 31:1-10

In you, LORD, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame;
deliver me in your righteousness.

²Turn your ear to me, come quickly to my rescue; be my rock of
refuge, a strong fortress to save me.

³Since you are my rock and my fortress, for the sake of your
name lead and guide me.

⁴Keep me free from the trap that is set for me, for you are my
refuge.

⁵Into your hands I commit my spirit; deliver me, LORD, my faithful
God.

⁶I hate those who cling to worthless idols; as for me, I trust in the
LORD.

⁷I will be glad and rejoice in your love, for you saw my affliction
and knew the anguish of my soul.

⁸You have not given me into the hands of the enemy but have set
my feet in a spacious place.

⁹Be merciful to me, LORD, for I am in distress; my eyes grow weak
with sorrow, my soul and body with grief.

¹⁰My life is consumed by anguish and my years by groaning;
my strength fails because of my affliction, and my bones grow weak.

14-24

KEY VERSES

¹⁴But I trust in you, LORD; I say, “You are my God.”

**¹⁵My times are in your hands; deliver me from the hands of
my enemies, from those who pursue me.**

¹⁶Let your face shine on your servant; save me in your unfailing love.

¹⁷Let me not be put to shame, LORD, for I have cried out to you; but let the wicked be put to shame and be silent in the realm of the dead.

¹⁸Let their lying lips be silenced, for with pride and contempt they speak arrogantly against the righteous.

¹⁹How abundant are the good things that you have stored up for those who fear you, that you bestow in the sight of all, on those who take refuge in you.

²⁰In the shelter of your presence you hide them from all human intrigues; you keep them safe in your dwelling from accusing tongues.

²¹Praise be to the LORD, for he showed me the wonders of his love when I was in a city under siege.

²²In my alarm I said, "I am cut off from your sight!" Yet you heard my cry for mercy when I called to you for help.

²³Love the LORD, all his faithful people! The LORD preserves those who are true to him, but the proud he pays back in full.

²⁴Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the LORD.

ENGAGE THE WORD

Trusting God in the face of death is one of life's greatest tests. In this psalm we hear a profound faith in God for both living and dying. The psalmist depends upon God's protection, care, goodness, and love to sustain him.

FAITH IN THE LORD'S PROTECTION

Psalm 31:1-5

As his enemies press in, the psalmist testifies that God is a "rock of refuge" and "a strong fortress" for him (v. 2). The image is that of a place where a person is safe from an attacking enemy. It might be an inaccessible position in the mountains or a walled citadel constructed for defense.

The psalmist compares God to a fortress because of His "righteousness" (v. 1). This term expresses the characteristic of consistently making right decisions about life. God will always do the right thing. It may not look like it to us at times. It may feel that we have

Did You Know?

Ancient people believed that the divine world predetermined human destinies at the beginning of each year. Biblical writers, however, knew that while the Lord controlled the future, He did not necessarily predetermine it.

FAITH IN THE LORD'S CARE

become like a hunted animal trying to avoid a “trap” (v. 4). But we can trust that God knows what He is doing. We can be confident that God will “lead and guide” through such times (v. 3). God is committed to doing what is best for His people, because He is a “faithful God” (v. 5).

On this basis, the psalmist commits his spirit into God’s hands (v. 5). This is the final resolve of a dying person, as it was for Jesus upon the cross (Luke 23:46). It places full confidence in the One who holds all life in His hands.

Psalm 31:6-10

At this point the psalmist makes a startling statement. He says, “I hate those who cling to worthless idols” (v. 6). Why does he say this? A “worthless idol” is an impersonal piece of wood or metal. It cannot feel anything or help anyone during a crisis. Thus, the psalmist prefers to “trust in the LORD” (v. 6) because the Lord actually does care about the human plight and can do something about it.

Nothing seems worse than suffering and dying alone. But the psalmist knows that the Lord remains there with him. God sees his “affliction” and knows “the anguish” of his soul (v. 7). Though he suffers greatly, he knows God has not really given him into the hands of his enemies. His life remains in the hands of his merciful God who plants his feet “in a spacious place” (v. 8). His spirit is free though his body is in pain.

Our suffering never goes unnoticed by God. Every human life, including ours, matters to heaven. As the psalmist wrote, “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful servants” (Psalm 116:15).

Psalm 31:14-20

In a bold statement of faith, the psalmist tells the Lord directly, “I trust in you, LORD” and affirms that “You are my God” (v. 14). The Hebrew word for “trust”

FAITH IN THE LORD'S GOODNESS

Think About It

The psalmist's pleas for help in time of need are actually testimonies to his faith. He has turned to the One that he knows can actually make a difference and not someone or something else.

here connotes absolute reliance upon another. It suggests almost a careless or reckless confidence. Thus, the psalmist commits his "times" (his future destiny) into God's hands (v. 15). He knows God's plans are far better than his own, and certainly those of his enemies.

In this section of the psalm, the reason given for such confidence is the goodness of God. The psalmist reflects on the abundance of "the good things" the Lord has put in his life (v. 19). He imagines them kept in a storeroom and distributed for all to see. According to verse 20, the good things of God include a shelter in God's presence far away from the evil plots and "accusing tongues" of humans. The list could be much longer, for God's goodness comes to us in many ways each day.

FAITH IN THE LORD'S LOVE

Psalm 31:21-24

The final verses of the psalm include words of praise, testimony, and admonition. The psalmist praises God "for the wonders of his love" (v. 21). This is another reason for his confidence in the Lord. The word for "love" here is the one that connotes unfailing love. It is that loyal love that never gives up on a person. In verses 21 and 22, the psalmist testifies to the way the Lord showed that love when he was "in a city under siege." The Lord heard his cry for help and responded.

The psalmist's final admonition urges us to "love the LORD," "be strong and take heart" (vv. 23-24). In other words, we are challenged to continue believing in the protection, care, goodness, and love of God as Jesus did. In the garden, Jesus fully trusted God and simply said, "Yet not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42).

REFLECT

Consider the ways God can help you foster a "be strong and take heart" attitude this week.

April

10

HE HAS BECOME OUR SALVATION

*In the face of persistent human need, we can affirm
God's sovereignty and rejoice in His salvation.*

THE WORD

PSALM 118:14-29

The LORD is my strength and my defense; he has become my salvation.

¹⁵Shouts of joy and victory resound in the tents of the righteous:
“The LORD’s right hand has done mighty things!”

¹⁶The LORD’s right hand is lifted high; the LORD’s right hand has
done mighty things!”

¹⁷I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the LORD has done.

¹⁸The LORD has chastened me severely, but he has not given me
over to death.

¹⁹Open for me the gates of the righteous; I will enter and give
thanks to the LORD.

²⁰This is the gate of the LORD through which the righteous may
enter.

²¹I will give you thanks, for you answered me; you have become
my salvation.

²²The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone;

²³the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.

**²⁴The LORD has done it this very day; let us rejoice today and
be glad.**

²⁵LORD, save us! LORD, grant us success!

²⁶Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD. From the
house of the LORD we bless you.

²⁷The LORD is God, and he has made his light shine on us.
With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of
the altar.

KEY VERSE

²⁸You are my God, and I will praise you; you are my God, and I will exalt you.

²⁹Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever.

ENGAGE THE WORD

Psalm 118 celebrates the victory of the Lord in this world. It invites worshipers to join a triumphal procession to the Jerusalem temple praising God for salvation. For Jews, this was the final psalm sung at the Passover meal, a celebration of Israel's exodus from Egypt. For Christians, this psalm celebrates Jesus' victory over death.

COMING FROM BATTLE

Psalm 118:14-18

The first 13 verses of Psalm 118 are the testimony of a warrior returning from a victorious battle. He invites everyone to join in the celebration, including the priests and the people of Israel, especially "those who fear the LORD" (vv. 2-4). As he makes his way to the Jerusalem temple, he tells of the perils he faced and how God delivered him.

The warrior's celebration and testimony continue in verses 14-18. He declares that the Lord is the reason for his victory. Though he had fought hard and been in danger of death, God had been his "strength," "defense," and "salvation" (v. 14). This is exactly what Israel experienced when the Lord drove back the Red Sea and defeated the Egyptians, according to Exodus 15:2. God gave them strength to overcome, protection they needed, and deliverance from their enemy. It is what God promises to all who trust in Him.

Following the battle, the psalmist tells how his fellow warriors had gathered at their tents to celebrate. As they divided the plunder, they shouted with joy over God's victory. They declared that the powerful "right hand" of the Lord had brought the victory and delivered them from death (v. 15). Again, this alludes to Israel's rescue from the Red Sea (Exodus 15:6). In the ancient world, a king's right hand symbolized his power.

Did You Know?

At the Passover meal, participants sang Psalms 113—118 at different points during the meal. Jesus and His disciples likely sang Psalm 118 a few days after Palm Sunday.

ENTERING THROUGH THE GATES

The words of the psalm remind us of the drama that unfolded at the crucifixion of Jesus. He was “chastened...severely” by Roman soldiers and killed (v. 18). Yet, death did not have the final word for Him either. He was “given over to death” (v. 18), but in three days He rose again. The week before that happened, Jesus celebrated that victory with a crowd that could not imagine all God had in store. Perhaps this is similar to what we do when we gather around the grave of a loved one these days. We too celebrate victory over death that is yet to come. With warriors of old and Jesus on Palm Sunday, we know that resurrection is always on the horizon for His faithful ones.

Psalm 118:19-24

When the psalmist arrives at the city he calls out for the temple gates to be opened. He wants to “enter and give thanks to the LORD” for all He has done (v. 19). The Lord had answered his prayer for deliverance on the battlefield. Instead of being a loser, like a stone that builders reject, he had become a winner, like the most important stone in a building, “the cornerstone” (v. 22). This was the stone that stabilized a building and provided orientation for the rest of the stones in it.

Reference to the cornerstone reminds us once again of Jesus. He, in fact, made the connection himself in Matthew 21:42. He quoted Psalm 118:22 to summarize the point of His parable about the tenants who killed the landowner’s son. Like the tenants, Israel’s religious leaders had rejected Him. They thought He was a loser. But, in fact, Jesus was a winner. He conquered death and became the foundation upon which God established His kingdom. Paul explained that the church was “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:20). Therefore, “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (Philippians 2:10).

Think About It

The Gospel writers tell us that Jesus knew exactly what would happen to Him in Jerusalem. He was fully aware of the suffering He must bear in order to gain victory. Yet, He willingly did it.

PROCEEDING TO THE ALTAR

Such a turn of events only happens because “the LORD has done this” (v. 23). The day of victory is literally “the day that the LORD has made,” which makes it a day of rejoicing and gladness (v. 24).

Psalm 118:25-29

As the procession of victorious warriors moves on, it comes to its intended destiny, the temple “altar” (v. 27). There the offerings of thanksgiving and sacrifices for sin could be made. The victorious warriors could express their gratitude for God’s deliverance with thank offerings.

The warriors are greeted by Israel’s spiritual leaders, the priests, who will assist them in presenting their offerings. They welcome the procession with the words, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD” (v. 26). It is their response to the worshipers who shout their battle cry in Hebrew Hosanna, which translates “LORD, save us” (v. 25). In response to the priests the warriors affirm that “the LORD is God” and invite the priests to “join in the festal procession” as it makes its way to the temple altar (v. 27).

The altar of sacrifice was also Jesus’ destination on Palm Sunday. Within a few days He would lay down His life for the sins of the world, not on the temple altar, but just outside the city gate. On an old rugged cross Christ would become the offering for the sins of all humankind forever. From that point on, His people would “give thanks to the LORD” for God’s amazing, enduring love on a cross (v. 29). Then, when Jesus rose from the grave, they would proclaim, “You are my God, and I will exalt you” (v. 28), because God had won the final victory over death.

REFLECT

On this Palm Sunday, think of the reasons you have to rejoice and be glad!

April

17

DELIVERANCE FROM DEATH

God's victory over death fills His people with praise.

THE WORD

PSALM 116:1-13

KEY VERSES

love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy.

²Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live.

³The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came over me; I was overcome by distress and sorrow.

⁴Then I called on the name of the LORD: "LORD, save me!"

⁵The LORD is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion.

⁶The LORD protects the unwary; when I was brought low, he saved me.

⁷Return to your rest, my soul, for the LORD has been good to you.

⁸For you, LORD, have delivered me from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling,

⁹that I may walk before the LORD in the land of the living.

¹⁰I trusted in the LORD when I said, "I am greatly afflicted";

¹¹in my alarm I said, "Everyone is a liar."

¹²What shall I return to the LORD for all his goodness to me?

¹³I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD.

17-19

¹⁷I will sacrifice a thank offering to you and call on the name of the LORD.

¹⁸I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people,

¹⁹in the courts of the house of the LORD—in your midst, Jerusalem. Praise the LORD.

ENGAGE THE WORD

If Jesus sang a song on that first Easter morning, it may have been Psalm 116. This psalm is a song of one who was rescued from the grave. The psalmist tells about his encounter with death and how the Lord saved him from it.

The psalm begins with a personal testimony of a brush with death. The psalm writer testifies to how God rescued him from the grave and then promises to live a life of gratitude. Jesus could also testify to going down into the depths of the grave, rising up and moving forward with praise.

GOING DOWN INTO THE DEPTHS

Psalm 116:1-5

The psalmist describes what we often call a near-death experience. He says “death entangled” him and “the grave” overcame him (v. 3). The word translated “grave” is actually *Sheol*, the Old Testament name for the place of the dead. Ancient Israelites did not talk much about life after death except to mention this shadowy, dreary place in the underworld. There the rich and powerful found themselves on the same footing as the poor and powerless.

This psalm speaks of *Sheol* as a place that causes deep emotional pain. The thought of going there produced “distress” and “sorrow” (v. 3). It was like ropes bound a person and held him/her down. Jonah described similar feelings when he was thrown into the sea. Water literally engulfed him while seaweed wrapped around his head and he sank into the ocean (Jonah 2:5-6). As his life was ebbing away, he also cried out to God like the writer of Psalm 116.

Down in the depths the psalmist not only experienced anguish and distress, but also the presence of the Lord. He called out and the Lord listened. He spoke and some One was there. God not only “heard” the psalmist’s cry for help (v. 1), God “turned his ear” toward him (v. 2). The latter term indicates giving full attention, turning away from whatever else occupied

Did You Know?

The Old Testament does not describe life after death, or make any distinction between heaven and hell. The New Testament, however, clarifies that there are different destinies for the wicked and the righteous.

RISING UP FROM THE GRAVE

a person to focus upon the one speaking. The God of the universe is never too busy to hear our prayers.

Such a loving response from the Lord caused the psalmist to state his “love” for God (v. 1). Down in the depths of life he found the Lord “gracious” and “full of compassion” (v. 5). He discovered that God continued to offer undeserved favor and to enter into his pain. Long before Jesus died upon the cross, God knew the anguish death causes and came along side those suffering in its grip. As verse 15 of this psalm affirms, “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful servants.”

Psalm 116:6-11

What so many who have stood around a death bed have hoped for came true for the psalmist. The Lord “delivered [him] from death” so that he could once again “walk before the LORD in the land of the living” (vv. 8-9). It was as if he had risen from the grave.

The prospect of death had brought the psalmist to a point of desperation. When he looked for human help, he realized “everyone is a liar” (v. 11). Their wisdom fails in the most important moments of life. They cannot be trusted. But, the psalmist learned, God can be trusted. So, he placed his life in God’s hands. The threat of the grave drove him to the only place one can go at such times. Only God can be trusted when life lays in the balance. The platitudes offered by people in this world are only lies. Our souls must “rest” in the goodness of the Lord (v. 7). Only there can one find true comfort and hope.

For the psalmist, his experience felt like resurrection from the dead. For Jesus this was literally true. He actually died and lay in a tomb for three days. Then, “God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death” (Acts 2:24).

MOVING FORWARD WITH PRAISE

Psalm 116:12-13, 17-19

After deliverance, the psalmist knows what he must do. He will live a life that honors the Lord. He would

Think About It

The psalms frequently speak about deliverance from death. Though these references may be poetic ways of expressing intensely stressful situations, they also foreshadow the resurrection of Christ and of His followers.

not just continue living as if nothing happened. He would be forever grateful.

For him, this meant presenting offerings to the Lord and fulfilling his vows. During his struggle for life, he apparently bargained with God, as ancient Israelites often did. They would promise to do something if God would respond to their prayer. Hannah, for example, promised her child would serve in the tabernacle if God allowed her to have a son (1 Samuel 1:11). Such vows were taken very seriously in the Bible. Ecclesiastes 5:4-6 warns that it is much better not to make a vow than not keep it. So, the psalmist states his determination to “fulfill my vows to the LORD” twice (vv. 14 and 18). He will do so before the entire congregation as a public witness to God’s goodness in his life.

Apparently, the psalmist’s vow included bringing “a cup of salvation” (v. 13) and sacrificing “a thank offering” (v. 17), which may have been the same thing. One kind of “thank offering” was pouring a cup filled with sweet smelling liquid on an altar. The point is that the psalmist found a way to visibly demonstrate his gratitude to God, a good spiritual practice for any follower of Christ.

As noted last week, Psalms 113—118 were sung at the Passover festival, which celebrated Israel’s deliverance from Egypt. This is the most important event of the Old Testament, because it reveals the power of God to save His people like no other. For Christians, the death and resurrection of Jesus has overshadowed the Passover as the most significant event of all human history. God not only delivers from slavery; He delivers us from death. The Lord is the God of resurrection.

REFLECT Today, think about the “good news” message of Easter.

JIM EDLIN

April

24

SET FREE BY CHRIST

*Believing in Christ can set you free no matter
what type of bondage you are in.*

THE WORD

ACTS
16:16-34

Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. ¹⁷She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.” ¹⁸She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, “In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!” At that moment the spirit left her.

¹⁹When her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. ²⁰They brought them before the magistrates and said, “These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar ²¹by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice.”

²²The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. ²³After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. ²⁴When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

²⁵About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone’s chains came loose. ²⁷The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison

doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸But Paul shouted, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!”

²⁹The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

KEY VERSE

³¹**They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.”** ³²Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. ³³At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. ³⁴The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.

ENGAGE THE WORD

It’s ironic how God often takes a situation meant to bring harm, and transforms it into a blessing. There are several ironic elements in the scripture passage this week. For instance, the title of today’s session is “Set free by Christ,” and yet Paul’s message about Jesus Christ landed him in prison! This week’s session is a keen reminder that Jesus is in the business of setting captives free from every form of bondage.

CASTING OUT A SPIRIT

Acts 16:16-18

A wise saying proclaims, “Always listen twice. First what’s being said and second, who said it.” Paul and Silas were in Philippi proclaiming the gospel message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. One day they met a slave girl possessed by a fortune-telling spirit. Immediately, she began to shout that they were servants of God, who taught the truth about salvation. She followed them for days, and continued to proclaim loudly that they were messengers of salvation from God.

So here’s the question: Was her loud proclamation a good or a bad thing? As always, we must “consider the source!” Jesus did not allow the demons to reveal His identity (Mark 1:24-25); likewise, Paul would not allow

Did You Know?

The fortune-telling spirit that possessed the slave girl is described literally as “a spirit, a Python.” In Greek mythology, Python was the snake that guarded the celebrated oracle at Delphi, considered to be a source of wisdom.

PERSECUTION AND PRISON

SINGING AND AN EARTHQUAKE

an evil spirit to testify on his behalf. Even when a liar tells the truth, he/she makes the truth suspicious.

Finally, Paul became annoyed. He definitely did not want his converts to develop the habit of listening to evil spirits. In the name of Jesus, Paul commanded the spirit to leave the girl, and the spirit departed.

Acts 16:19-24

One would expect the exorcism of an evil spirit to be good news and cause for celebration, but it was not. Without the fortune-telling spirit, the slave girl could no longer be exploited by her owners for financial gain. Their reaction against Paul and Silas was harsh and violent. Paul and Silas were “seized” and “dragged” (v. 19) into the marketplace before the authorities, “stripped and beaten with rods” (v. 22), “severely flogged,” and “thrown into prison” (v. 23) “without a trial” (v. 37). Cast into the darkness of the inner cell, their feet were painfully clamped into metal stocks. Faithfully serving Jesus is obviously no guarantee of a life free of opposition or difficulty!

The owners knew an accusation of “liberating a slave girl” would hardly gather sympathy for their cause. Thus, they masked their grievances under three contrived accusations: 1) Paul and Silas were Jews (racial bias), 2) they were causing an uproar in the city (disturbing the peace), and 3) they were advocating unlawful customs (legal infraction). The love of money is often a very poor guardian of truth or upright behavior.

Acts 16:25-28

After such violent treatment, Paul and Silas were undoubtedly bruised, bleeding, sore, and in considerable pain. Instead of bemoaning their unfair and unjust situation, however, they were praying and singing hymns to God, while the other prisoners listened.

Suddenly an earthquake shook the prison, causing the prison doors and locks of the confining chains to

Think About It

The slave girl's message sounded good, but was deceptive. While Paul and Silas were preaching *the* way of salvation, the possessed slave girl characterized their message as merely *a* way of salvation.

fly open. Let there be no doubt that God had heard their prayers and singing!

The crash of the earthquake woke the jailer and he found the prison doors wide open. Jailers were often punished with the sentence of their prisoners if the prisoners escaped (see Acts 12:19; 27:42). Fearing that all the prisoners had run away, the jailer drew his sword to kill himself. But Paul stopped him with the words, "Do not harm yourself! We are all here!" It might seem surprising that the other prisoners had not taken this rare opportunity to make their escape. One can only imagine that the same Paul who had commanded their attention by his compelling prayers and singing had also commanded their attention to stay in place.

BELIEF IN JESUS AND SALVATION

Acts 16:29-34

In a remarkably ironic turn of events, the jailer who had earlier thrown them viciously into the inner prison cell now bowed down before them in fear and trembling. The spirit-possessed slave girl had previously announced that Paul and Silas knew the way of salvation. Now, in his fear, the jailer inquired about that way with the question, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Without hesitation, Paul and Silas declared, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." After hearing them proclaim the Word of the Lord, the jailer and his entire household believed and were baptized with great joy.

Regardless of the chains of sin that might bind us, the answer for true freedom and forgiveness is still found in Jesus Christ. Indeed, believe in Jesus, and He will save you.

REFLECT Are there chains you need God to set you free from today?

DANIEL G. POWERS is co-director of the Bible and Theology program and professor of New Testament at Nazarene Bible College. He is also author of *1 & 2 Peter and Jude* in the *New Beacon Bible Commentary* series.

May

1

KEEP ON SPEAKING

*The good news of Jesus can penetrate
the most unlikely places in this world.*

THE WORD

ACTS 18:1-18 **A**fter this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. ²There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, ³and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. ⁴Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.

⁵When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. ⁶But when they opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent of it. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.”

⁷Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. ⁸Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptized.

KEY VERSE

⁹One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. ¹⁰For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.” ¹¹So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.

¹²While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews of Corinth made a united attack on Paul and brought him to the place of judgment.

¹³“This man,” they charged, “is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law.”

¹⁴Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to them, “If you Jews were making a complaint about some misdemeanor or serious crime, it would be reasonable for me to listen to you. ¹⁵But since it involves questions about words and names and your own law—settle the matter yourselves. I will not be a judge of such things.” ¹⁶So he drove them off. ¹⁷Then the crowd there turned on Sosthenes the synagogue leader and beat him in front of the proconsul; and Gallio showed no concern whatever.

¹⁸Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sisters and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchreae because of a vow he had taken.

ENGAGE THE WORD

PAUL, THE BI-VOCATIONAL EVANGELIST

Acts 18:1-4

In Corinth Paul met a Jewish Christian couple named Aquila and Priscilla, who were tentmakers by trade. Aquila and Priscilla moved to Corinth because Emperor Claudius ordered all Jews to leave Rome. The Bible does not record when and how this Jewish couple became Christians.

Paul was also a tentmaker by trade. While ministering in Corinth, Paul lived and worked with Aquila and Priscilla in their tent-making business. Thus, Paul was perhaps the first bi-vocational pastor while he preached in Corinth. Many pastors today work bi-vocationally as they obediently answer God’s call to preach the gospel. It is not an easy task, but many churches are blessed to have such faithful and hard-working pastors who are following in the footsteps of the great apostle Paul.

As was his custom in new cities (see 14:1), Paul went to the Jewish synagogue to share the gospel. Working during the week, Paul shared the gospel message every Sabbath in the synagogue, trying to “reason” and “persuade” Jews and Gentiles to believe in Christ (v. 4). Paul found a way to witness for Christ through his work as well as his preaching.

Did You Know?

Corinth was a large cosmopolitan city that was infamous in the ancient world for its sinful depravity and immorality. Thus, the verb “to corinthianize” became synonymous with immorality and debauchery.

MORE PREACHING AND MORE OPPOSITION

GOD’S ENCOURAGEMENT TO KEEP PREACHING

Acts 18:5-6

When Silas and Timothy joined Paul in Corinth, Paul “devoted himself exclusively to preaching” (v. 5). Paul’s companions probably brought funds that enabled Paul to commit full time to preaching. But the same word “devoted” can also be translated as “began to become absorbed” in his preaching. Silas and Timothy’s arrival probably encouraged and emboldened Paul with fresh energy and concentration to share the gospel. We should not underestimate the powerful importance of our encouragement and support for our pastors and leaders. Our support (both moral and financial) can make a significant difference in our pastors’ effectiveness.

The content of Paul’s message was that Jesus was the Messiah (v. 5). When the Jews’ ongoing opposition became abusive (literally, “blasphemous”), Paul switched his primary focus from the Jews to the more receptive Gentiles. By using the Greek word “blasphemy,” Luke insinuated that the opposition was not only against Paul but against God. Believers have an obligation to witness to their faith, but we cannot force someone to believe. Sometimes people will reject the message.

Acts 18:7-11

Leaving the synagogue, Paul went next door to the home of Titius Justus. Paul’s ministry among the Gentile Corinthians found great success, and many people believed and were baptized. Even Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his family became believers in response to Paul’s message.

Despite the success, Paul was in danger and afraid. Paul had faced similar opposition in other cities, where he had been attacked and thrown out of town (Acts 13:50-51; 14:1-6, 19-20). Thus, it is not surprising to recognize Paul was worried and anxious about his Jewish opponents. In a nighttime vision, however, the Lord reassured and encouraged Paul to continue his

Think About It

Government opposition caused Aquila and Priscilla to be banned from their home in Rome. However, God used this exiled Christian couple to spread the gospel message throughout the Roman Empire.

**LEGAL CHARGES
AGAINST PAUL
DENIED**

ministry. God urged Paul to put aside his fear (literally, “do not continue to fear”) and to persist in spreading the gospel message in Corinth. Moreover, the Lord promised His presence and protection over Paul. As a result, Paul remained in Corinth for 18 months, teaching the Word of God. Despite opposition, believers can rest confidently in God’s ability to accomplish His plans and to protect His children.

Acts 18:12-18

The Jewish opposition finally mounted a legal attack against Paul and brought him before the Roman governor Gallio. Due to the increase of many disruptive new religions throughout the empire, the Roman government had declared all new religions to be illegal and punishable by law. Bringing Paul before Gallio, the Jews charged Paul of “persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law” (v. 13).

This was a significant legal challenge we should not overlook. If the Jews could persuade Gallio to rule against Paul’s preaching, the legal precedent established in Corinth could effectively ban the Christian faith throughout the entire Roman Empire. Even before Paul was able to begin his defense, however, Gallio dismissed the entire case! Gallio declared that this dispute was merely a Jewish matter of “words, names, and your own law” (v. 14), and he refused to judge against Paul’s preaching of the gospel. Even though the crowd turned on the synagogue leader in protest and began to beat him, Gallio showed no concern at all. In this way, Paul and the Christian gospel scored a significant victory over the opposition.

REFLECT

Consider ways you can share the good news in an unlikely place this week.

DANIEL POWERS

May
8

THE LIFE-CHANGING POWER OF THE GOSPEL

The good news of Jesus changes lives wherever it goes.

THE WORD

ACTS 19:1-20 **W**hile Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples ²and asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?”

They answered, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.”

³So Paul asked, “Then what baptism did you receive?”

“John’s baptism,” they replied.

⁴Paul said, “John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.”

⁵On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

⁶When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. ⁷There were about twelve men in all.

⁸Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. ⁹But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. ¹⁰This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.

¹¹God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, ¹²so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them.

¹³Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, “In the name of the Jesus whom Paul

preaches, I command you to come out.” ¹⁴Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. ¹⁵One day the evil spirit answered them, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?”

¹⁶Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.

¹⁷When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. ¹⁸Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed what they had done. ¹⁹A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas. ²⁰**In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.**

KEY VERSE

ENGAGE THE WORD

BAPTISM WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT

Acts 19:1-7

Leaving Corinth, Paul traveled to the city of Ephesus, where he met a group of men who were followers of John the Baptist. Before Jesus’ ministry began, John prepared the way by calling people to repentance through baptism. Convicted by John’s preaching, these men repented and were baptized, but they had never heard of Jesus or the Holy Spirit. Paul reminded them that John had told the people to believe in the one who was coming after him. The one John preached about was none other than Jesus. Hearing Paul’s message, these men were baptized, and they received the Holy Spirit when Paul laid his hands on them.

The ministry of John the Baptist was very powerful, but salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ alone. The work of the Holy Spirit is also crucial. Without the Spirit, this group could not continue the mission of John or Jesus. But with the Spirit’s indwelling presence, they spoke in other languages to preach and proclaim the good news of salvation to all people, just like the believers did in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). Today, we also need the infilling of the Spirit in order to share the gospel effectively and live a Christlike life.

Did You Know?

Ephesus was the third largest city in the Roman Empire. The Ephesian temple of the Greek goddess Artemis (a fertility god) stood as one of the “Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.”

THE SPREADING GOSPEL

AUTHENTIC VERSUS INAUTHENTIC POWER

Acts 19:8-10

If possible, Paul always began his ministry in a new city in the Jewish synagogue. Likewise, in Ephesus, Paul went to the synagogue where he “argued persuasively” (literally, “entered into dialogue persuasively”) about the kingdom of God. Paul’s persuasive dialogue in the synagogue must have gone well because he was able to witness boldly for Christ for three months before opposition arose. This long period of peaceful dialogue was probably due in part to the favorable response to the gospel of John the Baptist’s former followers. But eventually, a group of Jewish opponents hardened their hearts against Paul’s message. When they began to slander the gospel publically, Paul left the synagogue and began to teach and preach in the lecture hall of Tyrannus, who probably rented the hall to Paul. Thus, Paul was able to continue his ministry in Ephesus for two years, spreading the gospel message to both Jews and Greeks throughout the province of Asia. This two-year period became Paul’s longest tenure of ministry in any of the churches he planted.

Acts 19:11-16

In verses 11-16, Luke recorded a rather humorous contrast between the authentic power of God at work in Paul and the ineffective power and disastrous results of seven brothers who tried to fake authority over evil spirits in the name of Jesus.

Just as He did with Peter, God affirmed Paul’s ministry with miraculous signs and the power to expel evil spirits in Jesus’ name. God’s power was so intensely at work in Paul that people found healing by merely touching clothing that Paul had touched.

Since Paul was able to drive out evil spirits in the name of Jesus, seven sons of a Jewish high priest tried to do the same thing. Invoking the name of Jesus like a magical formula, they commanded an evil spirit to come out. Needless to say, it did not turn out the way they expected! The evil spirit answered, “Jesus I know,

Think About It

Paul's ministry in Ephesus spread throughout the province of Asia (Acts 19:10). The well-known seven churches of Asia addressed in Revelation 2—3 were probably planted and established during this same time.

A WAVE OF REPENTANCE AND SALVATION

and Paul I know about, but who are you?" Then the demon-possessed man attacked and beat them until they ran away naked and bleeding.

The power of Jesus is undeniable. But Jesus' power is experienced in a relationship of faith and obedience to Him, not in merely saying His name like some magical formula. The sons of Sceva discovered this truth the hard way.

Acts 19:17-20

Paul's miracles and the humiliating defeat of the sons of Sceva caused the people of Ephesus to be gripped with fear and reverent awe. The people recognized Jesus as Lord over evil spirits and they held the name Jesus in high regard. This had a direct impact on the way the people lived their lives. Many believed and made open confessions of their sins. Some who practiced sorcery renounced their pursuit of the occult, and they burned their magical scrolls publicly. Luke observed that the scrolls were valued at approximately 200 years of income! As a result, the gospel message spread widely and grew in influence as God demonstrated the life-changing power of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.

Jesus Christ is still Lord today. When we share the good news of Jesus to those around us, God will use our faithful witness to save and change lives wherever we go.

REFLECT Take time this week to thank God for His life-changing power.

DANIEL POWER

May

15

THE POWER OF A CLEAR TESTIMONY

*The first vocation of every Christian is to share
the good news of God's grace with non-believers,
as well as believers.*

THE WORD

ACTS
20:17-37

From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. ¹⁸When they arrived, he said to them: “You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. ¹⁹I served the Lord with great humility and with tears and in the midst of severe testing by the plots of my Jewish opponents. ²⁰You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. ²¹I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

²²“And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. ²³I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. ²⁴However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace.

²⁵“Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. ²⁶Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of any of you. ²⁷For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. ²⁸Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. ²⁹I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. ³⁰Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. ³¹So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

KEY VERSE

³²“Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. ³³I have not coveted anyone’s silver or gold or clothing. ³⁴You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. ³⁵In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’ ”

³⁶When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. ³⁷They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him.

ENGAGE THE WORD

Saying goodbye is hard to do. Indeed, some farewells fill us with sorrow to the point of physical pain. But despite the pain, I like even more what Winnie the Pooh said: “How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard.” Farewells are especially difficult when we love the person who is leaving.

In our passage for this week, we will explore Paul’s “farewell speech” to the Ephesian believers whom he loved so dearly. This passage provides a snapshot of Paul’s passion for ministry, and his love and concern for those with whom he ministered.

PAUL’S FAITHFUL SERVICE**Acts 20:17-21**

There are many farewell speeches found in the Bible (see Joshua 23:1—24:30; John 13—17). Typically, a farewell speech contained three parts: 1) summary of the leader’s life as an example for others, 2) review of the present situation and warnings for the future, and 3) instructions and exhortations for faithfulness.

Paul’s farewell speech began with a summary of his ministry in Ephesus. Paul served the Lord with humility and tears in the midst of harsh opposition. Nevertheless, he remained faithful and diligent in his preaching and teaching, both in public settings and privately “from house to house” (v. 20).

Did You Know?

Paul declared to the Ephesian leaders that “none of you...will ever see me again” (Acts 20:25). In fact, according to Acts and Paul’s own letters, Paul never did see the Ephesians again.

THE TASK OF TESTIFYING TO GOD’S GRACE

Paul identified the content of his gospel as twofold: 1) people must turn to God in repentance, and 2) they must have faith in the Lord Jesus. Repentance to God (which means confessing one’s sins and turning away from godlessness) and placing one’s faith in Jesus alone are the essence of salvation. The Ephesians knew that Paul had consistently modeled this message in his preaching and teaching. Likewise, repentance of sin and faith in Jesus must always be foundational in our proclamation of the gospel.

Acts 20:22-27

Paul felt compelled by God to return to Jerusalem despite the strong possibility of danger. The Spirit warned him repeatedly that he would face prison and hardships. Nonetheless, Paul was determined to obey the Spirit’s leading regardless of danger or discomfort. Paul’s singular goal was to accomplish the task God had given him: “the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace” (v. 24). Indeed, God has tasked every believer to witness to others about His grace and salvation as we can see in Jesus’ Great Commission to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19-20). Testifying to God’s grace is something we all can do every day in small and big ways.

Due to the Spirit’s warnings about the danger of going to Jerusalem, Paul knew he would never see his friends from Ephesus again. Despite the sorrow of saying farewell, Paul had no regrets because he had persistently shared with them the fullness of God’s will and salvation plan. Paul never shrank away from declaring the truth of God, even in the midst of opposition. We too must diligently declare the truth of God to a generation that is not always open and receptive to the truth.

Acts 20:28-31

Paul commissioned the Ephesian leaders to keep watch over the church and themselves. He warned

WATCHING OVER THE TRUTH

Think About It

Notice the play on words: Paul was “bound” by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem (v. 22). Before his conversion, Paul wanted to bring “bound” prisoners to Jerusalem for trial. Finally, Paul was “bound” (arrested) in Jerusalem in Acts 21.

them of “savage wolves” from outside the church who would attack and try to destroy believers. Additionally, challengers to the faith would arise from within the church who would distort the truth. Attacks from outsiders are difficult, but the threat of distorted truth and false teaching within the church is even more dangerous and painful. In the face of both challenges, Paul urged the leaders to remain faithful in caring for their flock, even as Paul had been faithful.

Paul’s experience reminds us that obedience to God does not mean believers will be spared difficulty or persecution. The competing messages of different religious voices can be confusing, but we must stand firm in proclaiming the necessity of turning from sin and confessing faith in Jesus Christ alone for salvation.

PAUL COMMITS THE EPHESIANS TO GOD

Acts 20:32-37

Finally, Paul committed his friends and fellow leaders to God and to the word of His grace. The word of God’s grace resounds clearly in the Bible, which is the foundation of the truth of salvation. When believers commit themselves to God and His Word, they will find encouragement and an eternal inheritance among all the saints of God. Just as Jesus promised, Paul was blessed through his selfless conduct and faithful proclamation of the gospel among the believers in Ephesus. He urged these leaders to follow his example. With tears and a final prayer, Paul commended the Ephesians to God’s care for the future. God gives every believer kingdom work to do, just as He did for Paul. We must remain faithful to that task.

REFLECT

Take time this week to pray for non-believers in your circle of influence.

DANIEL POWERS

May

22

THE VISION THAT TRANSFORMS

Paul's entire life was transformed by an encounter with the risen Lord Jesus.

THE WORD

**ACTS
26:12-29**

On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. ¹³About noon, King Agrippa, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. ¹⁴We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.'

¹⁵"Then I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?'

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' the Lord replied.

¹⁶"Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen and will see of me. ¹⁷I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them ¹⁸to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

KEY VERSE

¹⁹**"So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven.** ²⁰First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds. ²¹That is why some Jews seized me in the temple courts and tried to kill me. ²²But God has helped me to this very day; so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—²³that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles."

²⁴At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defense. "You are out

of your mind, Paul!” he shouted. “Your great learning is driving you insane.”

²⁵“I am not insane, most excellent Festus,” Paul replied. “What I am saying is true and reasonable. ²⁶The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. ²⁷King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.”

²⁸Then Agrippa said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”

²⁹Paul replied, “Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.”

ENGAGE THE WORD

The conversion of Saul of Tarsus (whom we know as Paul) on the road to Damascus was one of the most significant events in the early days of the Christian faith. Saul’s conversion from persecutor to proclaimer of the gospel highlighted the life-transforming power of Jesus Christ and the gospel. Luke found Saul’s transformation important enough to include three lengthy accounts of Paul’s conversion story in Acts. Our passage this week is Luke’s third telling of this story of salvation. Paul’s personal encounter with the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus changed everything.

PAUL’S CONVERSION ON THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS

Acts 26:12-18

This passage records Luke’s third account of Paul’s conversion and divine call. All three accounts (Acts 9:1-19; 22:3-21; 26:2-23) tell essentially the same story with some minor variation of details. While traveling to Damascus to arrest and prosecute believers, Paul was confronted and challenged by the risen Lord with the famous words, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Then Jesus commissioned Paul to take the gospel message to the Gentiles.

In this account, Luke added Jesus’ words, “It is hard for you to kick against the goads” (v. 14). The goad was a traditional farming implement used to spur or guide

Did You Know?

Two experiences qualified a person to be an apostle in the early church: seeing the risen Lord and being personally commissioned by Him. Both experiences happened to Paul in his Damascus road experience.

oxen. To kick against the goads was a well-known proverb among the Greeks to emphasize the futility of striving against fate or against the gods. Paul used this proverb in his defense before King Agrippa to explain his preaching ministry to the Gentiles. It was not Paul's idea to preach to the Gentiles. Instead, the Lord appointed Paul as a servant and a witness of the risen Lord Jesus to the Gentiles "so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith" (v. 18). Resistance to God's call would be as futile as to kick against the goads.

Paul's conversion was dramatic and unique. But in one detail it is the same as every other conversion. Namely, every conversion begins with a real encounter and relationship with Jesus.

PAUL'S MESSAGE OF REPENTANCE

Acts 26:19-23

Paul obeyed Jesus in his vision from heaven. Starting immediately in Damascus, he began to preach the gospel message. Paul's message focused on Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Specifically, his message called for repentance expressed in three complementary ways: First, he called them to "repent," which means to turn around and move in the opposite direction. Paul's own repentance was characterized by a total change in direction from a persecutor to a proclaimer of the gospel. Second, Paul summoned them to turn to God. True repentance does not only include turning away from something (sin), but also turning to Someone (God). Third, he called them to demonstrate their repentance through their actions. True repentance entails a change of both the heart and behavior.

The reference to "the prophets and Moses" (v. 22) underscored the prophetic nature of the Christian message that the Messiah would suffer, die, and be raised again. The Scriptures also prophesied that this salvation message would be proclaimed to Jews and Gentiles alike. Paul's obedience in preaching to the Gentiles was the cause of his arrest by the Jews. None-

Think About It

When Paul preached the gospel to “those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles” (26:20), he helped fulfill Jesus’ commission in Acts 1:8 to be His witnesses “to the ends of the earth.”

THE RESPONSE TO PAUL’S TESTIMONY

theless, God continued to help Paul stand strong and faithful to the commission he had been given.

Obedience to God’s call to share the gospel does not mean we will not face opposition and persecution. However, we have the promised assurance that God will protect us from all who seek to silence our witness.

Acts 26:24-29

Paul’s testimony evoked a strong response from those who heard him. Festus interrupted Paul and proclaimed he had lost his mind. Conviction will often cause people to try to interrupt and deflect the implications of the truth. Paul assured Festus he was in his right mind, and he appealed to the Jewish King Agrippa to acknowledge the scriptural basis of his words in the prophetic writings.

King Agrippa’s evasive response revealed the pointed conviction of Paul’s testimony. Agrippa asked sarcastically, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?” The word “persuade” indicates that Agrippa understood Paul was trying to convince him to repent and become a follower of Christ. Paul did not deny his evangelistic intentions, but he expressed the sincere hope that they too would see the light of truth and repent, just as Paul had seen the light and repented on the road to Damascus.

Paul experienced a response of mockery and rejection when he shared his personal testimony with Festus and King Agrippa. But he shared the truth of his life-transforming vision anyway. Regardless of the response, believers must witness to the power of the gospel to turn people from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God.

REFLECT | In what ways is your life a testimony of the power of God?

May

29

THE GOSPEL IN THE MOST UN- LIKELY PLACES

The gospel message is for all people in all places.

THE WORD

ACTS
28:16-31

When we got to Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him.

¹⁷Three days later he called together the local Jewish leaders. When they had assembled, Paul said to them: “My brothers, although I have done nothing against our people or against the customs of our ancestors, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans. ¹⁸They examined me and wanted to release me, because I was not guilty of any crime deserving death. ¹⁹The Jews objected, so I was compelled to make an appeal to Caesar. I certainly did not intend to bring any charge against my own people. ²⁰For this reason I have asked to see you and talk with you. It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain.”

²¹They replied, “We have not received any letters from Judea concerning you, and none of our people who have come from there has reported or said anything bad about you. ²²But we want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect.”

²³They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. He witnessed to them from morning till evening, explaining about the kingdom of God, and from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets he tried to persuade them about Jesus. ²⁴Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe. ²⁵They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement: “The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your ancestors when he said through Isaiah the prophet:

²⁶“Go to this people and say, “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.”

²⁷For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.’

²⁸“Therefore I want you to know that God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!”

³⁰For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. ³¹**He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!**

KEY VERSE

ENGAGE THE WORD

PAUL’S INTRODUCTION TO THE JEWISH LEADERS

Acts 28:16-20

Paul was a prisoner when he arrived in Rome; but instead of a prison cell, he was under house arrest with Roman guards. Paul’s strategy in a new city was always to share the gospel with the Jews before he took his message to the Gentiles. Since his captivity prevented him from going to the Jewish synagogue, Paul invited the Jewish leaders to come to him.

Paul’s introduction of himself to the Jewish leaders in Rome is decidedly defensive. Paul adamantly professed he had done nothing wrong. Even though he was a prisoner because of the Jews in Jerusalem, Paul revealed he had done nothing against the Jewish people or their customs. On the contrary, he was a prisoner “because of the hope of Israel” (28:20). For Paul, the hope of Israel consisted of God’s promise of the Messiah with the restoration and salvation of Israel. Paul preached that Jesus was the fulfillment of this messianic promise.

In theory, the Jews were the most likely audience to respond favorably to the gospel message. Nonetheless, they often opposed and rejected the message. Paul shared his testimony with them anyway. Like Paul, we should not become discouraged when those who seem most likely to respond to the gospel do not do so.

Did You Know?

The Jewish population was large and influential in first century Rome. Cicero, the well-known Roman statesman, wrote about the Jewish people's ability to sway public opinion in his writings.

PAUL WITNESSES TO THE JEWS

BELIEF AND RESISTANCE

Acts 28:21-23

The Jewish leaders agreed to meet with Paul and listen to his story. Paul's defensive words in the previous verses suggest he thought the Roman Jews had already turned against him because of negative reports about him from Jerusalem. Surprisingly, they had not received any news from Jerusalem about Paul. Nonetheless, the Jewish leaders were skeptical about Paul's message because so many people spoke against the Christian movement.

On the day of their meeting, a large number of Jews came to Paul's house where he witnessed to them about Jesus and the kingdom of God. It is easy to assume that Paul simply preached about Jesus to the Jews at this meeting. However, the language of the text indicates that Paul's witness was a dialogue—a conversation—with these Jewish leaders. Using the Old Testament Scriptures to support his testimony, Paul talked and reasoned with them from morning until evening about the message of salvation in Jesus the Messiah. God often uses our ongoing conversations with other people to influence them to respond positively to the gospel.

Acts 28:24-27

The Jewish response to Paul's message was mixed: some were persuaded by his testimony while others would not believe. This was a common response of the Jews to the Christian message in Acts. In other passages in Acts, the Jews often opposed Paul's insistence that God's Messiah Jesus invited all people to salvation through faith in Him. The same objection to the inclusive nature of the gospel was probably the cause of the disagreement among the Jews in this passage as well.

The result of the meeting was unpleasant and disappointing for Paul. Citing Isaiah, Paul reminded his Jewish audience of their ancestors' opposition and rejection of God's plans. Even though God wanted

Think About It

Luke's decision to end his book with a report of ongoing, unhindered evangelism reminds us that evangelism lies at the very heart of God's call to every believer to share the good news of salvation.

SALVATION FOR ALL

to heal and save them, their calloused and stubborn hearts caused them to shut their eyes and ears from recognizing God's purposes, just as their ancestors had done in the past. Believers must remember that those to whom they witness must willfully choose to accept Christ as their personal Savior. We cannot force people to believe, but we are called to share the gospel anyway.

Acts 28:28-31

Paul determined to focus on those who would respond favorably to the gospel. If the Jews refused to listen, he would proclaim God's saving message to the Gentiles, who were much more receptive to the message of salvation. For the next two years, Paul continued to welcome anyone—both Jews and Gentiles—to his prison home who would listen to his message. Even though confined to his home by a Roman guard, Paul continued to testify and teach about salvation through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The ending of Acts is rather abrupt and unexpected. Luke did not inform his readers about what finally happened to Paul in Rome. But with a triumphant word of assurance, Luke concluded Acts with the affirmation that the gospel message continued to be proclaimed in the very center of the Roman Empire “without hindrance.” Nothing can stop the proclamation and advancement of the kingdom of God by God's faithful witnesses. Let us join in sharing our faithful testimony of salvation in Jesus Christ!

REFLECT

Where can you share your faithful testimony of salvation this week?

 DANIEL POWERS

Key Verse Memory

Committing God's Word to memory is an important goal for Christians of every age. To assist you in this worthy objective, we have suggested three key verses for memorization. Select one verse to memorize each month or memorize one verse of your choosing for the quarter.

Key verses for Spring 2022:

Psalms 63:1

Psalms 27:1

Psalms 116:1-2

COMING NEXT QUARTER

SUMMER 2022

Unit 1: Hebrews

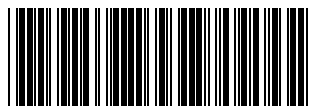
The book of Hebrews gives a strong case for faith in Christ; yet its words are often thought of as being too difficult to comprehend. During this study, we will gain a clearer understanding of the powerful message of this book of the Bible.

Unit 2: What Is the Church?

We gather each Sunday morning, read the Bible, sing songs, and hear a sermon from our pastor—often giving little thought as to why we do what we do. This unit explores the importance of the church, its practices, and its ministry in the world.



THE FOUNDRY
PUBLISHING



AS-MAM22