

The New Testament

The Acts of
the Apostles

Translation and Commentary

by David Morsey

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Preface

The purpose of this project is to provide the Lord's people with a thorough, easy-to-read interpretation of the Bible, verse-by-verse. With this commentary there will be a translation from the original text which will preserve simple dignity and yet eliminate the colloquial and antiquated expressions. There will also be an effort to avoid translations that make arbitrary decisions about certain text which might be taken in several ways. For example, in the descriptions of heaven in Revelation 21:16, it says, "The city lies foursquare." Now the Greek word translated "foursquare," tetragonos, can mean "cube" or "four-cornered." If the city is a pyramid, which is quite possible, then "four-cornered" is a good translation. But if we use the word "cube" then we shut out the possibility of the pyramid, an arbitrary decision which we are not capable of making at this time. Accordingly, we will attempt to stay as close to the literal text as possible, without paraphrases that may take too much liberty.

Foreword

It is our intention with this chapter-by-chapter study to show as accurately as possible what the Bible teaches. We are not trying to present a reasonable philosophy of life with a reference to Scripture as a source, but rather, we are attempting to show as faithfully as possible what the Bible teaches about life. We are not here defending the Bible, but only interpreting it. The Holy Spirit Himself must defend the Bible because, after all, it is His Word.

In order to interpret the Bible accurately the following things are essential: (1) The presence and power of the Holy Spirit; (2) a thorough knowledge of the Hebrew and Greek languages in which the Bible was written; (3) a knowledge of the history and culture of the periods in which the Bible was written; (4) a personal situation which is free enough to make it unnecessary to defend any particular theological position; and (5) enough personal experience with Christ and with the Bible to provide the high degree of sensitivity that is essential to bring out the best possible meaning among several choices.

The presentation of the truth of God as revealed in Scripture must be simple enough to be available to all who seek it, and yet profound enough and accurate enough to be assured that we are conveying the message as God intended it to be given. We must come to the Bible, not as a textbook to be analyzed, but rather as a revelation from God of the meaning of life, especially as it relates to the human spirit and its identity with God. Essentially the Bible reveals to us the nature of God, the nature of man, and the nature of man's relationship to God. As a revelation of the nature of God, the Bible becomes a source of nourishment to the spirit which finds its source in the Bread of Life—Jesus Christ. As a revelation of the nature of man and his relationship to God, the Bible provides guidelines for living.

In this study of the Bible we are going to provide a translation from the original text (Greek in the New Testament and Hebrew in the Old Testament) and with it, comments that will clarify the meaning of the text, providing both the spiritual nourishment and the practical guidelines that were intended from the beginning in the revelation that God has given us.

An Introduction to the Study of the Book of Acts

The circumstances surrounding the writing of the various books of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, are singularly obscure. Thousands of books have been written on these matters, which are usually included under the general category of biblical introduction. There are, of course, many reasons why it is important to consider the circumstances under which a given book was written. But, in the consideration of these matters, it is most important to resist the temptation to include data that is only speculative. The statements in regard to authors or circumstances can affect one's attitude toward a given book, and if there is any error in these statements, it can be misleading as to the interpretation of the book. For example, there is a very widely read series of biographies on some of the prominent figures in the New Testament. Among these is a book on the author of Acts—Luke, the physician. If one would gather all of the biblical statements relative to Luke, and whatever historical data can be substantially verified, one might put together a twenty or thirty page pamphlet. However, we have a book of hundreds of pages, almost all of which is speculative. If one paid much attention to such a book, one could be in danger of being greatly misled. Unfortunately, even among responsible biblical scholars, there is a tendency to give too much attention to the discussion of these speculative areas. A simple but helpful analogy would be in the working of crossword puzzles. Anyone who has spent much time with these brain-teasers knows that it is better not to put a word down at all than to run the risk of putting down the wrong word which can throw the entire puzzle off. In our study of the book of Acts, it is most essential that we observe the principle of avoiding speculation. We do not know who Theophilus was at all, and we know very little about Luke, except that he was a physician, that he was a Gentile, and that he spent a good deal of time with Paul on his missionary journeys, beginning at Philippi. With this, we will have to be content, because all of the rest is speculative. We also know a good deal about the historical setting of the book of Acts. The time factor is well attested—covering the period from the resurrection of Christ to the final years of Paul in Rome. The understanding of the historical setting will, of course, be most helpful to us as we proceed in our study of the book.

It should also be noted here that we are presenting our own translation, as we did with the Gospel of John. The reason for this is not to add to the already cumbersome and confusing collection of translations, nor to in any way minimize the King James Version, (which we happen to like), but rather to provide the reader with a ready reference as to the basis for the comments that we make about the various texts. Many of the variations in translations relate to the difference between Old English and modern usage.

There is no book in all the Bible more crucial to the understanding of the church, or the body of Christ, than the book of Acts. It furnishes the entire foundation for various theological and practical issues that confront the church today. The most crucial of these, of course, is the ministry of the Holy Spirit. At issue also is the whole question of methodology and the functioning of the body of Christ as a corporate agency for the fulfillment of God's purposes on the earth. Because of the crucial nature of this book, it is important for us to set forth some guidelines as to our approach to it. These guidelines are as follows: (1) We must begin with a thorough analysis of the Greek text; (2) We must make use of whatever historical data outside the Bible is verifiable and dependable; (3) We must avoid the use of speculation as much as possible, and certainly wherever necessary, it must be so noted; and (4) We must avoid symbolisms, interpretations, and applications that are based upon traditions, and not upon the requirements of scholarship.

The reason for these introductory comments and the necessity of establishing certain principles, is that in the church today we are in danger of losing the truth in the great sweep of careless and

unqualified Bible teaching. The result of this carelessness is that believers everywhere are suffering with confusion, disappointment, discouragement and disillusionment regarding the faith, because they are not able to harmonize their own personal lives with what is being taught. The era of “manual” Christianity has left many scars of failure upon the simple believer who wants to follow Christ.

In the matter of the Holy Spirit, the overlooking of the historical perspective, and the misapplication of a number of texts, has led to a great stream of error as to the work of the Holy Spirit and His manifestations in the life of the believer. The result is that a great majority of believers today are defeated and feel that they are not really experiencing the work of the Spirit within them as they ought. It is most unfortunate if the very Word of God should be used as an instrument of discouragement and defeat because of an improper understanding of it.

As the name implies, the book of Acts is a record of the deeds of the apostles as they went out under the command of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. The Gospels present the life of Christ lived **for** us through Jesus on the earth. The book of Acts presents the life of Christ lived **in** us through the Holy Spirit. It is very important for us to see this essential truth, so that as we go through the events of this book, we will focus not so much on the episodes of miracles and ministries, but upon what these episodes reveal to us of the Spirit of Christ. The power of God manifested on earth through His Holy Spirit touched the lives of ordinary people. There was never a hint anywhere in the book of Acts of spiritual preparations required as prerequisites to the coming of His Spirit. Chief among the examples of this is the apostle Paul, who was smitten by the Spirit while he was on the way to bring havoc to the very members of the body of Christ.

If we see the book of Acts either as a gallery of heroes, or an indictment of the unproductive, we will miss its main point. It should rather be an encouragement to all, that whoever or whatever they are in the flesh, the Holy Spirit has the power to use them in the fulfillment of His purposes on the earth. Most Christians look wistfully at the book of Acts and assume that, marvelous as it is, it is something just a shade above their own capacity. To use the events of the book of Acts as a model, or goal, is to invite discouragement. To use it rather as evidence of the power of the Holy Spirit working through ordinary people, is to bring comfort and strength.

As we proceed with this study, it is hoped that the latter will be the result—that the humblest and weakest believer may be able to take courage and to know that as surely as one cares about Christ and longs for such experience, so surely can one believe that the Spirit of Christ dwells within. And, as surely as the Spirit of Christ dwells within, one may be quite confident that His Spirit is doing His work in one’s own heart, and that He will ultimately bring that work to fulfillment, as the apostle Paul so plainly told the believers at Philippi—“*Being confident of this very thing, that He which hath begun a good work in you, will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ*” (Philippians 1:6).

As the Gospels begin with the coming of Jesus to the earth to be born among men, and to die for them, so the book of Acts begins with the coming of His Holy Spirit, to be born in the spirits of men, and to provide them with the power to be the sons of God. As the remainder of each of the Gospels tell of the work of Jesus on the earth and His ultimate glorification, so the remainder of Acts tells of the continuing ministry of the Spirit in the hearts of men and the ultimate victory afforded them over Satan on the earth.

In the ancient age when there were no jetliners, and no automobiles, and no satellite communication systems, the apostles covered an amazing expanse of the known world, reaching from the shores of Spain to the threshold of Asia; and their immediate successors, from Africa, to the Baltic Sea. (One wonders if the electronic devices have really been that much of an improvement.) In city after city they left groups of believers from which radiated out throughout the world a steady flow of the tidings of redemption. Had this process not been aborted by the coming of a highly organized, systematic religious monstrosity, the process of evangelism used by the apostles would have been a far more effective force than the system that replaced it. Perhaps

there would have been no Dark Ages at all. But, we are speculating and that is risky. One thing is certain. The simple assemblies of believers, shepherded by men of God, quite apart from the more spectacular and showy promotional methods of the modern media, is a tremendously effective instrument in the work of Christ on the earth, and is far more in keeping with the spirit of the book of Acts.

In the early chapters of Acts, the events surrounding the coming of the Holy Spirit are startling and remarkable, and create an air of excitement about the early ministry of the apostles. This excitement is parallel in many respects to the coming of Jesus as a babe at Bethlehem. It is tempting to assume (and not all have resisted the temptation) that these exciting events were and should be the common daily experience of all believers continuously, day in and day out; year in and year out. This attitude has given rise to much discouragement and defeat on the part of believers whose lot is to be consumed in the more routine and prosaic aspects of the work of the church in the world. Many religious groups have capitalized on the spectacular at the expense of the ordinary sufferer in the body of Christ. The most damaging effect of this is the assumption that if one is not involved in these spectacular events, or is not delivered from some suffering, that there is something amiss in the experience of that one. In addition to this, many a valiant and heroic servant of God, struggling amidst hardships and heartaches to hold together a flock of God's sheep in some wretched borough, or ghetto or sophisticated suburb of a great metropolis, or a rural hamlet or village, exposed to the sensational claims and presentations of the media, may become deeply discouraged and assume again that he must be somehow missing the mark in his work for God. And the sheep, seeing the clover on the other side of the fence, are inclined to wonder what is wrong with their own shepherd. It would be tragic if these shepherds were deterred from their task by the spectacular demonstrations of those who must present the sensational to survive in their multi-million dollar programs. Let the discouraged believers everywhere take heart in studying the church as it was in the book of Acts. Whereas the early chapters do depict some very remarkable events in the coming of the Holy Spirit, in the course of early sharing of that experience with the surrounding peoples and countries, the rest of the book of Acts finds the apostles and the churches struggling with weakness and discouragement and disappointment as they seek to spread the Word throughout the world. Paul's epistles very graphically describe the afflictions that he bore continuously to fulfill his ministry on the earth. Both the book of Acts and Paul's own epistles present him as a man moving in constant affliction. He frequently described the distress and the sorrow and the agony of his work. But, as he pointed out to the Corinthian believers, *"It is not yet time to reign."* He urged the believers in Rome not only to *"rejoice with them that do rejoice,"* but also to *"weep with them that weep."* It is important to understand this at the outset as we go to the book of Acts, else we will distort the reality of the situation, and set before the believers a model of sensationalism that was not really true. The early church was very like the present church. It was full of weakness and distress and affliction; of sorrow and conflict; of personal jealousies and strife. There were indeed the moments of miracles and rejoicing, but there was also a large degree of human weakness. If we were to be transported in time back to those days, we might find that the church of this day is just as much used of God, and just as much attended by His Spirit as were the early believers.

In the early chapters of Acts, then—perhaps through chapter 12—we have the startling events that surrounded the first coming of the Holy Spirit and continuing up through Peter's bringing of the ministry of the Spirit to the Gentiles. Then, in chapter 13, we have the anointing of Paul and Barnabas at Antioch. Throughout the rest of the book of Acts, the central focus is upon Paul and his fellow workers, establishing groups of believers throughout the Mediterranean area and over into the Near East. The experiences of Paul and the other disciples are very much parallel to the experiences of the believers today. There were a number of miracles, and victories, but there were also many heartaches and disappointments and rejections. Sometimes large numbers of people received Paul's message, but often there were many who rejected it. By his own testimony,

especially to the people of Corinth, his life was filled with affliction and distress; with hunger and hardness; with persecution and imprisonment. He had his moments of rejoicing, but he had also his times of discouragement and of tears. For Paul, the ultimate victory came as he faced death. In his second letter to Timothy he made mention of this in his well known words, *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith; henceforth there is laid up for me a crown (victor’s wreath) of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give to me at that day; and not to me only, but unto all them also that love His appearing”* (II Timothy 4:7,8). As we go through the book of Acts, then, let us take heart in the realization that the same Holy Spirit is indeed working in us, who was working in the church at that day. And, let us not assume that in order to be assured of the presence of the Holy Spirit, our lives must be constantly lived in a state of exhilaration and euphoria.

Acts 1:1-5

TRANSLATION

The first account I have made, O Theophilus, concerning all things which Jesus began to do and to teach until the day in which He was taken up, having given commandment through the Holy Spirit; to the apostles, whom He had chosen: to whom also He presented Himself as living, after His suffering, by many positive proofs, being seen by them over a period of forty days, and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God. And, assembling together with them, He directed them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father—“Which you have heard from Me; because John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized by the Holy Spirit after not many of these days.”

COMMENTARY

The Living Jesus, Who Was With His Disciples, Will Send His Spirit To Be In Them

Luke, the physician, narrates some of the most remarkable events in history with the same artless simplicity that characterized the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus. He makes no effort to persuade or to impress with literary devices. He makes no effort to supply proofs for what he is saying. Throughout the entire book of Acts, it is obvious that Luke is depending on a higher power to confirm the truth of his words.

There would not be the slightest break in the direct participation of God with His servants on the earth. Jesus had assembled the disciples and told them not to move from Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came to dwell within them and to do His work through them. No matter how much teaching they had received from Jesus, it was impossible for them to properly communicate this truth apart from the voice of the Spirit coming through their spirits. The human mind has the power to store up knowledge, but

not the power to apply it in the communicating of the truth of God. It is for this reason that Jesus had to communicate His directives to the apostles through the Holy Spirit. The human mind, unaided by God, is not even able to communicate with God, much less to present that truth to the world.

The “proofs” to which Luke referred, were the tangible, visible evidences of Jesus’ appearance on the earth to a large number of people (Paul says about five hundred). The word which Luke used for this, and translated in the King James Version by “infallible proofs,” was used in the ancient classics, such as Thucydides, to denote “positive proofs,” that is, proofs that could be verified. The refusal to accept this kind of testimony from history, would be tantamount to the refusal to accept, for example, the return of one who had been presumed dead. Let us say that some weeks or months later

the person shows up quite unexpectedly, and this information is communicated to friends in distant cities. The adventure may be told and retold in the generations to come as a remarkable experience. Let us say then that the ones who receive the story of the episode years later would refuse to believe it just because only a certain number of people had seen the survivor. All of history has to be accepted, of course, on the testimony of those who have been its witnesses. If one has already made up one's mind as to what one wishes to believe, and thus prejudices the matter, then no accumulation of witnesses will be conclusive to that person. It is thus with the resurrection of Christ. Large numbers of people saw Him after His resurrection, but those who are predisposed not to believe that Jesus was indeed the Son of God, will not accept this witness. It must therefore be realized that only the Holy Spirit can convince one of this truth, since, as Paul says in I Corinthians 2:14, **"The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him, neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned."** Jesus had walked about after His resurrection, for some forty days. He had been seen by not only the apostles, but hundreds of others. The refusal to receive this kind of testimony is rooted in the unwillingness to believe.

The link between God and His creatures must not be broken. As the Spirit of God in Jesus touched and sanctified the disciples, so now that Spirit must not only touch them, but dwell within them. John the Baptist came to prepare the remnant of Israel for the receiving of their Messiah. In connection with this, he offered them baptism unto the purifying of their sin of unbelief; and cleansing, as a preparation for the coming of their Messiah. As of that time, the Holy Spirit had not come to take up His work of indwelling and empowering the people of God. Thus, John's baptism

was a baptism unto repentance. The baptism of the Holy Spirit was, then, the fulfillment of the prophecy that one day God would put His Spirit in His people and take away from them their own stony hearts of unbelief. Now He was about to come and make good that promise. The expression, "baptism of the Spirit," is used only a few times in the New Testament, and always in connection with the coming of the Spirit initially to dwell in the hearts of those who accept Him. It never has to do with a second coming of the Spirit after the initial conversion. Thus, while some use this expression to mean a work of the Spirit subsequent to salvation, such a usage is actually misapplied. According to the apostle Paul, **"By one Spirit are we all baptized into one body . . ."** (I Corinthians 12:13). We are baptized by the Spirit, then, when we take Christ into our spirits, and are made members of His body. After this initial coming of the Spirit into our spirits, we have many experiences with the Holy Spirit—some positive in the way of special blessings, and some negative, in the way of the revealing of our flesh to us, but once the Holy Spirit has come into our spirits, there is no need to have Him come a second time. To say that the disciples were already Christians, or saved, is to overlook the major point that the Holy Spirit had not as yet come to anyone. They were saved, all right, but only as Israel had been saved in the Old Testament sense. After the Holy Spirit did come into the world, there would have been no such initial experience of salvation, but rather an immediate coming of the Holy Spirit bringing salvation with Him. The Jews had their salvation under the covenant relationship to God apart from the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. The Christian today can only be saved by the coming of the Holy Spirit. The disciples themselves would not come into this experience until the day of Pentecost which was to come not many days hence.

Acts 1:6-14

TRANSLATION

When they had come together then, they were asking Him, saying, “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons, which the Father has placed in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and unto the ends of the earth.” And when He had said these things, while they were watching, He was lifted up; and a cloud received Him up out of their sight. And as they were gazing unto heaven while He was going, behold, also two men stood alongside them in white robes, who also said, “Men, Galileans, why do you stand looking at the heavens? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in the same way as you have beheld Him going into heaven.” Then they returned unto Jerusalem from the mountain called “Olivet”, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey. And when they entered [Jerusalem], they went up into an upper chamber, where they were staying, both Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Phillip, and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of James. These all were continuing constantly with one mind in prayer, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

COMMENTARY

At the Threshold of Pentecost—Jesus Glorified

Swiftly the moments were passing. Jesus’ final glorification is at hand. His bodily presence will be no more seen on the earth until the consummation of all things. The disciples cling to their Master. One more question—“Will you, at this time, restore the kingdom to Israel?” Jesus’ answer should have settled for all time the issue of timetables. Moments before Jesus’ departure, this was the most fundamental question that they could ask. Was not this the ultimate purpose—the restoration of all things?

Jesus’ answer is almost brusque. “This is really not your concern. It is in the hands of the Father.” (Much of the confusion and division that exists today in the effort to unravel the mysteries of prophecy is the result of going beyond that which God has intended, to determine the times and the seasons. It is best to be silent where God is silent. Beyond this lies the perilous quagmire of human speculation.)

Refusing this question, Jesus does, nevertheless, have a final word for the

disciples. If His own glorification is at hand, the glorification of His creatures is not yet. There remains still the titanic task of bringing to the whole world God's message of redeeming grace. For this they will need power totally beyond themselves. And such power is shortly to be theirs. Powerless to fulfill this mission while they were as yet learners at the feet of Jesus, they will now be possessed by His own Spirit, and will thus be totally adequate for the task. Jesus did not tell them that if they possessed His Spirit they **ought** to be His witnesses, but rather that they **will** be His witnesses.

It is tempting to use verse 8 on an individual basis as a test of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life. To do so is to miss totally the main import of the statement. Jesus is not dealing here with private commitments, but rather with the grand and universal truth of God's revelation to man. It has to do with the historic coming of the Holy Spirit, it is not just an individual promise, but rather a sweeping declaration that God's purpose of redemption for mankind will be inexorably fulfilled; His church will be invincible in the task, "**and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.**" From the day of Pentecost to the present hour, the church has indeed been invincible. Centuries of siege from the forces of the abyss have not prevailed against it. It is, of course, true that without the Holy Spirit one cannot be a witness to Christ. But, on the other hand, one cannot even be saved without the Holy Spirit. If one has taken Christ into his heart, he has the Holy Spirit. There are many factors that determine the effectiveness of one as a personal witness to the grace of Christ, but to say that one does not have the Holy Spirit simply because one does not conform to certain patterns of personal work, would be an unfortunate abuse of this marvelous text. This text belongs not to an individual, but to the body of Christ in general. As surely as one asks Christ to come into the heart,

one does possess His Spirit. By this Spirit one is baptized into the body of Christ. And as surely as one is a member of the body of Christ, one belongs to the corporate witness referred to in this passage. One may participate personally in this witness to a greater or less degree, depending upon one's commitment to Christ, but to use this text as leverage to impress upon Christians some appeal to a further filling of the Holy Spirit, totally misses the basic impact of Jesus' words.

Jesus and His disciples had gathered, for these remaining moments, on the Mount of Olives. While they were talking together, suddenly Jesus was lifted up to glory and was swept into the clouds and out of their sight! The disciples were riveted to the spot. Their trance was finally broken by two angels, who declared to them the truth that has been ringing in the ears of the church to this very day—THIS VERY SAME JESUS WILL COME AGAIN AND STAND ON THE MOUNT OF OLIVES.

The disciples returned to Jerusalem and to the upper chamber where they had been staying. Jesus had declared to them that they must wait here, in Jerusalem, until the Holy Spirit had come. Neither their obedience in coming to the upper chamber, nor the quality, nor persistence of their prayers would affect God's timetable. It is true that they waited faithfully in that upper room and it is true that they prayed with great earnestness and persistence, but God had appointed Pentecost as the day when His Spirit would come to the earth, and no one would hasten or prevent that moment. It is tempting to speculate here as to what the disciples were doing during those days that they waited. Many sermons have been preached on this theme, and efforts made to show that the actions of the disciples were the prerequisites or preludes to the coming of the Holy Spirit. It must be observed here that the insistence upon certain steps

being taken by the individual as the prerequisite for the coming of the Holy Spirit is completely contrary to the Scripture. The human spirit is completely bankrupt, and incapable of doing anything to achieve the coming of the Spirit into his heart. This is according to the plain teaching of the Scripture. The only thing that the lost soul can do is to cry out for mercy. If one had the capability of performing these steps before receiving the Spirit, one would not need the Spirit. The apostle Paul was

smitten by the Holy Spirit in a circumstance where he was absolutely opposing God. The disciples came to the upper chamber in Jerusalem as bankrupt as the apostle Paul in terms of meriting the grace and power of God. Given the history of strifes and jealousies that persisted during their days upon the earth, even the unity of the disciples on the occasion had to be a gift of the Spirit. But in that upper chamber, helpless and human, they stayed and prayed; they watched and waited.

Acts 1:15-26

TRANSLATION

And in these days Peter rose up in the midst of the brethren (the group of persons which was gathered together there was about a hundred and twenty), and said, "Men, brethren, it was necessary for the Scripture to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became the guide to those who seized Jesus, because he was numbered among us and had obtained his share of this ministry. This one, then, purchased a field from the reward of unrighteousness; and falling headlong, burst in the midst, and all his viscera fell out. And it became known to all who were dwelling in Jerusalem; so that that field was called in their own dialect, "Akeldama," that is, "the Field of Blood." For it is written in the book of Psalms, "Let his habitation become desolate, and let there not be one who dwells in it;" and "His overseership let another take." It was therefore necessary that from among these men who came together with us for the whole time that Jesus went in and out among us, having begun from the baptism of John until the day in which He was taken up from us, that one should become a witness with us of His resurrection. And two were set forth, Joseph who is called Barsabas (who was surnamed Justus), and Matthias. And they prayed and said, "Knower of the hearts of all men, show us which one of these two You have chosen to take the place of this ministry and apostleship from which Judas has fallen away, having gone unto his own place." And they gave lots to them, and the lot fell upon Matthias; and he was numbered together with the eleven apostles.

COMMENTARY

At the Threshold of Pentecost—A Lesson in Leadership

Jesus has ascended; the Holy Spirit has not yet come. Redemption hangs suspended between heaven and earth. His disciples wait in the upper chamber; the atmosphere is charged with expectancy. The absence of details about those ten days seems almost a holy hush before the great majesty and power of God bursts once more upon the earth.

Then suddenly our reverie is broken and

we are snatched back into the mundane reality of an election! It is as though God will not let us indulge ourselves in mystic imaginings and fleshly fantasies. Jesus has arisen from the dead; He has walked among men; He has summoned His disciples to a final rendezvous, and given them a charge to keep; He has ascended gloriously into the clouds, and given assurance of His return. These glorious events are all compressed into a handful

of verses and now, almost equal space is given to a business meeting! Who can fathom the mind of God? Were the book of human origin, we would merely frown in passing and note that the author had been a bit indiscriminate in his priorities, but this is God's book, and we have no choice but to search for a message from Him in this episode, important enough to be given such a prominent place in the comprehensive account of one of the greatest moments in human history. Whereas Jesus' ascension into glory is given one sentence, this episode of the choosing of a replacement for Judas takes up ten verses.

What does the Holy Spirit want to teach us in this episode? There is first the lesson of Judas. (The reader is urged to refer to lesson 62 of the Commentary on the Gospel of John for a full discussion of the betrayal by Judas.) In our previous discussion of Judas we indicated that in all likelihood Judas had not been predestined to be the betrayer of Jesus. Jesus, Himself, announced the moment that Satan entered into Judas. Had Judas been born to the task of betraying Jesus, Satan would have been in him from the beginning. Now in this moment, at the threshold of Pentecost, the matter of Judas comes up again. Peter identifies Judas with the figure in the Psalms (69:26 and 109:8) who occupied the position of a bishop, or overseer, and was subsequently given over to desolation and destruction. Judas had a place with Jesus. Peter indicates that he had been, not just counted as a follower, but numbered with the inner circle, as the Greek word suggests, and possessing a genuine share in the ministry. It is quite possible that Judas had begun sincerely enough but was turned aside by carelessness in the flesh, as some of the episodes of his life seem to indicate. God had, of course, known about this in His omniscience, but had, for His own reasons, chosen to allow Judas to take

his place among the disciples in spite of it. The entire scenario of Judas has its grave warning. And this warning is brought out as a prelude to the launching of the greatest mission on earth—the presenting of God's message of deliverance to all the earth. But if it is a majestic mission, it is also a most serious responsibility. Those who are appointed as God's ambassadors will face intense opposition from the enemy. Some will fall. Judas was one, and became an extremely important object lesson to be set forth on the eve of Pentecost.

In addition to this, there is the lesson of leadership—how shall the church go about the task of selecting and sending forth its agents. The choosing of the successor to Judas gives us an insight into the approach that the body of Christ should take in its own appointments. (The episode was referred to earlier as an election, but only with a touch of satire.) In reality, it was not an election at all, but rather an appointment by God carried out by a simple human device of casting lots. What should be more specifically noted is that there was thus no way in which the human element could enter the process. It was not a matter of God directing one's thinking to make the sound choice, but rather a blind action which allowed no participation of the mind whatsoever. Thus, the human element was not allowed, in any way, to detract, or thwart God's purpose. If it be argued that God can direct the mind as well, that may well be, but the history of the church has shown that no matter how much people may begin a business meeting with prayer, it is obvious that all the minds in the group have not been guided by the Spirit. For some reason, the Holy Spirit does not seem to channel all minds in the same direction. Whether or not it could be argued that free elections, or a democratic process is practical in the church today, at least there was not anywhere in the Bible a sanctioning of

the democratic process in terms of the affairs of the body of Christ. Paul went everywhere appointing elders in the church, and, so far as we know, there was no effort to allow the free expression of the assemblies. On the other hand, there is no evidence that the casting of lots, as was done in this instance, was ever practiced again. The crucial nature of this particular appointment was such that it was essential that there be no possibility of human error. In a sense, Jesus was again making the appointment as He had with the original twelve.

The specific lesson to be learned here is not the method itself, but rather the most essential principle, that the mission which confronted the representatives whom Christ left behind, was so formidable as to be totally beyond all human capacity, and therefore requiring at every point the guidance of the Holy Spirit. As of this moment, the Holy Spirit had not yet come, and these disciples, apart from the direct intervention of God, would not have had the inner resource to draw upon. But the message is clear—the very presence of God within, through His Holy Spirit, would be an essential factor in the success of the mission to which He had appointed His disciples.

So then, in summary, we learn from this episode two vital principles:

1. The leadership of the body of believers will be under constant attack from the enemy, and must rely upon the dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit within to prevent the same tragedy that destroyed Judas.

2. The appointing of leadership in the body of Christ is so crucial to the success of the mission that it must at all times be under the control of God Himself. Therefore, the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit within, is essential and He must be relied upon at all times to fulfill God's purpose through the believers on the earth.

Beyond the episode of the appointing of Matthias, and the fact that there was a continual waiting upon God, nothing else is given us as to what went on during those days. Obviously, the disciples ate and slept, and attended to normal daily needs. It would be a mistake to believe that the activities in that upper room prior to Pentecost had much to do with the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Certainly the prayers that were made were important, and probably did allow these disciples some participation in God's great plan, but the Holy Spirit came on the day of Pentecost as a part of God's timetable in the same way that Jesus came to Bethlehem as a babe on that glorious occasion some thirty years previously. There was a faithful remnant awaiting expectantly the arrival of the Messiah, just as there were committed disciples awaiting expectantly the coming of the Holy Spirit. But the times are in God's hands, and nothing can hinder Him. Again, the effort to use the events of this historic occasion as a model for the individual experience of receiving the Holy Spirit would be to totally misapply both the statements and the intent of this record.

And now, we are ready for Pentecost!

LESSON FOUR

Acts 2:1-13

TRANSLATION

And on the occasion that the day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all together in harmony in one place. And suddenly there came out of heaven a sound as of a driving violent wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them a dispersement of tongues as of fire, and they sat upon each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak with other tongues, even as the Spirit gave to them utterances.

And there were dwelling in Jerusalem, Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And when the sound of this occurred, the multitude came together, and were perplexed, because while they [the disciples] were speaking, each one was hearing in his own dialect. And they were amazed and were marveling, "All these who speak are Galileans, are they not? And how are we hearing each one in his own dialect in which he was born? Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and those who dwell in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the regions of Libya which are near Cyrene, and the Romans who dwell as foreigners in the land (both Jews and proselytes), Cretes and Arabians—we are hearing them speaking in our own tongues the majesty of God." And they were all amazed and were troubled, and were saying to one another, "What does this mean?" And others, mocking, were saying, "They are filled with new wine."

COMMENTARY

Pentecost—Matchless Moment of Meeting Between God and Man

At last, the blessed Holy Spirit has come! There is not a greater moment in the history of the world, yea, the universe! The fullness of God dwelling in man! The full impact of it is incomprehensible—above all that we can ask or think. All other issues of life are beggarly in comparison. In the beginning of time, the Spirit of God had moved upon the face of the deep, and life sprang forth. The same Spirit had

impregnated a figure of clay and the life of God possessed man. The dwelling of the Spirit of God in man, however, was short-lived in the ravaging effects of disobedience. God had said to the pristine pair—Adam and Eve—that disobedience would bring death. And so it did—not immediate physical death, but the death of the spirit. For thousands of years since that fateful hour, human beings have had to struggle on, void of

the inner presence of the Spirit of God, to confront the issues of life with the aid only of laws and instructions and the Divine Presence hovering near, but not able to be in them. But now, the barren years are passed, and all who will, may receive within their own spirits, the indwelling presence of the Spirit of God forever. It is no longer a matter of laws and instruction and religious forms but the very living reality of the person of Christ as our inseparable source of strength and fellowship. The coming of Jesus as a babe in Bethlehem was, of course, a marvelous thing, and had to be the point of beginning; but if the beginning was glorious, the fulfillment in the coming of the Holy Spirit was infinitely more glorious since it brought the very presence of God, not only to be with us, but to be in us.

The day which God had selected for the advent of the Holy Spirit was one of the festivals of the Jews—the day of Pentecost. It takes its name from the fact that it occurred on the fiftieth day (seven weeks) after the Passover feast. It commemorated barley harvest. The symbolism is unmistakable—the human spirit must be nourished by the Spirit of God if it is to take its place with God for eternity. God had planted on the earth the seed of mankind—an embryo possessing qualities very like Himself; had watched over its long years of dormancy; and is now about to realize the harvest. The coming of the Holy Spirit will be the final touch that is needed to bring the harvest to maturity.

The Blessed Arrival was signaled by the sound of a great wind—not the sigh of a gentle zephyr, nor the singing wind in the treetops, but a roaring hurricane. And with the wind, the fire. As the fire came, it was dispersed, so that something of the appearance of a flame of fire came to rest upon each of the disciples. **And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.** In one simple

sentence, the most profound event in human history is recorded. The Spirit of God had entered the spirit of man! But, no more than a sentence is needed, because the greatest of human words would only beggar the reality. (Sometimes eager efforts to give testimonials about a private experience with God may, in reality, dissipate the glory in the weakness of human expression. Such divulging of personal moments with God is unnecessary and can readily minister to pride in the speaker and envy in the listener.)

The immediate effect of the coming of the Spirit into the spirits of the disciples was to transform them into living channels of divine communication. As we would expect, God, the Author of diverse dialects, transcended in a moment their normal barriers. It is not necessary to know the nature of the phenomenon. Whether each disciple spoke a different dialect to a different group, or the words that they spoke came in such a way as to be heard by the listener in his own dialect, is not important. The language barrier was instantly overcome by the power of the Holy Spirit, communicating through the anointed vessels of God. The miracle of communication that thus took place at the initial coming of the Holy Spirit, was different in nature from the spiritual experience later discussed by Paul in I Corinthians 14. This later phenomenon, involving unknown tongues, was understood by God alone, and seemed to be an ecstatic utterance originating in the spirit rather than the mind, and not understood by the worshipper. It was a language of worship—of communication between man and God. (More about this later.) The use of the word “tongue,” as a symbol of communication, was frequent in the Hebrew language. In the poetical books and the prophets of the Old Testament, the word is so used over a hundred times. When the Holy Spirit came, He loosened the tongues of His

people, so that as God dwelled within them, He would have an instrument for the manifesting of that presence to the world. Such a use of the tongue was not confined merely to a special phenomenon of ecstatic experience, but was also manifested in the edification of the body of believers by prophecy, evangelism, teaching, and ministry of various kinds. The impact of the coming of the Holy Spirit, then, was manifested in part by the opening of the mouths of the people of God to become the instruments of divine communication. To focus unduly on the phenomenon of the unknown tongue, is to minimize the grand sweep of God's use of human vessels in many different ways to reveal Himself to the world.

As the angelic hosts inflamed the sky with divine radiance at the coming of Jesus, so now the disciples are electrified with the power of God, so that fingers of fire seemed to leap from their person. So startling were the events that surrounded this glorious occasion that some supposed them to be drunk. Those whose blinded hearts had refused the witness of Jesus as the Messiah, now mocked the coming of His Holy Spirit by charging the disciples with drunkenness.

It would be a misapplication of this episode to assume that everyone who is filled with the Holy Spirit will act in such a way as to appear to be drunk. There are many today who continue in the false assumption that the coming of the Holy Spirit into the life of the individual ought to be accompanied by unusual manifestations of some kind, such as speaking in tongues, or feelings of ecstasy. Such an assumption is quite misleading and has been responsible for causing many to doubt an otherwise genuine experience. It must again be noted that just as the birth of Jesus brought unusual phenomena which are not duplicated in the private experience of new birth, so the historic coming of the Holy Spirit was attended by special manifestations that do not necessarily accompany the coming of the Holy Spirit into the individual life.

THE MOST RELIABLE EVIDENCE OF THE PRESENCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE HEART OF THE INDIVIDUAL IS THE QUIET WITNESS OF HIS SPIRIT TO OUR SPIRIT THAT WE BELONG TO HIM, WHICH IS EXPRESSED BY THE FACT THAT WE CARE ABOUT CHRIST.

Acts 2:14-21

TRANSLATION

And Peter stood there with the eleven and lifted up his voice and declared [by divine decree] to them, “Men, Judeans and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. For these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is but the third hour of the day. But this is that which was spoken through the prophet Joel: ‘And it shall be in the last days,’ saith God, ‘I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. And indeed upon My male servants and upon My female servants, in those days, I will pour out of My Spirit, and they shall prophesy. And I will give wonders in the heaven above, and signs upon the earth below, both blood and fire and vapor of smoke. And the sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and illustrious day of the Lord come. And it shall be that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

COMMENTARY

The Coming of the Holy Spirit—An Ancient Prophecy Fulfilled

Were God’s communion with man only by vague inferences drawn from the stars and planets and the phenomena of nature, we would not ever know for sure, either what God truly thinks of man, or the ways in which man can relate to God. It is not an easy thing to relate to God—to come to terms with the Master of the Universe and to be certain that we have correctly assumed His interest in us, and His openness to us. There is a certain measure of humility in the pursuit of God that says, absolute truth belongs to God and God alone, and that it is measured to us only as He sees fit. We on the earth must be content with functional truth, that is, truth that is adequate for a workable relationship to God, but limited by the bounds of human understanding. It is not inappropriate for

a human being to say, on occasion, “I do not know.” Perhaps much of the fragmenting of the church throughout the centuries has been the unwillingness to admit that there are some things about the nature of God and the nature of man that we will not know until we have shuffled off this mortal coil. Human efforts to resolve all of the apparent paradoxes and enigmas of the Scriptures has led to much dissension and bickering among the members of the body of Christ.

But how can man know anything about God? The answer, of course, lies in the power of God to commune with man. A grasshopper (or as Isaiah calls us), for example, would not have the slightest capacity to understand the meaning and

implications of man, unless man should have the power to commune with the grasshopper (which of course he does not). God's power to communicate with man is even more remarkable than His power to create Him. But how does this take place—this communion between God and man?

This is where the Holy Spirit comes in. The Holy Spirit is the great agent of communication between God and man. He communicates sometimes privately to the individual spirit, as in Romans 8:16—**“The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God.”** If the question is asked, “How does one know one is saved?”—the answer must be, ultimately, that there is a witness deep within our spirits that we are His children. If it be objected that this is purely subjective and cannot be proved to anyone outside, the answer must be, “Yes, that is true.” But we do not need to prove it to anyone outside ourselves. For us, the evidence of our salvation is the witness within that causes us to care about Christ. The Bible itself makes it quite clear that we cannot depend upon our good works as evidence of our salvation. In fact, we are in no position to judge our actions, as Paul himself has said to the people at Corinth. But what about the promises of Scripture? The answer is that we cannot always be sure that we have satisfied either real or supposed conditions of the promises. The witness of the spirit within is our most dependable evidence, because, we find that once we have taken the Spirit of Christ into our spirit, there is a persistence to our clinging to Christ that seems to abide amidst all the conflicts and contrary experiences of our lives.

But now we must distinguish between the private experience of communion with God and that which is intended by God as a public utterance. Here the road becomes narrow and treacherous. To be

convinced that one has a personal message from God is one thing, but to presume that God has given one a message for His people is quite another. It is a very grave responsibility. The one who correctly assumes that God has given a message for the people is called a prophet. But, the one who has wrongfully presumed this to be the case is called a false prophet. (Let the believer beware. There are serious consequences to being a false prophet. In the Old Testament, false prophets were stoned to death.)

This, of course, brings us to Joel and the prophecy of the coming of the Holy Spirit. Before the coming of the Holy Spirit, prophecy was far more limited. The word “prophet”, both in Old and New Testaments, referred to one who had a special message from God. On occasion, such messages included the foretelling of future events but by no means regularly so. For the most part, the prophet was merely a spokesman among the people of God, who in the absence of a written revelation from God was the bearer of God's communiqués to His people. The Old Testament had its giants among the prophets, such as Moses and Samuel; Elijah and Elisha; Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and the number of so-called minor prophets. These all had a very special anointing from the Holy Spirit and provided the basis of our Old Testament Scriptures. On occasion, God gave the anointing of His Spirit to individuals for a prophetic moment, as in the case of Moses' sister, Miriam, and later, in a most unusual experience, to Saul, who became the first king of Israel.

The impact of Joel's prophecy, as related by Peter on the day of Pentecost, was, of course, that this gift of prophecy would be considerably broadened, to include a large number of the Lord's people who would make up the body of Christ. It must be immediately made clear, however, that the statement, **“your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,”**

by no means implies that everyone who becomes a Christian, or receives the Spirit of Christ, will automatically be a prophet. And the warning must also be sounded here that the same conditions apply to the New Testament prophets as to the Old—that one who presumes to speak for God, and does so falsely, is subject to divine judgment. (It is mystifying how so many people in these days take the matter so lightly. It is a serious thing to stand forth and claim to be speaking from God.) One of the tragic consequences of this carelessness is that many of the Lord's people today have ceased to pay any attention to the so-called prophets at all. Paul himself says in I Corinthians 14:8, **“If the trumpet shall give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to battle?”** Much of the activity in the present day expression of prophecy has made a mockery of that which was a most effective instrument in the communion between God and man.

Carelessness has robbed the church of truth.

But back now to the prophecy of Joel. Peter stands forth on the day of Pentecost with a certain word from God. The Greek word used for his act of declaring means actually to give an utterance of divine import. It was used by the early Greeks of messages from their own gods, and borrowed by the New Testament authors to refer to especially inspired utterances. Thus, God Himself is communicating through Peter, when Peter says that this grand display of power was none other than the fulfillment of the prophecy spoken by Joel, centuries earlier. God promised the coming of His Holy Spirit in such a way as to possess His people on earth, and give to them special power.

We must next examine the prophecy of Joel and its New Testament fulfillment.

Acts 2:14-21 (Continued)

COMMENTARY

The Prophecy of Joel—A Message from God by a True Prophet

From antiquity, the supreme search of mankind has been for a guiding light in the midst of a mystifying, overwhelming, often terrifying universe. For this guiding light, some have clung to the rudderless raft of subjectivism—the pursuit of truth by the exploring of the inner self; some have appealed to the more objective, but ever-changing experiments of science, some have penetrated the spirit realm in pursuit of a deity or deities, with or without guides; while others have sought refuge in a written revelation, such as the Bible, or the Koran, which, for various reasons, they have presumed to be a Word from God. (For further discussion, see author's pamphlet, *Reality and Revelation*.) The great question, of course, is how do any of us know for sure what is from God? The effort to present human truths and logic in support of one's particular position leads only to the dead-end street of naturalism—that is to say, trying to penetrate the supernatural with tools that belong to the natural realm. One does not examine a painting with the ear, for instance. Even to speak of it is absurd. Similarly, one cannot prove God through the natural senses. One may use the natural senses to appreciate the expressions of God, but not to appropriate God Himself. If man is to know God, there must be an expression of God that goes beyond the capacity of man. This expression of God must be beyond even the objective element in man—the area of feeling and intellect. It must be an expression that reaches to the deepest inner self as an experience from without. This is the greatest

miracle of all—the capacity of God to communicate to the spirit of man even beyond the reaches of the emotions and the intellect. When the Spirit of God has touched us, there is a sense of the reality of His presence that is sustained, beyond any external expressions. Thus, it is not just a matter of subjective experience—it is a spirit-experience beyond the subjective. If the Spirit of God does not carry us across the treacherous channel of the human feeling and thinking process, we have very little hope of coming to the truth.

It is for this reason we must look upon the realm of prophecy as a very serious matter and not something to toy with in irresponsible religious frivolities. Our eternal spirits are at stake, and we must hear from God, and not be confused by the clamor and confusion of human instruments aspiring, with fleshly ambition, to join the chorus of prophets. It is so tempting to the human ego to want to be very special with God. The tragedy of such an attitude is seen in the wreckage of human lives across the centuries of the church by would-be prophets and false prophets, who have not known the difference between fleshly religious exercise and the true ministry of the Spirit.

And this brings us to the prophet Joel. How do we know Joel was a true prophet? In fact, how do we know that the Bible which contains the prophecy of Joel is a true revelation from God? If we cannot prove the Bible to be the Word of God merely by human evidences, we can

perhaps prove that it was written authentically, by those who claim to have written it. But there is a gap between proving the Bible to be the authentic literature of the people of God, and proving that God, Himself inspired it. We have already said that we cannot use natural evidences to prove supernatural reality. We cannot use miracles to prove that God is with us, since many supernatural events take place among groups that are outside the framework of the Bible. We cannot go by logic or by feelings, since both are part of a brain that has such a complex network of misinformation, biases, distortions, etc., that we must always use it with guarded confidence. But what is the alternative? The alternative is that we must recognize our total dependency upon the Spirit of God to make known to us, beyond our capacity to know the truth of God. Paul speaks of this kind of knowing—**“That you may know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God”** (Ephesians 3:19) (Author’s translation). It is not, then a matter of feeling God, or of proving God logically, but of being the recipients of the gift of God’s own Holy Spirit, bringing to life our human spirits, and giving to us a grasp of God and of His truth that is beyond the human senses. It is this that keeps us believing and sustains us when the human feelings and reasonings are totally inadequate for us. Those who have never received such a gift from God will, naturally, claim that this is merely a subjective experience and proves nothing. The answer is, of course, that they are right. There is no way that we can prove the realities of the Spirit of God within, to the human mind, untouched by that Spirit. But the fact of the matter is that it is not necessary for us to prove it to them. We can give a witness concerning our experience with God, but it remains for the Holy Spirit to prove Himself.

Which brings us back to Joel. Our confidence in Joel is based upon our confidence in the entire Bible. Our confidence in the Bible is based upon the witness of the Holy Spirit within us that as we read it, we are confronting the Word of God. Paul reminds the Romans that **“faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ”** (Romans 10:17). The Holy Spirit brings conviction to the human spirit in the hearing of the Word. Once one is convinced that the Bible is the true revelation of God, all other supposed revelations are eliminated in the fact that they are in conflict with the Bible. For example, the Koran teaches that Jesus was a prophet, whereas the Bible teaches that He was the Son of God. Since our eternal spirits are at stake, we cannot any more be tolerant of alleged revelations of God, than we can be tolerant of the chemical substances we put in our bodies, without verifying their claim to being nonpoisonous.

If we have accepted the Bible as the true revelation of God, then we can safely look to Joel as giving us a vital message from God. And, by the same token, we can accept Peter’s word that the experience of Pentecost was, in fact, a fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel. It is, therefore, most important to examine the prophecy of Joel, and to determine what message God is trying to get across to us. There is a limitless number of human messages that can be extracted from the Bible. In fact, any narrative, secular or sacred, ancient or contemporary, can be used as an object lesson to teach a large number of things. The story of Joel is, in fact, a treasury of such object lessons, but what we want to know is, what does God want to teach us in this prophecy? Nothing whatsoever is known about the life of Joel, beyond the identification of his father, and some indication of the time that he wrote (prior to Isaiah, c.750 B.C.). So significant is the message, that the instrument must be completely

obscure. Joel tells of a devastating plague of locusts that had come upon the land of Judah. So completely had the land been ravaged that there was not even sufficient provision for the ritual offerings. While the specific reason for this judgment of locusts is not given, we assume by the nature of the call to repentance and the solemn assembly, there had been a gradual buildup of displeasure on the part of God over the failure of the people of Judah to obey Him. Moses had warned the people about this in the first giving of the law from Sinai. He had told them of the blessings that would be theirs if they kept the law, and the curses upon them if they didn't. He had even named locusts as one of the plagues. While idolatry had been a problem at times in Israel, apparently it had not yet reached the proportions which would ultimately send the nation into captivity. So, the immediate cause of the plague of locusts as given in Joel, was of a more general nature, and hence preceded the final judgment of the Babylonian captivity. As of this time, the regular sacrificial system as ordained by Moses, was still in practice, and the calling forth of special fasting and ritual assembly was not difficult. Apparently, the penitence of God's people was effective; the plague was stayed; and abundance was restored to the land.

But there is far more to the prophecy of Joel than a plague of locusts. It was a common thing among the Old Testament prophets for the Holy Spirit to lift the prophet far beyond the immediate circumstance which occasioned the prophecy. There are many such mountain peaks in the Old Testament, which give grand vistas reaching clear to the final restoration of all things. Prominent among these is the Song of Moses in Exodus 15; the Song of Deborah in Judges 5; and the Song of David in Psalm 68. The first hint of the lifting of the sights comes in Joel 2:19, and then again in verse 27 as a prelude to the promise of the coming

of the Holy Spirit. In chapter 3, Joel refers to the captivity of Judah and Jerusalem, a much later event, and then shifts once more to the final judgment upon the nations, the vanquishing of God's enemies and the restoration of the kingdom of Israel. The Valley of Jehoshaphat is the Kidron Valley outside of Jerusalem, and signifies the contest between God and the nations to drive His enemies from the Holy City and to establish there, in Zion, His holy habitation forever. And so Joel presents a grand sweep of God's interaction with His people, from the penalty plague of locusts for disobedience, to the ultimate judgment upon the nations and deliverance of His people from their devastation at the hand of God's enemies.

This is that . . . In all of Scripture there is no clearer case of an identification of the fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy than Peter's use of Joel. Not only does Peter identify the coming of the Holy Spirit with Joel's prophecy, but he also identifies the coming of the Holy Spirit with the events of the last days. In the chronology of events, the coming of the Holy Spirit was to be, according to Joel, **after these things**. Thus, the plague of locusts as described in chapters 1 and 2 was not of itself to be identified with the events of the last days. We must be very careful here about our use of symbols. It is tempting to see the second chapter of Joel as a description of modern warfare, but this does not fit the context. According to those who have witnessed plagues of locusts of the severity of the one described by Joel, the terror of the devastation is well matched to the descriptive symbols of chapter 2. The importance of this is that we have to see the chronological relationship of Joel's prophecy regarding the coming of the Holy Spirit. It is obvious that Peter's use of the prophecy places the coming of the Holy Spirit as the beginning episode of the series of events that will mark the

fulfillment of God's plans for His people. The coming of Jesus with His sacrifice and Resurrection was, of course, the prelude to the events that would actually mark the beginning of the last days. Nothing of God's purpose could be fulfilled in the hearts of men until the death of Jesus had been accomplished, and victory over death had been won.

I will pour out of My Spirit upon all flesh. In the beginning of time, the Spirit of God had moved in the universe with such force as to effect the magnificent creation that we see around us. The Spirit of God had breathed into the form of man, and man became a marvelous, God-like creature. But the abundant fountain of God's spiritual presence was restrained as a result of the Fall, and man had to be content with flashes of glory from time to time through the course of his history. And then came Pentecost! Now the Spirit would flow like a river through the remaining ages of earth's existence, and all who would, could be immersed in its flow. The whole impact of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was abundance of power and grace, and not just a trickle to a favorite few. In some quarters in the church, the coming of the Holy Spirit has been surrounded with such an aura of specialization that the sense of abundance has been lost in the confusion and apparent inaccessibility of the Holy Spirit to the simple seeker after Christ. The insistence upon certain rules or steps as prerequisites for the receiving of the Holy Spirit lend to this inaccessibility. It would seem that only a

favored few, with a very special kind of faith and a very special degree of piety are candidates for the abundant blessing of the Spirit. This, of course, is quite contrary to the flow of the Spirit as evidenced in His coming on the day of Pentecost and in the events that followed as He was introduced to the people of surrounding regions.

The truth of the matter is that then, as now, the Holy Spirit comes abundantly to all who seek Christ. There is nothing that we can do in ourselves to merit or acquire the Spirit. Our part is merely to ask and receive. Even the faith that is required to receive the Spirit is something that comes from God. It is the faith of Christ in us and not our faith reaching out to Christ. If a human being has the capacity to fulfill certain requirements first, then what need has he of the Holy Spirit? It is the very fact that we are bankrupt and helpless that makes us the most likely candidates for the coming of the Holy Spirit to us. Many people have difficulty in realizing the presence of the Spirit, not because the Spirit has not come to them, but rather they have been given certain humanly devised expectations of what should happen to them when the Spirit does come. There is much of human tradition in the discussions of the evidences of the presence of the Spirit in the life. Once again, let it be said that the most telling evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit within is the fact that we care about Christ and want to be identified with Him.

Acts 2:14-21 (Continued)

COMMENTARY

The Prophecy of Joel—The Union at Last of God and Man

Like a great catalyst, the Holy Spirit moves in the hearts of men to bring about the eternal union with God. This union is forever. All who enter into such a union here on the earth begin immediately their eternal oneness with the God of the universe. Through those who are thus united with Him, God communicates with the people of earth. There is a sense in which all who are filled with the Spirit become channels of God's blessing to others. In I Thessalonians 4:18, Paul tells the believers to comfort one another with the words regarding the Resurrection. In fact, throughout the New Testament there is a continual emphasis upon the ministry of believers to one another in comfort, in forgiveness, in exhortation, in encouragement. The capacity of Christians to minister to one another is one of the most significant effects of the coming of the Holy Spirit. The specific words of Joel are that there would be such a sweeping touch of the Holy Spirit upon all, that there would be the capacity even among servants, both male and female, to become channels of communication for God.

Taken in the more general sense, the prophesying that was spoken of by Joel would include ministry to one another for the edifying of the body of Christ. This is the way that Paul uses the word in I Corinthians 14, where he expresses the desire that the believers would be able to prophesy, rather than to speak with tongues; for prophesying, as he indicates, is for the edifying of the Body. When the

focus of the word "prophecy" is continually upon future predictions, we lose the more basic and magnificent concept of the priesthood and ministry of the believers to one another. It should also be noted that the careless usage of this marvelous gift has turned many a meeting into a religious free-for-all, with people presumptuously implying that they have a message from God, when, in fact, they are often speaking in the flesh. Such carelessness has caused many to shy away from the marvelous privilege of regarding themselves as being able to minister words of blessing to fellow believers, even though they may not be especially gifted in public ministry.

It is most important to distinguish between the general usage of prophecy as referring to a Spirit-given capacity to minister to and edify one another in the Body, and the special gift of prophecy. A similar distinction must be made between faith as a general gift of God unto salvation and faith as one of the specific gifts for special purposes. In the Old Testament, there was the prophet as a special gift of God, but not the universal gift of prophecy. In the New Testament there is both the specially anointed prophet and also the more general capacity to prophesy. In the Old Testament, also, among the prophets there was the occasional prophetess, such as Miriam, who sang the Song of Moses. But with the coming of the Holy Spirit, the capacity to prophesy came upon the women as well as on the men.

A word must be said here about the place of women in the body of Christ. As in many of the important issues of faith and practice, the flesh gets in the way of the spirit. There has been much of prejudice and willfulness in this matter. Men have often been unwilling or unable to see the marvelous place which God has given to women especially in the New Testament. On the other hand, the women, fearing to be left to a minor position, have sometimes asserted themselves in assuming positions that were clearly contrary to the express statements of the Scripture. A woman, when properly related to Christ, is the most marvelous gift that God has ever given to man. The only thing in all of creation about which God found something incomplete, was man. Accordingly, He divided the man and from him made the woman. From this point on, man would never be complete alone. This does not mean that every man must be married, but rather that manhood would be an incomplete expression of God without womanhood. It is not necessary for women to be married to fulfill a most essential place in the revelation of God to mankind. (It is interesting to note in passing that almost everything that a man can do can be duplicated by a machine, but there are many things a woman can do that cannot be duplicated by a machine.) There is a side of God that a woman can more aptly express than a man. It must be understood that God is really "co-personal," possessing in perfection, attributes of both men and women. There is in a sense, a "mother" side of God as well as a father side. Jesus, Himself, speaks of God's care in terms of the mother hen gathering her brood under her wings. Isaiah says that God's care for His people is even stronger and more constant than the mother's care for her suckling child (Isaiah 49:15).

The reproductive system in a woman is a marvelous and delicate instrument,

which has its effect upon her whole nature and makeup, giving her a kind of sensitivity not possessed by the man. An entire branch of medicine known as gynecology (the care of women's diseases) has arisen as a result of the highly sensitive nature of this reproductive system. (You do not find a branch of medicine specializing in men's diseases.) Because of her sensitive nature, a woman is able to reveal the side of God that is more gentle and loving. Mother-love is legendary (although, in today's world, the push of women to become like men is deeply affecting this image). God Himself was the author, in a sense, of unisex, that is, a being that was co-personal like Himself, but found it unsatisfactory in human beings, and corrected it by the development of two different beings. The special meaning of womanhood, beyond the original idea of procreation, comes to its full in the body of believers. A woman, possessed with the Holy Spirit, can be a marvelous messenger of the love and grace and compassion of God. In these days, it is very difficult for women to find husbands who represent all that God intends a husband to be. For this reason, many women will remain unmarried during their life on the earth, but this does not need to curtail their effectiveness in fulfilling this special place that God has given them on the earth, as they go about among believers in the grace and love of Christ.

As far as public ministry is concerned, there are specific guidelines regarding the place of women. Paul is very specific about the matter of women in places of leadership. In I Timothy 2:12, Paul says, **"But I do not permit a woman to teach, nor to be an authority over the man, but to be in silence."** The reason goes back to a certain susceptibility to deception which was a weakness left to her as a result of the Fall. For the woman, this is much like a

scar that continually reminds her of her humanness and her dependence upon God. For man, there were other scars. It is not that she is in any way inferior to the man, but rather that part of her penalty in the Fall was to be under submission to the man. Man has his penalty in the constant necessity of taxing labor in the effort to earn bread. Paul is very specific about women not being in authority over men. The only way that one can set aside this dictum is to discredit Paul as a valid spokesman for God. Some people do call him in question, but to do so is to call in question his entire ministry, which makes up a very considerable part of the New Testament. (To say that there was some conflict between the teachings of Paul and the teachings of Jesus, as some do, is to reflect a limited knowledge of both Paul and Jesus.) Both here and in I Corinthians 14, Paul also limits but does not exclude (as other passages show) the public ministry of women in the assemblies. His main concern was that the women should not take the place of authority in the directing of the life and ministry of the body of Christ. This was left to the men, who were symbols of the headship of Christ. As long as a woman functions in submissiveness to the headship of men, there is a very wide range of ministry open to her as a messenger of the revelation of God. In fact, she forms a very vital part of this revelation. The work of Christ would be very much crippled without the ministry of the women.

One of the most outstanding of the women in the New Testament was Priscilla, who with Aquilla, was a vital part of the development of the early church. In this sense, she was a true prophetess and an effective instrument as a partner of Aquilla. For the woman

who has children, there is no more vital ministry in the world, than the bringing of these children through the crucial years into a stable life with Christ in the world. But there is more to womanhood than raising children. As the woman fulfills her responsibilities to these children, there are other services beyond this which may give her satisfaction in relating to the Body. And for the women who are not married, or do not have children, there is limitless opportunity under New Testament conditions, to be fulfilled, as she gives herself to ministry to the body of believers in the name of Christ.

The foregoing discussion was essential to establish, at once, the place of women in the marvelous sweep of the Holy Spirit. It was a considerable change from the Old Testament concept of womanhood, not that the Old Testament patterns of motherhood were set aside, but rather that the fulfillment of womanhood took a far richer turn. In the Old Testament, women were occasionally given a special anointing. There is a rather significant number of women that were in a very special place. But in the New Testament, the women were blessed with the same overflowing abundance of the Holy Spirit as were the men, and special anointing was quite general rather than occasional. In order to see this grand place of women in the New Testament ministry, it is essential to see the concept of prophecy as far broader than the elements of prediction. In a certain usage of the term, all who minister to the Body in the name of Christ are exercising the function of prophecy. In a sense, we are all representatives of Christ, but here a word of special warning must be given—if one comes in the name of Christ and speaks in the flesh, one may be guilty of being a false prophet.

Acts 2:14-21 (Continued)

COMMENTARY

The Prophecy of Joel—A Flash of the Future

The prophecy of Joel is electrifying and sweeping and profoundly simple. It spans the age of deliverance from the advent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to the final day of the Lord, when God's purposes shall be fully consummated—and this, in about a hundred words. Peter leaves none of it out. God's ultimate triumph in the realm of the spirit and in the realm of the material world is equally dynamic and equally certain. It is all accomplished by His limitless power in both realms. Both Joel and Peter could only declare it in simple human terms. They could not possibly embellish it with rhetoric. The human mind cannot really grasp the impact of it anyway. And the Holy Spirit does not need rhetoric. Human descriptions of divine things have always beggared the reality.

With the proclamation of the coming of the Holy Spirit, Peter also declares the rest of Joel's prophecy regarding future events. It is obvious that the natural phenomena described here not only were absent in the coming of the Holy Spirit, but have not as yet occurred, in the fullness here described, unto this very day. It is further apparent that this description is parallel with descriptions in other prophecies that are definitely identified with the final consummation of the ages. The more specific of these occurs in Jesus' discourse on the end times in Matthew 24 and in Revelation 6, where Christ opens the seven-sealed book. There are many passages referring to cataclysmic natural phenomena occurring in the end times,

but all of these must be sorted out carefully as to their place in the chronology of events. All of this belongs to the vast subject of prophecy with which we cannot deal appropriately here.* But two things can and must be asserted here. First, the purposes of God include nothing less than the total deliverance of mankind from the forces of evil. God will bring to bear all His power in heaven and earth to accomplish this, and it will include both the spiritual and the material realms. Second, the power of God in this deliverance is great enough that salvation may be had by any one merely for the asking. All efforts to establish lists of requirements, or steps, or prerequisites for salvation, are manmade and merely confuse the grand simplicity of the statement before us—**And it shall be that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.**

The chronology of events that have to do with the last days is not easy to piece together. Perhaps it was not intended to be easy. In fact, it may not have been intended to be unraveled by us at all. Jesus did make the specific statement to His disciples as He left them, **it is not for you to know the times or the seasons.** Apparently, on the assumption that Jesus did not really mean what He said, there have been a great number of efforts to handle the chronology of future events. Most of them have succeeded only in dividing the believers into hostile camps. This of itself ought to give us a hint that

possibly we are treading on treacherous ground, and are not being blessed by the Holy Spirit in this effort. That is not to say that the Scripture is altogether silent on this theme, or that it is not profitable to study it at all, but rather to advise caution and humility in the pursuit of this awesome subject. (Perhaps there is an inverse ratio between the boldness of the declarations and the degrees of knowledge.) But for the purposes of the message of the book of Acts, it is not necessary to pursue the

theme further than the realities of its impact on our life on earth in the body of believers. The ultimate implication of the entire stream of prophetic utterances throughout the Scriptures is the final triumph of God over all the forces of evil unleashed in the ancient episode of rebellion in the Garden of Eden. Participation in this deliverance is readily available to anyone who will acknowledge one's need and open one's human spirit to the entrance of the Holy Spirit of God.

* There is an entire series on prophecy by the author, beginning with the July 1979 edition of the Harvester Mission Messenger.

Acts 2:22-28

TRANSLATION

Men, Israelites, hear these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a Man attested unto you from God by deeds of power and wonders and signs which God did through Him in the midst of you, even as ye yourselves know—This One, delivered up by the decreed will and foreknowledge of God, to the hand of lawless men, you have crucified and slain; which One God raised up, having loosed the pangs of death, inasmuch as He was not able to be held by it. For David said unto Him,

I was seeing the Lord before me continually,

Because He is at my right hand, in order that I may not be shaken.

For this reason my heart has rejoiced and my tongue has exalted;

And yet also my flesh shall settle down in hope;

Because you will not abandon my soul in Hades,

Neither will you give Your Holy One to see corruption.

You have made known to me the way of life;

You will fill me with good cheer with Your presence.'

COMMENTARY

The Message of Pentecost—Abundant Life Out of Wretched Death

The proclamation has been given; the astounding events have heralded the coming of the Holy Spirit—the personification of the power of the Godhead—to bring to pass in the hearts of men, the fulfillment of God's purposes for the glorification of His creatures. It was not a trickle of power for an anointed few, but a great floodtide of the divine presence, available to all who cared to plunge into its depth, conditioned only by the will to receive.

Peter continues his proclamation to the people of God. Behind the great display of power stood Jesus, the lowly Nazarene, whom His own people had crucified and slain. Peter shows no mercy in the attachment of guilt. It is useless to

argue that the Romans participated. It is true that the Roman soldiers carried out the order, but Rome, through its representative, Pilate, had already pronounced Jesus guiltless and had only agreed to let the Jewish leaders have their way as an alternative to chaos and violence in the holy city. The Jews themselves had shouted to the heavens that the blood of Jesus should be upon them and their children. But if the Jews do bear the guilt of crucifying Jesus, they have also been the recipients of His complete, forgiving grace, as has been demonstrated over and over again in the salvation of large numbers of God's people down through the ages since that infamous day. The apostle Paul, for instance, a Jew, identifying himself as

the chief of sinners, nevertheless revels in the forgiving grace of Christ.

But they must come back to the lowly carpenter of Nazareth, now elevated to the place of glory, if they would receive God's salvation. Peter declared to the assembled multitudes that God has already put His stamp of approval upon Jesus through the great miracles and wonders that He did upon the earth. These miracles were not an effort to prove to the Gentile world that God exists or that Jesus is the Son of God, but rather to prove to the people of God themselves that this Jesus is indeed their Messiah. Unwilling to accept Him before, they had put Him on the cross. Now, in spite of that tragic error, they are offered God's forgiveness and more than that, His indwelling Spirit. In support of his claims for Jesus as the Messiah, Peter quotes from David in Psalm 16. To the risen Christ he attaches this great psalm of life.

This hymn of life is at once a prophecy concerning the resurrection of the Messiah, and also an insight into the nature of the life which He thus made available to His creatures. The indwelling presence of Christ through His Holy Spirit will (1) be with us always—He will never leave us; (2) keep us from being shaken by the cataclysmic events of this world; (3) bring gladness to our hearts in the midst of earthly troubles; (4) give security to our physical

persons in the hope of eternal life; (5) show us the pathway of life; and (6) bring harmony and good cheer to our minds.

This quotation from David is most appropriate in the proclamation regarding the Holy Spirit. The message of David is one of grace, and not guilt; of forgiveness and forbearance and life, and not blame and judgment and death. In so many ways the church has taken this glorious gift of life and cast it into religious formalities which, like the Pharisees, has brought about more bondage than liberty. The gift of the Holy Spirit has been packaged and auctioned off to the highest bidder—to the one who comes forward with the most pious religious exercises, and the most zealous religious deeds. Religious manuals on the Holy Spirit seem to present Him as the prize for the scaling of the cliffs, rather than the oasis to which the famished and desperate desert wanderer can crawl for relief. The desolate and dying of this world need the gushing springs of the life-giving Spirit of Christ—not the barren wilderness of religious creeds and formalities. Manmade staircases to religious bubble fountains are inaccessible to the sin ravaged wretches of the lonely wasteland. In the final words of God's great revelation to man, John, His beloved apostle, wrote, "**And he who is thirsty, let him come; he who is willing, let him take of the water of life freely**" (Revelation 22:17) (Author's translation).

Acts 2:29-36

TRANSLATION

“Men, brethren, it is appropriate to speak with boldness to you concerning the patriarch David, because he also died and was buried, and his tomb is among us until this day. He, being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn to him by an oath that One out of the fruit of his loins would sit upon his throne; he, knowing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of Christ, neither was He abandoned in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption. This Jesus God raised up, of whom we are all witnesses. He then having been exalted at the right hand of God, and having received the promise of the Holy Spirit from the Father, has poured out this which you see and hear. For David did not ascend into heaven, but he himself said, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand, until I make Your enemies a footstool of Your feet”.’ Let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both the Lord Himself and Christ.”

COMMENTARY

Pentecost and the Symbolism of David—Sovereign, Sinner, and a Man After God’s Own Heart

It was through David that Christ received His earthly right to sovereignty. The everlasting kingdom promised to David in II Samuel 7 is fulfilled in the eternal reign of Christ. It is thus that the riddle of lordship expressed in Psalm 16 is resolved. David was indeed king, but the sovereignty of Christ superceded him. The promise of a king, greater than David, who should not see corruption, is thus set forth by David himself.

Appropriate indeed is the reference to David by Peter in his Pentecostal proclamation. David was certainly the forerunner of the New Testament believer, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and living in a personal union with Christ. In general, the Old Testament believer was identified by a covenant with God, kept in relationship to Him by laws and rituals, but not enjoying the personal relationship with Him that was made possible by the coming of

the Holy Spirit. In this respect, David had a very unique place with God. The psalms which he wrote reflect a highly personal relationship, parallel to that of the New Testament believer. The legitimacy of this comparison lies in the fact that David’s name comes up over sixty times in the New Testament, and often in connection with the privileges of the personal identity with Christ. One of the most important of these passages is in Romans 4, where David is seen as the symbol of the one whose sins have been forgiven; his heart cleansed; and iniquity not laid to his charge.

The steady, inexorable process of God’s recovery of mankind is mirrored in the life of David. David and his glorious songs have been a great encouragement

to believers throughout the ages. God's relationship to David remains steadfast and unchanged throughout all the vacillations of a life that seemed never free from turbulence. The psalms were written in the agony of David's seemingly ceaseless conflict. But in the midst of the struggle, there always emerges the focus on the great deliverer—the coming Messiah. Now at Pentecost, the coming of Christ in the person of His Holy Spirit, fulfills so much of that which David projected with insights that were lifted far beyond his own limited horizon.

The everlasting sceptre of Christ was passed to Him by David, who was a type of Jesus as the king of the Jews. But more than this, the one who takes the throne of David will reign over all the nations of the earth forever. **“The kingdoms of this world are become the**

kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ; and He shall reign for ever and ever” (Revelation 11:15). Such a one is in view in David's prophecy in Psalm 16. But yet more glorious is the truth that this Jesus, who has received the eternal throne, has, in His death and resurrection, provided the same eternal life to all who wish to follow Him. It is this same Jesus, whom God had made the sovereign ruler of the universe, that the Jews had so brazenly and brutishly put to death. It is with this stunning rebuke to the house of Israel that Peter brings to a close this epoch-making address which ushered in the most pivotal moment in human history—the coming of the eternal Spirit of God to dwell in the hearts of men.

Acts 2:37-40

TRANSLATION

And when they had heard, they were pierced through the heart, and said to Peter and to the rest of the apostles, “What shall we do men, brethren?” And Peter said to them, “Repent, and let each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ unto the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God shall call.” And with many other words he gave witness, and besought them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse generation.”

COMMENTARY

Pentecost—The Ultimate Response

Peter’s words were simple and direct and carried with them the impact of the Holy Spirit. Unlike much modern-day pulpiteering, there was no effort to impress or manipulate the audience with human reason or rhetoric. The Spirit of God penetrated the hearts of the hearers, and there was the only ultimate response that man could ever give to God—**“What shall we do?”** Peter was ready with the answer, uncomplicated and unconfusing. **“Repent and be baptized!”** As simple as these words were to the Jewish hearers, the church has been embroiled in controversy over their meaning for centuries. The reason for the controversy has been, as ever, based upon the problem of motive. If one simply desires to know what God wants, so that one may do it, there need be no real difficulty. But if one must attempt to defend some preestablished position, or engage in intellectual repartee, or evade some measure of responsibility before God, then the issue may become quite complex, indeed. The words that Peter used are quite critical to our own relationship to God. These words were, unmistakably, the direct answer to his

audience in their quest for salvation. Let us establish from the outset that our objective is merely to determine what God wants, insofar as it applies to us, and do it.

In the first place, it is vital to understand the audience to whom Peter was speaking. In the second place, it is equally crucial to consider a statement Peter had made, to which the audience had responded. The failure to understand circumstance and context in the interpreting of the Scripture has led to many misapplications of the truth. As far as the audience was concerned, Peter was addressing Jews and Proselytes (Gentiles who had actually joined the Jewish ranks through the rite of circumcision) from the entire region of the Mediterranean and the Middle East. If there were Gentiles in the audience, Peter was not addressing his remarks to them. A specific message to the Gentile world was given by Peter in the home of Cornelius a bit later. The penetrating thrust of Peter which pierced the heart of these Jewish listeners was the charge that they had, in fact, crucified the very

Messiah whom they had long awaited as their deliverer. To those whose hearts were open, the words came as a shaft. They did not deny, or dodge, or debate the charge—they cried out in anguish, “What shall we do?” To such ones, faced with such a charge, Peter’s instruction was—“**Repent and be baptized.**”

Repent of what? Repent of rejecting their Messiah; repent of killing Him. The word used for “repent” is *metanoeo*. It means, “to change the mind.” It does not involve the emotions or mystical experience. It means to turn from one thing to another. It involves an act of the will. There is another word used in the New Testament for “repent” where the feelings are involved. This word is *metamelomai*. This word is used less often, and not in connection with salvation. To the Jew, who acknowledged his identification with those who crucified Jesus, there was immediate forgiveness. The refusal of the Jewish community today to accept responsibility for the crucifixion of Christ, is at once an admission of their lack of openness to God and their ignorance of His forgiving grace.

To the Gentile quest for salvation, the word is, “**Believe and confess.**” The Gentile was not seen as having rejected the Messiah. He did not even know about Him. Peter’s contact with the Gentiles in the home of Cornelius and Paul’s contact with the Philippian jailor, both indicate that the response to their quest, as Gentiles, was simply to believe and accept.

By the same token, baptism here must be seen in connection with the purifying of the Jews. The baptism which the church participated in was a baptism of identification as both Paul and Peter emphasized. Such baptism took place after belief, as the episodes with the Philippian jailor and the Gentiles in Cornelius’ household both indicate. Such baptism never preceded salvation.

The baptism required in this episode at Pentecost was the baptism offered by John—a baptism of repentance. It was part of the preparation for the coming Messiah. Centuries of idolatry and rebellion must be acknowledged and purged ere the Jew was ready for his Messiah. Even Jesus felt that it was necessary for Him to undergo such baptism in order to be identified with His Jewish brethren, even though He did not, Himself, participate in the Jewish rebellion. God could not send the Messiah into an atmosphere of disobedience lest He be totally rejected. The existence of a remnant of the faithful—those who acknowledged in humility their identity with the people of God, made it possible for God to send the Messiah in the knowledge that there would be a reception for Him. To Nicodemus, a Pharisee who came to Him by night, He pressed the necessity of a new birth by the Spirit in order to see the kingdom of God. But the coming of the Spirit must be preceded by the cleansing of the water. Thus He said to him, “**Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God**” (John 3:5).

To the Jew, the idea of baptism was a most familiar one. The purification rites of the Jewish religion were numerous and well established (see Leviticus). The laver must precede the Holy of Holies. To the Jew, cleansing and forgiveness and sacrifice were common themes. They seemed to have no difficulty at all understanding John’s appeal to baptism in the sense of the purifications of the Old Covenant. After the coming of the Holy Spirit, however, baptism takes on a new meaning and seems to include the concept of identification as well as cleansing. Paul speaks of this in detail in Romans 6, where he sees baptism as symbolizing the identification of the believer in the death and burial and resurrection of Christ. Peter expands the meaning of baptism in this light in the

third chapter of his epistle to the dispersed Jews of Asia. Peter's requirement of baptism in his response to the Jews at Pentecost was to precede their receiving of the Holy Spirit. It was thus, not the baptism that was the practice of the New Testament church, but rather, that practice by John. As Jesus, Himself, found it necessary to fulfill this requirement, so it is given here to the Jews at Pentecost. Once the Holy Spirit then was introduced to all peoples on earth, Jew and Gentile, there seemed not again to be the requirement of a baptism of purification such as that given by John.

Certainly such instruction was not given to the Gentiles. When Peter went to the household of Cornelius, he went as God's channel for the bringing of the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles. While Peter was addressing the Gentile group there gathered, and without any preceding instruction, the Holy Spirit came upon them all, and they were baptized afterwards. It was thus not a condition of their receiving the Holy Spirit, but something which Peter urged upon them afterward. Likewise, in chapter 8, Philip considers wholehearted belief on the part of the Ethiopian eunuch, to be the precondition of his being baptized.

As far as the general subject of baptism is concerned, there need be no confusion. There is no question but what baptism signifies cleansing as well as identification throughout the Scriptures. If it was not an absolute condition of salvation, at least it was certainly a universal practice of the church from its inception to the present day. To argue for baptism as an absolute condition of salvation is to limit, in some respects, the grace of God. We have, of course, the incident of the thief on the cross. He was certainly admitted to the kingdom without baptism. It is dangerous for us to insist upon what God's grace will allow. To use baptism as the means of entering

the kingdom, as with infants, is to press the symbol beyond all that the Scripture gives to it. As far as the mode of baptism is concerned, which is another area of controversy, it is certainly unsound to make it a divisive factor in the body of Christ. It is quite likely immersion was the most commonly accepted method. But if God had meant it to be an absolute requirement, He certainly could have made it absolutely clear in the Scripture, as other things are. Where the Scripture is not absolutely clear in certain matters, it is a wise thing to be at least reserved in our judgment. There have been great men of God, men of the Spirit, men of the Word, on both sides of this issue. It would go beyond the power of the human mind, as well as the intent of the Scripture, to make an absolute judgment in the matter.

In summary, let it be said that baptism was a universal symbol of cleansing and a later symbol of identification with Christ. It is hardly something to be shunned, when there is such abundant evidence that it was a most important aspect of the salvation experience, as practiced throughout the history of the church. To say that it was an absolute condition of salvation goes beyond the clear instruction of Scripture and limits the possibilities of divine grace. To say that baptism was a precondition of receiving the Holy Spirit is to reverse the order of things as taught and practiced throughout the rest of Scripture and throughout the history of the church. The Gentile believers in the household of Cornelius were baptized after the Holy Spirit had come upon them.

Still speaking to the Jews, Peter indicates that the promise of the Holy Spirit was to their children and to all in the future, **"Whomever the Lord our God shall call."** If we remember that Peter is speaking to the Jews, this passage should not be difficult. It was well established in the prophets that

there were segments of the nation of Israel that were to be forever blinded, and who would ever turn a deaf ear to Him. In this respect, the grace of God was not limitless. There were limits as established by the hardened hearts of His people, who had become an adulterous as well as idolatrous nation and had been cut off as branches from the olive tree (see Romans 11). Paul

declares that ultimately there will be some regrafting of the branch, but it is certainly true that the call of God to Israel was not universal. Even as Peter was offering the invitation, he was reminded of elements of the Jewish nation that were so perverse that his only instruction could be that those who wanted salvation would have to separate themselves from this element.

Acts 2:41-47

TRANSLATION

They then who received his word were baptized; and there were added on that day about three thousand souls. And they were attending constantly to the teaching of the apostles and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayers.

And fear came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs took place through the apostles. And all who believed had all things in common together; and they were selling their possessions and their substance and dividing it to all, according as each one had need. And they were continuing daily of one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, were receiving food with rejoicing and simplicity of heart, praising God and having grace with all the people. And the Lord was adding together daily those who were being saved.

COMMENTARY

The Birth of the Body of Christ—The Church of the New Covenant

The Holy Spirit of God has come to dwell in the hearts of men. And all who receive His Spirit are welded together in a bond of unity with Christ as His body. The emergence of this body completes the process of redemption and brings to fulfillment the meaning and purpose of Christ Himself. Speaking of Christ to the Ephesians, Paul says, “**And gave Him as a head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of the One who fulfills all things in all**” (Ephesians 1:22,23) (Author’s translation). This is the ultimate meaning of salvation—to be possessed with the Spirit of Christ, and thus to become part of Him, as His body. All the manifestations of Christian grace evolve out of this simple reality. It is not possible to have the Spirit of Christ without being, at the same time, a part of His body. And with the coming of the Spirit into the heart, come also the gifts

of the Spirit. One may not be fully aware of the gift or be fully expressing it, but when the Holy Spirit comes in, in His power and in His presence, He transforms the human vessel into a channel of His own energy.

Thus, the climax of the events of the day of Pentecost came in the bringing together of some three thousand souls to form the embryonic beginnings of the body of Christ which would, in the centuries to come, grow into a vast array of hundreds of millions of Spirit-filled beings, who would make up the eternal family of God. This family was ordained before the foundation of the world to come into being and to exist side by side with Him throughout the ages of eternity. In part, this has to do with the meaning of the universe.

The large number that were thus

brought together on the day of Pentecost is sometimes cause for discouragement on the part of those who labor in the harvest fields with, what may seem to them to be, rather limited results. It is important for such ones to remember that, in the first place, these were Jews, who had already received a great deal of teaching in the matter of faith. It remained only to demonstrate to them that this man Jesus, whom they knew, was indeed the very Christ of God—their long awaited Messiah. In the second place, many of them were already familiar with the teachings of Jesus, and were, in fact, His followers who already believed, but needed only to receive the Holy Spirit, who was now manifested on this day. It would not always be this way, even in the future ministry of the apostles, who faced much rejection and discouragement, even as the faithful servants of God today. To assume that the first proclaimers of the truth had more power or were more pious than today's servants of God would be to call in question the capacity of the Holy Spirit to remain changelessly present among His people through the centuries of time. Or, it would be to assume that the early believers were a better breed than the modern ones or more devoted. They also had their phony "Ananias and Sapphira" types and their egoistic Demetriuses who "loved to have the preeminence," and their John Marks, who turned back from the work. Every age of the church has had its share of human weakness, but each has also had its slate of selfless servants, who have carried forward the pure word of truth and preserved it unto this very day. It is better to move simply day by day in the Spirit, as much as possible, and leave the valuation of the results to the Lord of the harvest. It is really presumptuous to think that we can do anything of ourselves, and therefore whatever is done by us must be done through His Spirit. The failures offset the successes with enough regularity to keep one from being overcome with pride. For some of

God's talented servants, humility may be a virtue, but for most of us, it is merely a facing of the facts. The more confidence one has in the flesh, the more likely one is to be judgmental about the condition of the believers and the results of their work.

The vivid description of the benevolent state of the believers at the time of Pentecost has given rise to envy and fleshly aspiration on the one hand, and guilt and discouragement on the other. It is assumed that what has been here described as the actual experience of the believers has been offered as the norm for the church for all time. That would be an unfortunate mistake. In the several passages where such conditions have been described in the book of Acts, it is important to note that there were not any "go and do likewise" clauses. In general, the believers throughout the Scripture are urged to exercise benevolence and responsibility toward the welfare of one another. However, the church was never urged, at any point, to involve itself in any kind of communal living.* The offering up of one's possessions was a purely voluntary thing, as clearly expressed to Ananias and Sapphira (see chapter 5). The whole structure of economics and of the social order was quite different at that time, and in that place. The effort to duplicate this phenomenon in later centuries has had a very limited success. There has certainly not been enough success to warrant the conclusions that it is an ideal toward which all believers ought to work on this earth.

It has also been assumed by some, in regard to these last verses of chapter 2, that the believers spent the better part of their time in worship and fellowship and eating together. If this was true for a brief period of time, it was certainly not the continuing practice. Later on, Paul would urge those that were idle to get busy with productive work and also would remind the Corinthians that they

had their own houses to eat and drink in, and that they should limit the degree to which they identified the Lord's supper with feasting. There is a certain rather mystical approach to Christianity today that tends to demean the normal processes of human life and to encourage believers to live in a constant climate of supercharged spirituality. Taking their cue from this passage in Acts and several others, they seem to feel that nothing is worthwhile that does not have with it some spiritual motive or implication. In I Corinthians 10:31, Paul urges the believers to do everything to the glory of God. In context, he is referring to certain practices in the matter of eating that were under question. His response was to let the glory of God be the guide not only in this, but in other such matters. That is, that all of one's choices, as a believer, ought to be made in terms of their effect upon our relationship to God. To derive from this text the idea that every action that we take throughout the day ought to have some spiritual implication would be to abuse the text. It is perfectly legitimate for a believer to spend a large number of hours during the day concentrating on the work at hand, however mundane it may be. An employer has a right to expect eight hours of concentrated work for eight hours of remuneration. That is not to deny the right and practicality of the believer to offer up words of prayer and praise. Perhaps the greatest expression of devotion that a human being can give, however, is to go about one's daily tasks in the complete confidence that the Spirit of Christ is within and continuing His work in us, unseen and unsung, moment by moment. It is the kind of confidence that the child exhibits, who goes about his activities, secure in the belief that mother and father are seeing to his needs. The child that must continually run to mother to reassure himself of her care and presence is demonstrating a large degree of insecurity, if not, in fact, a kind of neurosis.

Although the last verses in the second

chapter of Acts seem to present a picture of great harmony and tranquility and spiritual vigor, we must not assume that the presence of the Holy Spirit within should insure a life on this earth of endless tranquility and spiritual euphoria. This would be contrary not only to the teaching of Christ, but also to the tenor of Paul's ministry throughout his epistles. Paul went through many periods of distress and discouragement; of inner turbulence and anguish; of weakness and fear. He makes numerous references to these personal distresses in both of his epistles to the Corinthians. The Bible makes it quite clear that suffering is an important part of the growth process of the believer. If every adversity and every problem is immediately whisked away by the Spirit of Christ within, then where were the suffering. Jesus was "touched with the *feeling* of our infirmities." We are told to weep with those that weep and rejoice with those that rejoice. If all is rejoicing, where were the weeping? Perpetual tranquility is not necessarily an evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit. There are many religious groups that learn how to so control the emotions and mask the realities of life that they seem to go about in a perpetual state of euphoria. This is not because they are masters of the circumstances, but rather maskers of the emotions. One of the unfortunate side effects of such masking of the emotions is the inability to empathize with others in their sufferings. Of course, if one believes that the reason people suffer is because they do not have either the faith or purity to be entitled to God's deliverance, then one can conveniently justify one's indifference to the pains of others.

It has been quite essential to take the time to analyze the description of the life of the believer in the verses of Acts 2 in order to keep these conditions in proper perspective. It is most important to understand that in the spirit, where Christ dwells, there is continual peace and joy and love, since the Spirit of

Christ is there. But in the flesh, where dwells the natural man, there is the continual struggle that is the normal accompaniment of human weakness. When we react to people or circumstances in the flesh, we will experience the inadequacies of that fleshly reaction. When we react in the spirit, we will function in the victory and effectiveness of the Holy Spirit within us. As long as we are on the earth, the flesh is a potential problem. Paul himself never got away from that until his final victory cry as he was ready to depart from this life. The great thing about our relationship to Christ under the New Covenant is the liberty that we have to carry on the struggle in the flesh, without losing our place with Christ in the spirit. After Paul's discussion of his own struggles in the flesh as recorded in Romans 7, he gives the encouragement of chapter 8, in which he indicates that **"There is no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus."**** He assures the believer of the abiding presence of His Holy Spirit, in spite of the weaknesses of the flesh. He contrasts the position of those who possess the Spirit of Christ and those who are totally possessed of the flesh apart from the Spirit. He shows that the one who has the Spirit of Christ in him is inclined (Greek, *phroneo*) toward the things of the Spirit, and the one who does not possess the Spirit is inclined toward the things of the flesh. The believer may have trouble with his flesh, but his general trend of life, his abiding concern is for the things of the

spirit. The one who does not possess the Spirit of Christ is indifferent to the things of the Spirit. He may sometimes perform religious functions, but he really has no concern for the things of the Spirit at all.

In conclusion, it must be declared incontrovertibly that the body of Christ today is no different than it was in the days of Pentecost, since the Holy Spirit is, Himself, changeless. It is, after all, His power that has maintained the believers, and not anything of human strength. It is certainly true that the visible or organized structure which we call "the church" has gone through a great many changes, some for the better and some for the worse. But the prevailing body of Christ—those who have been united with Christ by His Spirit—has remained an effective instrument in the fulfillment of God's purpose through the centuries of history. To deny this is to deny the effective power and presence of the Holy Spirit and to focus on the flesh instead. The Holy Spirit, so gloriously manifested on the day of Pentecost, has indeed prevailed, according to His promise, in the fulfillment of His purpose in the body of believers. And that same power and presence can be relied upon in the individual believer to hold him steadfast and carry him through to glorification. **"Being confident of this very thing, that He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ"** (Philippians 1:6).

*It must be here noted that there is a vast difference between the word "communal" and the word "communist." Many have confused the Christian concept of living together in community, with the philosophical tenets of Marxian socialism or Communism. While Marxian Communism does involve the joint ownership of property by the people, it also involves many other ideas that are inextricably interwoven, such as atheism, with its moral relativity, and the "withering away of the state," which is, at once, most impractical and, in fact, contrary to the plain teaching of Scripture regarding the meaning of government. These observations are very simple and surface, but are intended only to indicate that there is a considerable difference between Communism and communal living as practiced by the early Christians.

**There is no evidence whatsoever in either chapter to indicate that the experience of Paul in chapter 7 was an earlier and less spiritual period of his life, or that chapter 8 represents some kind of secondary experience that lifted him into a new relationship to Christ. These were two different aspects of his experience with Christ that ran parallel throughout the rest of his life. For a further discussion of the conflict between the flesh and the spirit, one is urged to see the author's pamphlet called *The Struggle*.

Acts 3:1-10

TRANSLATION

Peter and John were going up unto the temple at the ninth hour, which was the hour of prayer. And a certain man, being lame from his mother's womb, was being carried, whom they were placing daily at the door of the temple which was called "Beautiful", to ask alms from those entering into the temple; who, seeing Peter and John as they were about to enter the temple, was asking to receive alms. And Peter gazed on him, with John, and said, "Look on us." And he gave attention to them, expecting to receive something from them. And Peter said, "Silver and gold I do not have, but what I have this I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." And he took him by the hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were strengthened. And he leaped and stood, and was walking; and he entered with them into the temple, walking and leaping and praising God. And all the crowd saw him walking and praising God; and they knew him well, that this was the one who sat at the "Beautiful" gate of the temple for the sake of alms, and they were filled with wonder and astonishment at that which had happened to him.

COMMENTARY

The Miracle at the Temple Gate—Outer Glory Versus Inner Power

High atop Mount Moriah, in its gold and marble magnificence, stood the temple of Herod—the reconstructed symbol of the Jewish faith. Grand in size and grander still in meaning, the people of God clung to it desperately as their last link with God—the remnant of their shattered national glory, once brilliant in the days of Solomon. To the various courts and colonnades that surrounded the holy place, came a steady stream of Jews and proselytes, Pharisee and faithful, merchant and mendicant, worshipper and wretched; to draw from its shriveled breast such meager nourishment as their famished souls could extract.

And so to the temple came each day a certain crippled beggar. Where else could

he go? Where else could anyone go? With wretched frame, and still more wretched soul, he took his place at the gate called "Beautiful." As the name implies, it was perhaps the most magnificent gate of the temple. Its burnished brass glistened in the rising sun, giving promise of limitless glory, but withal, concealing behind its splendor, the darkness and bondage of a religious system that gave nothing but the husks of empty legalism in place of the bread of life. Came also to this gate at the hour of prayer, Peter and John. The true meaning of the temple had been trampled in the dust of the adulterous pursuit of pagan idolatry. The Jewish faith had long since become nothing more than a religious formality. Still, the emptiness and formality were not obvious

to the Jewish worshipper, and for all of its inadequacy, it was all that he had. And he clung to it tenaciously, blindly following the absurdities of their equally blind leaders. Into this darkness came Jesus, the light of the world. Terrified lest their darksome deeds be exposed, the Pharisees easily stirred up their blind followers to crucify the hated bearer of truth.

The followers of Jesus, equally hated by their countrymen as profaners of the Jewish faith, had continued coming to the temple, even after the glorious had freed them from the bondage of its religious system. They had in fact brought a restored vitality and meaning to the ancient symbols. To them there was nothing inconsistent about identifying their new faith with the old temple. In fact, as Jesus had taught, the very meaning of the Old Testament symbols was fulfilled in His own coming. He was the true temple, and the true sacrifice. In Him was the fulfillment of altar and laver, lampstand and incense and shewbread, and, above all, the mercy seat of the Holy of Holies. It was quite natural then for the early Christians to continue their allegiance to and participation in the events of the temple. Much of the ministry of both Jesus and Paul was conducted in the synagogues. Thus, Peter and John had come to the temple to participate in the hour of prayer, not as the adherents to a religious formality, but as the followers of the One who was the fulfillment of all things. As they approached the temple gate, Peter and John were arrested by the plaintive cries of the crippled beggar. It was certain that he was not the only beggar there, and it was equally certain that God had some special purpose for this encounter. God did not deliver all the beggars of Jerusalem, any more than He delivers all the impoverished of the world today.

And why does not God deliver all the afflicted today? To lay it at the feet of human inadequacy is foolishness. Human inadequacy is the reason Christ

had to die. And though human guilt is cured by the cross, human inadequacy is not. On the other hand, for a human being to attempt to explain or justify God's purposes and actions in the world is to take the presumptuous position that one has the right or authority to make any judgment about God. A judge automatically puts himself above the judged.

It was as essential for the apostles to have a badge of authority as for Jesus. The miracles which Jesus performed were the proof of His Messiahship. The miracles were not performed either as evidence for the existence of God or strictly for the comfort of those who were so blessed. The word translated by "miracle" really means "sign". As the representatives of Christ and the purveyors or channels of His Holy Spirit, the apostles likewise needed a badge of authority. Without the New Testament, which, of course, had not as yet been written, the miracles, or signs, furnished the needed evidence that they were truly the anointed messengers of God. To assume that every believer today should be an instrument of God in producing such signs, would be a misapplication of this special episode. The assumption on the part of some that everything in the Scripture is to be universally and indiscriminately applied has led to a great deal of confusion in the body of Christ. God makes His own applications of power to whom and through whom He will. Remarkable healings and manifestations of divine power do take place today. There are those through whom God ministers healing continually. But that is not to say that everyone who is a believer ought to be healed, or that everyone who is a believer ought to be a channel through whom God does work His healing power. An Old Testament text which may be appropriately applied here is found in Isaiah 55:8,9—"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens

are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.” For all that we humans may assume that we know God’s thoughts and ways, it is wise to be reserved where God is concerned, and assume only that He will do what He will in the affairs of men, and none can hinder Him.

It was neither the faith of the disciples, nor of the cripple that effected this miracle at the gate “Beautiful.” Peter and John immediately disallowed any special capacity for bringing about this man’s healing. And, as for the beggar himself, he came not to the disciples with prepared heart and vital faith. He was rather looking to them for a handout and was as startled as the crowds at the miracle that was performed. Remember, this is not to cast a shadow of doubt upon

the possibilities of the miraculous in this day, but rather to give comfort to those who, for reasons known only to God, have been denied either healing for themselves or for those for whom they have diligently prayed. To put an extra burden of guilt upon such ones for some obscure frailty of faith or conduct is presumptuous and unconscionable. It further makes the assumption that we human beings have determined with absolute accuracy just exactly what is implied in various texts that seem to indicate that healing is in the atonement, or that every believer ought always to be healed. The pressing of this claim has left a great many thousands of faithful believers in agony of defeat. It would be well to heed the words of Paul to the Corinthian believers—**“What hast thou that thou hast not received?”**

Acts 3:11-18

TRANSLATION

And while he [the cripple] was clinging to Peter and John, all the crowd ran together to them at the portico called Solomon's, struck with awe. And when Peter beheld it, he answered the crowd, "Men, Israelites, why do you marvel at this? Or why do you gaze on us, as though our own power or godliness has made him to walk? The God of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His Servant [child] Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, condemning that One to destruction. But you denied the Holy and Just One, and asked a man, a murderer to be given to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead, of whom we are witnesses. And on the basis of faith in His name, His name strengthened this one whom you are beholding and whom you knew; and faith which is through Him [Christ] gave to him this wholeness before all of you. And now, brethren, I know that you did it in ignorance, even as also your rulers. And the things which God proclaimed beforehand through the mouth of all His prophets, that His Christ should suffer, He thus fulfilled."

COMMENTARY

In the Name of Jesus—Wholeness of Body, Soul and Spirit

The lame beggar stood completely whole before the startled crowd. There was no doubt of his recovery and there was no doubt of his identity. Even the Pharisees would admit, if indeed grudgingly, that a "notable miracle" had taken place. But on what terms and conditions? What were the implications for the people of that day? And, what are the implications for believer and nonbeliever of the world today? If it could be demonstrated unquestionably that this episode does indeed represent the norm for believers today, then there would have to be a re-evaluation of the entire question of what one may expect as a believer in terms of personal welfare physically and circumstantially. There are, of course, a number of "movements" both within Christendom and outside of it, that make

sweeping claims regarding the matter of extraordinary healing. The issue must be dealt with in some detail, since there are large numbers of people both in the "healing movements" and outside of them, that have not been able to participate in this phenomena. There is, therefore, a great deal of disillusionment and discouragement, as well as feelings of guilt and spiritual inferiority. It must be noted here that, while for some groups healing is a sign of the presence and power of Christ, there are many extraordinary healings that take place among groups of people that do not identify with Christ at all. It is, therefore, risky to use healing as a test of one's experience with Christ. (In the "last days" a great many people are going to be deceived by the miracle-working power of

the Antichrist.) That is not to say that God does not perform extraordinary healings today, but only that such experiences cannot be used to prove anything about God. It is well to remember that NOT EVERYTHING THAT IS SUPERNATURAL IS FROM GOD.

But what, then, are the implications of this episode? It is obvious that it was selected from numerous such episodes for a particular reason. In the last lesson we discussed the general implications of this healing as it related to the emptiness of the Jewish religious system at that time. It was only through the followers of Christ that the true meaning of the temple was expressed. But now the question is, in what way does this healing express the implications of the new relationship between God and man brought about through Jesus Christ?

In the first place, there was a boldness in Peter and John that was not of themselves. In fact, they later declared emphatically that it was not of themselves. The Holy Spirit had not simply given them a gift of power, but rather was expressing His own power through them. That is to say, they did not have a residual of power within that they could take and use as they pleased. Rather, they were merely channels through which the Holy Spirit expressed His own power. Apparently, Peter sensed within that the Spirit intended to do something for this man through him, and he was emboldened to exercise this authority. It is important for believers to realize that the lack of faith about a certain matter may not at all be the result of some failure on the part of the individual, but rather may indicate that it is not the intention of the Holy Spirit to do something at that particular time or in that particular way. It is presumptuous to assume that God's actions in a given matter are dependent upon the individual. Who would ever

feel worthy or adequate? What an intolerable burden it would be, if, for example, we had to believe that some loved one was not healed because of our own inadequacy. It would relieve the believer of a good deal of guilt and frustration if he would only realize this point. There are some who have a special gift of healing, according to Paul's word to the Corinthians, but even then, that gift can only be exercised as the Spirit of God directs. If one has faith in a given matter, it may be assumed that the Lord is with them in it; but if one does not have faith, it is better to wait, and to assume that for reasons of His own, God is not ready to move in the matter, rather than to assume that one ought to push ahead and try to achieve faith. In this event of the lame man, there is an easy flow of human openness and divine willingness. The net result is power and peace. If the effort to experience and to express the power of God yields frustration and distress, then it would be wise for one merely to be still and wait on God. Faith is not a matter of the flesh but of the spirit—it can only come as a gift of the Spirit. Feelings of faith, which are in the natural mind, have nothing to do with the reality of faith, which is of the Spirit. By their own admission it was not anything in Peter or John that brought about this miracle—not their goodness, not their faith, not their worthiness. God willed to minister to this lame man through them and so He did.

In the second place, the lame man himself was not in any way especially prepared for this divine gift. He was not at this point even thinking of anything other than the dreadful circumstances which brought him to the temple, not as a noble worshipper, but a miserable mendicant. Not only did he give no evidence of faith, but did not even ask for help, a common request which Jesus made of those whom He helped. In most presentations of the matter of divine healing, there is a set of requirements or

conditions that are regarded as the necessary prerequisites for one to expect healing. None of these were present in this case. It was God's will to heal, and the apostles were there and open.

In the third place, the crowd was not particularly sympathetic. As was often the case with Jesus, the circumstances were not necessarily conducive to the working of miracles (as, for example, in the raising of Lazarus). The situation in Capernaum, where Jesus **“could not do any mighty works, because of their unbelief,”** was evidently an unusual situation, because in many other instances Jesus did do His work in the midst of much opposition.

The miracles which the apostles performed in the wake of Pentecost were thus expressions of God's power working through them. In addition to that, they were signs (*semeion*) by which their work was accredited. Such “signs” are not necessary today, in view of the accreditation provided through the Scripture. However, whether or not the workings of God may today be regarded as “miracles” or “signs,” His power in the world and through His Church has not ceased from that day to this. There is an unfortunate tendency to emphasize the more spectacular demonstrations of God's power and to ignore the quiet and unseen work within the hearts of men, which Jesus identified as the “greater works.” It is an audacious presumption to presume that God's work is stymied by human weakness. If He cannot do it through one, He will do it through another. It is by His grace that the vessel is cleansed in the first place; and by His grace that the cleansed vessel is preserved; and by His grace that the preserved vessel is used.

In answer to the original question, the implications of this episode of the lame beggar for mankind today are that (1) the power of God was not limited by the

human factor, either in the apostles, themselves, or in the beggar; (2) there is no indication whatsoever that such divine power has ever been withheld from His people to the present day; and (3) willingness on the part of God and openness on the part of His servants is all that is needed to fulfill His work on the earth. Any vessel put in His hands will by Him be cleansed and preserved and used for these purposes.

It is of further importance to note that the end result of the physical restoration was spiritual restoration. The once lame beggar now entered the temple with the disciples **“walking and leaping and praising God.”** The entire episode was couched in the process of faith. It was **“on the basis of faith”** and in the name of Christ that the miracle was performed. That does not mean that anyone there had to feel the force of faith. Faith is a process that can only come from God, and it is irrespective of our feelings. It is thus possible for one to come before God and make requests, and to have no particular feelings of confidence about the answer, and yet the very coming has been the evidence of faith. It is like the flight on a jet airliner. There is an act of faith in buying the ticket that may not find expression in corollary feelings of confidence or ease within. It is not how one feels about the flight, but the act of purchasing the ticket and boarding the jetliner that is the demonstration of faith. If one did not have faith in God, one would not even come in prayer in the first place. One would not, for example, go to a mailbox and talk into it in the hope that the conversation would be carried like the letters to a distant friend. Faith is a fruit of the Spirit; it comes with the coming of the Holy Spirit within. As such, it is a process that may not always be expressed in the flesh, which is the natural mind. It is like love and peace, which are also fruits of the Spirit. According to Paul in Ephesians 3 and Philippians 4, both of these qualities

are beyond human understanding. That is, they transcend the natural intellect and emotion, and function within us in our spirits, quite apart from a corollary expression in the natural mind. This is the **“peace of God which passeth all understanding.”** It is folly to try to match the work of faith in the Spirit with

the feelings of faith in the flesh. The lame beggar did not reach out in faith to God, nor did the disciples make any issue of faith, but nevertheless, a process of faith was taking place which restored body, soul and spirit to this wretched man at the gate of the temple.

Acts 3:19-26

TRANSLATION

Repent therefore, and turn unto the blotting out of your sins, so that the times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send to you the before-appointed Christ, even Jesus, whom it was necessary for heaven to receive until the times of the restoration of all things, which God spoke through the mouth of His holy prophets of old. Moses on the one hand said, “A Prophet shall the Lord your God raise up for you out of your brethren, like me; him ye shall hear according to all things whatsoever he may speak to you. And it shall be that every soul which does not hear that Prophet shall be destroyed utterly from among the people.” And all the prophets from Samuel and as many as succeeded him, spoke and proclaimed these days. You are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God established with your fathers, saying to Abraham, “And in your seed shall all families of the earth be blessed.” To you first, God, raised up His Son and sent Him, blessing you, in the turning away of each one from your evil.

COMMENTARY

The Physical Restoration of the Beggar Brings the Call for Spiritual Restoration

The beggar was beside himself with joy in his physical recovery. But God had a higher purpose for the miracle—recovery of mankind from spiritual wretchedness. The message came first to His own people, Israel. They needed to be assured by the miracles that Jesus, in whose name this man had been made whole, was indeed the Messiah whom God had before appointed and had proclaimed through the mouth of His prophets down through the ages of Israel’s history. That was the essential meaning and purpose of the miracles. And here is a prime example of such use of a miracle. On the basis of what God has just done, Peter addresses the Jewish crowd there gathered.

Peter first brings up the issue of faith. It

was not by any personal power that the man was healed, but rather by faith in the person of Jesus. The idea of faith in the name of Jesus does not imply that His name may be used as a magic word. It is rather faith in the person of Jesus as the authority of God. (Closing one’s prayer with the phrase, “In Jesus’ name” does not, of itself, give additional weight to the prayer unless one is actually conscious of an interaction with the Spirit of God in one’s prayer, whereby one may truly sense that he and Christ are in harmony in this prayer effort.) The raising of the issue of faith was a vital point, given the history of the Jews, in which their very offerings were rejected by God because they were not mixed with faith. It was not so much the failure to keep the law that brought about God’s

judgment upon them, but the use of the law as a religious instrument rather than a means of devotion. This is the issue that Paul raises in II Corinthians 3, where he says that **“the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.”** The Pharisees had used the law as an instrument of bondage and oppression, thus making a mockery of the grace of God which had brought the law into existence in the first place. The Jews must now face squarely the issue of faith if they would participate in the New Covenant.

The One in whom they must rest their faith is none other than the One whom they had so viciously crucified. But with the indictment, there is the offer of complete forgiveness. If Peter lays upon them the guilt, he also modifies it with the recognition that they did the dastardly deed in ignorance. He also recognizes that in such a deed, the purposes of God for redemption were fulfilled. The willingness to admit one's need was always a keystone in the message of Jesus from the beginning. Those that think they are whole do not need a physician. But as insistent as He was upon the admission of need, so gracious was He in offering forgiveness and help. Peter's charge to the Jews is to repent in order that they might be part of the restoration. Repent of what? Repent of crucifying their Messiah! Repent of the faithless legalism in which they had so long persisted. And of what restoration? The restoration of all things—the people of God, the Gentile world, the spirit of man, and even heaven and earth as well.

Peter's message is a message of

forgiveness and restoration; a message of bright hope for the future of God's people; a hope that is rooted in the clear testimony of all the prophets from Samuel onward, indeed, even going back to Moses. Even as the nation was forming, Moses had looked down the ages through the eyes of God and seen the apostasy and devastation of God's people, together with the ultimate restoration and triumph. In his last days on the earth, Moses makes some startling disclosures to the people about their ultimate course of disobedience and apostasy, and their recovery. These words are recorded in the last chapters of Deuteronomy (28 to 33). Samuel, of course, predicted the eternal reign of the line of David. And all the prophets after Samuel picked up the same theme of the glorious and eternal kingdom of God, triumphing over all the forces of Satan, which had conspired to bring down His creation, and encompassing both a restored Israel, as well as the Gentile nations. This orchestration by all the prophets reaches its climax in John's revelation of Jesus Christ—**“The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ; and He shall reign forever and ever”** (Revelation 11:15).

The coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost had set in motion the ultimate process of restoration. The “last days” would actually take many centuries, but the ultimate triumph is as certain as the reality of the power of God, now expressed in the healing of the lame beggar at the gate of the temple.

Acts 4:1-12

TRANSLATION

And while they were speaking to the people, the priests, and the captain of the temple guard, and the Sadducees fell upon them, being greatly vexed on account of their teaching the people and proclaiming in the matter of Jesus, the resurrection from the dead. And they laid hands upon them, and placed them in custody unto the morrow, for it was already evening. And many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men was about five thousand.

And it occurred on the next day, that there were gathered together their, rulers and elders and the scribes in Jerusalem. And Annas the chief priest, and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and as many as were of the family of the chief priest. And they stood them in the midst and inquired, "By what power or in what name have you done this?" Then Peter, having been filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders: If we today be examined on the basis of a good deed done to an impotent man, by which this one has been saved, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, that by this One this man has been presented before you whole. This is the 'stone which was treated with contempt by you builders, and which has become the chief cornerstone.' And salvation is not in any other, for neither is there any other name under heaven given among men, by which it is necessary for us to be saved."

COMMENTARY

The Ceaseless Conflict with Counterfeit Religion

The healing of the temple beggar had been a genuine and spontaneous expression of the power of God through His simple servants. Gone from the new spirit-energized relationship to God were the old traditions, and hierarchies, and forms which had become the death-knell of the Jewish faith. The priestly class, who were presiding over this decadent and deteriorating system, had long since lost their way in the wilderness of

religious opportunism and had become **"blind leaders of the blind."** Their cynical hearts, jaded by ceaseless self-deception, were unable to comprehend the simple reality of God's capacity to work through His servants in a simple act of mercy, unstructured by religious formalities. Nor had the disciples merely replaced the old pharisaical system with a new one of their own. They resisted attempts to identify the miracle with

some special power or procedure within themselves.

Jesus had faced the same conflict countless times in His short ministry on the earth. It was always the same—the purity of personal faith in God versus the forms and facades of the Pharisees. Jesus had readily identified them as “**whited sepulchers**”—a gleaming and flawless exterior that gave sanctuary to the bones and stench of death. The wily agents of Satan, who sat in the Sanhedrin, had not changed a bit. They cared not a whit for truth or reality. Their inquiry of the disciples had nothing to do with benevolence and mercy toward a suffering soul. Peter and John were taken into custody like common criminals, because of a deed of mercy, the effectiveness of which could not be denied. The Pharisees had done nothing to alleviate the misery of these wretches that languished about the temple. The effective help that the apostles gave would surely expose the total inadequacy of the Pharisees and their system. “These dangerous rebels must be stopped at all costs!”

The assembly before which Peter and John had been brought was the old Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was a council of seventy elders who had been authorized by Rome to conduct the general affairs of the Jewish people. They had the right to impose sentences, short of the death penalty. They could have caused the apostles endless difficulties. So, Peter and John were not merely debating religious theory. Peter, of course, knew the peril of his position. He was well aware of the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees—a conflict which led ultimately to Jesus’ death. As he had been a channel for the ministry of healing to the lame beggar, so now he becomes a channel of the communication which the Holy Spirit wanted to give to this august body of fraudulent representatives of the true faith, which had once been delivered to

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, from whom they presumed to take their authority. Boldly, Peter confronted them yet once more with that hated name of Jesus. The death of their troublesome foe had only served to magnify their vexation, and multiply the message they so mindlessly feared. In frustration they lashed out at the two apostles, not for heresy or sedition, as in the case of Jesus, but for a mission of mercy.

Peter did not let the idiocy of their position go unchallenged. “**Do you examine us for a good deed done for a poor beggar?**” He did not wait for their response. He knew, and they knew, that he had driven a shaft home. He pressed the advantage of their stunned silence and went on to penetrate the essential issue which really had brought them together—the name of Jesus. With a boldness that could only have come from the Holy Spirit, Peter charged them not only with the crucifixion of the innocent Nazarene, but also with the sins of their fathers in rejecting the truth. They had dealt contemptuously with God’s own Son—the cornerstone of His entire structure of redemption for the world. For this they will pay with their very souls, unless they repent; for they have rejected the One who is now God’s only channel of salvation.

The Word of God is crystal clear—there is no possibility of salvation outside of Christ. If one soul in this world could ever be saved apart from the death of Christ then that death was a hollow mockery. In Romans 2, the apostle Paul implies that there will be a large number of persons on the earth who will be judged in terms of their conscience. God has the freedom to be gracious to whom He will be gracious. It is quite possible that God will show mercy to many who have not personally heard of Christ. The degree to which God will insist upon a personal knowledge of the theological implications of the death of Christ is not altogether certain. We must allow God

the latitude of His deity—that His thoughts and ways are far higher than ours. We must avoid entrapping God with petty human theories that insist upon a very specialized kind of knowledge as a prerequisite for salvation. But three things are certain—(1) The grace of God is beyond all human imagining; (2) God can never be fooled about the honesty and sincerity of one's heart; and (3) Any expression of God's grace is possible, only because of the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ.

But if it be asked, "*What is the advantage of knowing Christ and going through the disciplines of salvation, if in the end God is going to be gracious to some who do not know Christ?*" In the first place, the capacity to understand and handle the meaning of life on this earth, as it is revealed to us through the Scriptures, and through our association with Christ, is an immense advantage. But in the second place, even to ask such a question would be to reveal the shallowness of much evangelistic teaching today. The tendency on the part of some to present Christ as merely one's way of escape from hell, is to miss the deepest implication of the meaning of redemption. In an earthy analogy, it is like a shotgun wedding. The whole purpose of God in sending Christ in the first place was to draw mankind back to

Himself, for an eternity of life and unity with Him. Presenting Christianity as a formula for escape from hell, makes a mockery of the incarnation of Christ, to say nothing of His suffering and sacrifice. It is the wonder of the living, daily relationship with Jesus Christ that is the grand prize of salvation, and not just escape from the jaws of perdition. To walk with Christ on the earth, and to share His conflicts and His sufferings without regard, whatsoever, to either rewards or penalties, is a priceless privilege. Once the consummation of God's purposes for this earth are realized, and the conflict is thus ended, the experience of sharing with Christ His sufferings—of walking with Him through the Valley of Tears, and struggling with Him shoulder to shoulder in the camaraderie of the conflict, will never again be possible. This is the great loss for those who either (a) come to Christ at the end of their lives, or (b) have been extended a measure of God's grace on some basis other than the process of Christianity as we know it. For those who are a part of the body of Christ, or His bride, there is a glorious privilege not experienced by anyone else on earth, nor even the angels in heaven. The tendency to make the relationship with Christ into a religious system has obscured this reality.

Acts 4:13-22

TRANSLATION

And beholding the boldness of Peter and John, and perceiving that they were unlettered and common men [laymen], they were marveling; they were taking full account of them that they had been [continuously] with Jesus. But seeing the man standing with them who had been healed, they had nothing contrary to say. And having commanded them to be put forth outside the Sanhedrin, they were debating with one another saying, "What shall we do with these men? For indeed that a known miracle has taken place through them is apparent to all who dwell in Jerusalem, and we are not able to deny it. But in order that it may not be spread abroad more unto the people, let us issue a threat to them, that they no longer speak concerning this name to anyone." And when they had called them they gave the pronouncement to them not to make any utterance at all nor to teach concerning the name of Jesus. And Peter and John answered and said to them, "If it is a just thing before God to hear you rather than God, you be the judge; for we are not able not to speak of the things which we have seen and heard." And having uttered additional threats, they released them, having found nothing as a cause to punish them, on account of the people, because all glorified God concerning the thing which had taken place; for the man upon whom this miracle of healing had taken place was more than forty years old.

COMMENTARY

The Sanhedrin, Jealous of Their Authority, Preserved the System and Lost the Truth

From the beginning of the human saga, God's noblest creature has been subject to an endless process of deception by the archenemy of God. In time, the truth will triumph, but meanwhile, it seems as though, in the words of James Russell Lowell, "Truth is forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne . . ." There are almost as many varieties of belief about life and the universe, as there are minds to conceive them. Even communication about these ideas is seriously restricted by the limitations of

the human mind. Semantics is a constant problem, because the mind handles words within the context of its own experience. It is difficult to achieve harmony, even in the meaning of the words that we use. But what is truth? And what is deception? Is there such a thing as absolute truth? Can the human mind ever be certain that it is not self-deceived? And how then can we arrive at the truth?

Here before us in Acts 4 is an episode

which gives us some insight into the problem of truth and deception. Peter and John have just been the instruments of God in an act of grace and benevolence toward a lame beggar. Cutting through the morass of human concepts and misconceptions, God has revealed something of Himself in this graphic expression of His power and grace. Beyond all human words to describe it or evaluate it, God has demonstrated to mankind that He (a) cares about man; (b) has the power to reach him; and (c) is able to use human instruments in the exercise of His will. He further revealed that He can and does interact with individuals quite apart from the established religious system. (This latter point was, of course, the crux of the controversy with the Jewish leaders, who could not accept, or did not want to, the possibility that God could function without them.)

If the question be asked, "Why are people deceived?" this episode gives us at least a partial answer to that question. The average person, especially those who are particularly sensitive to the idea of tolerance, might automatically assume that because one is a religious leader, one must certainly have strong convictions about the truth of what one believes. This is, of course, a naive notion. In the world of secular philosophy, we have a very poignant example in the Communist party. It would be naturally assumed, for example, that the leaders of Russia would be the most ardent supporters of the Marxist-Leninist philosophy. The fact that they are not, is amply illustrated in the manner in which they have handled the Russian people since coming to power. The evils of capitalism, as taught by Karl Marx, have been totally ignored in the constant use of capitalist principles. Furthermore, while Marx taught that there would have to be a period in the social revolution when the proletariat would have to exercise control over the bourgeoisie, the leaders in the

Kremlin have extended that concept to the oppression of all peoples under their jurisdiction. The outward facade, "liberation of the oppressed masses," has become a fraudulent cover-up for the thirst for power that has driven all despots of the world from the beginning of time.

But the religious world is no exception. And the use of the words faith, truth, or God, are no more tests of sincerity in religion, than the words freedom, or equality, or liberation, are tests of sincerity in the political arena. While many people are sincerely and honestly deceived, and should receive help and understanding, it would be naive to assume that the pious pundits of religious theories are above willful deception and opportunism.

In this dramatic expose of the motivations of the Sanhedrin, we see just such self-ambition at work. These men could not deny that a very considerable miracle had been done, nor could they find any way of charging them with wrongdoing. Apparently they were not even able to muster false witnesses, since large numbers of the Jewish people had already attested to the validity of the miracle. But as in their attitude toward Jesus, they were not interested in truth or reality; in grace or benevolence; but in the preservation of their own positions of power. It was as Jesus had observed in a stinging rebuke to the Pharisees—the sheep were without shepherds. It was as though the religious leaders had lost their credentials as shepherds, in a drive for the credentials of power. Blind to the claims of compassion, the Sanhedrin was determined to put an end to this ministry of benevolence to the desolate people of God.

To the intimidating threats of the council, Peter responded with a boldness not his own. As he was a channel of the Holy Spirit in the process of healing, so now he was a channel of the same Spirit

in the communication of God's Word to these emissaries of Satan. **"We are not able not to speak of the things which we have seen and heard."** The text clearly indicates that Peter's response was the result of the ministry of the Spirit through him. And herein, lies a very basic answer to some of the questions raised in the beginning, relative to the matter of truth.

Jesus had indicated very clearly during His ministry on the earth, in many different places, that the evidence of the Spirit within was the fruit that was manifested without. **"By their fruit ye shall know them!"** What did He mean by "fruit"? Contrary to much popular opinion, there is no evidence in the Scripture whatsoever that fruit means winning of other souls.* Nor is it a matter of good behavior. Paul himself makes a very strong point of the constant failures of the flesh. Rather, it was the overall impact of the life that Jesus had in mind. **"Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?"** (Matthew 7:16). The presence of the Holy Spirit within is indicated by one's general attitude toward Christ, toward the world, toward one's self, and toward others. There is a caring about Christ and a caring about others. There is a sense of the importance of the things of God versus the things of this world. One's behavior is not always as it should be. Paul makes this abundantly clear in Romans 7. But it will be obvious by the general course of one's life, that one belongs to the kingdom of God rather than to the kingdom of Satan. None of these qualities were evident in the Pharisees. With the penetrating eyes of the divine, Jesus saw through the facade and perceived them to be **"whited sepulchers, full of death."** They were heartless liars, bringing the people of God under bondage and keeping them from the very kingdom of heaven which they claimed to represent.

All of these comments on the evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit within the individual are quite relevant to the question of truth. As we see the life and death conflict between Christ and the Pharisees, represented here by the encounter of Peter and John with the Sanhedrin, the essential question of truth is raised. How does a human being, in one sense, so far removed from God, determine wherein lies the truth between two conflicting systems? The episode gives us a clue. What are the motives and what is the energizing force within of those who claim to be spokesmen for the truth? In a sense, the human person is totally cast upon God for help in this matter. God alone knows what the truth is. The sincere heart, seeking the truth, is promised such help. **"But without faith it is impossible to please God, for he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him"** (Hebrews 11:6). Thus, to one confronting anyone that claims to be speaking truth, it is not only possible, but quite necessary, for one to sense the witness of the Spirit within, that this is the truth. The test by which one can judge the reliability of the true representative of Christ, is, in part, witness within of the evidence of the Holy Spirit in the message and the overall attitude and demeanor of the messenger. In the true servant of God, the Spirit of Christ should ever come through, manifesting the caring and grace of God. The human factor will be there, but always obscured behind the real presence of Christ. The merciless self-seeking of the Sanhedrin was in marked contrast to the boldness and compassionate appeal of these simple servants of Christ, who were willing to risk the wrath of the Jewish hierarchy to minister grace and life to a poor lame beggar.

*For the discussion of this matter the reader is referred to the author's Commentary on John 15.

Acts 4:23-37

TRANSLATION

And when they had been released, they came to their own people and proclaimed the things which the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they had heard, they lifted their voice together to God and said, “Master, You who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all things which are in them, who, through the Holy Spirit, spoke through the mouth of our father David, saying, ‘Why have the nations raged, and the people carefully plotted futile things? The kings of the earth presented themselves, and the rulers were gathered together of one accord against the Lord, and against His Christ.’ For in truth there were gathered together in this city against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, together with Gentiles and people of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your counsel determined beforehand would happen. And now, Lord, look upon their threatenings, and grant to Your servants to speak Your Word with boldness, while You stretch out Your hands, in bringing about healing and signs and wonders through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus.” And while they were praying, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and were speaking the word of God with boldness.

And a large number of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and neither did anyone say that his substance was his own, but all things were possessed in common by them. And with great power the apostles rendered the witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon all of them. For there was not even any poor among them; for as many as were possessors of the substance of lands or houses, selling them, brought the price of the things which were sold, and were placing them at the feet of the apostles; and it was distributed to each one even as one had need. And Joseph, one of the apostles, who was called Barnabas (which is, being interpreted, “Son of Consolation”), a Levite, a citizen of Cyprus by birth, possessing a field, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the feet of the apostles.

COMMENTARY

A Petition to the Master of the Universe—Source of the Apostles’ Power

The relatively small band of Jesus' followers was caught between two powerful forces which could have crushed them like an eggshell—Rome and Jerusalem. The Jewish leaders, custodians of the ancient traditions, which had once been the vital link between God and man, were implacably set against any kind of revision of a system which, though now totally worthless as a viable channel to God, was, nevertheless, the instrument by which they maintained their positions of power over the people. It mattered not that the system gave no solace or service to the people whatsoever, nor that all the evidences around them indicated that God was no longer really with them. They had no interest in God, whatsoever, as a vital force in their lives; were obviously quite indifferent to any revitalization of personal faith, and thus had no intention of opening their minds to the possibility that Jesus as the instrument of God's deliverance, as promised in their own Scriptures. It was not surprising that they should execute this One who was an intolerable threat to their own security and authority. It was even less surprising that they should now attack vigorously His followers. And on the other hand, there was the Roman Empire. Rome was, at this point, the unchallenged master of the Western world from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indus River; from the Sahara Desert to the British Isles. In the beginning, Jesus posed no threat to this secular giant, and thus, in the court of Rome, He was adjudged innocent before all the world. This was an important judgment, as a matter of fact, because there has never been any serious question, outside of a small sect of Judaism, as to Jesus' moral integrity. History has generally attributed the death of Jesus to nothing more than religious rivalries. For the most part, the world has not particularly condemned the Jews for their handling of the matter, but neither have they been reluctant to give to Jesus a place in history as one of its greatest teachers. But this moderate

attitude of Rome would change, and shortly the followers of Jesus would be pursued by Rome as well. They would even become the scapegoats for the faltering fortunes of the empire.

And so this small band of believers was extremely vulnerable to these powerful and relentless enemies of Christ, who were, in fact, the agents of His archenemy, Satan. They had placed themselves in such a position that, without Christ, they were helpless. But Christ was all they needed. In the person of His Holy Spirit, Christ Himself was dwelling in them. It was not that they received help from Christ in their confrontations, but rather that Christ Himself was speaking through them. They cared with His caring; ministered with His grace; and confronted the enemy with His boldness. Once, in fear, they huddled in an upper room; now, filled with the Spirit of Christ, they challenged the power of the Sanhedrin and soon would stand up to the Roman Empire.

Released by the Sanhedrin, Peter and John went immediately to the small company of believers who were the focal point of God's power at this crucial moment in the process of redemption. Through this small band, God would multiply His energies to reach out to all the world. This crucial moment would be shared with God, as everything in their lives would be. They lifted up their voices to the Master of the universe. They wanted boldness to pursue His purposes on the earth. They appealed to the Creator of all things, before whom the machinations of the rulers of the world became an exercise in futility. Even the crucifying of the Son of God was but the fulfillment of that which God had Himself ordained.

With many there is a considerable problem, here, in the matter of the sovereignty of God as it relates to the free will of man. There need be no difficulty if we stay away from human efforts to know

too much, and from the human classifications of theology. One of the biggest problems we face as human beings in trying to define God, or discuss Him at all, is the problem of semantics. Semantics has to do with the meaning of words. The whole problem of the process of human communication is the limitation of the capacity to express oneself. We each bring a myriad of different experiences to the words that we use. Two people can often use the same word and mean something different by it. In trying to define God, we always run into the limitation of our ability to describe something that is beyond human experience. The matter of the sovereignty of God is often discussed under the classification of “predestination.” Theologians of the church have wrestled with this problem for hundreds of years, and are no closer to a solution today. Perhaps the problem is that God does not neatly fit into our human categories, and perhaps the word “predestination” does not actually fit with the realities of what God is. If we allow ourselves to use human classifications, we run into a problem that is not possible to resolve. If with human words we discuss God in terms of having “predetermined” everything, then we have to face the question of how God could allow so much wretchedness and misery on the earth. But if we say that He is not responsible for it, then we have to say that He is not altogether sovereign. Actually, there are no inconsistencies in the nature of God; there are only inconsistencies in the articulations of man. After all, the word “predestination” is only an English translation of a Greek word, the meaning of which may not be all that clear to us two thousand years away from the original writing. The best way to handle the problem is to take each statement of Scripture, as nearly as we can understand it, and accept it at face value. Where there seem to be paradoxes, it is best to let the paradox rest with our inadequate understanding rather than with something inconsistent in the

nature of God. God is what He is, and we can never change that, and we will never fully understand it until we have our glorified minds. If we try to justify God as human beings, we will put ourselves in a position above Him. The capacity to condemn or to justify another always puts one in a position of authority. Perhaps God would just as soon have us leave the justifying of His actions to Himself.

Thus, in this statement in the prayer that the apostles prayed—a statement that suggests that God had determined beforehand the death of Christ, we can only accept the truth of the idea and assume that God did, indeed, before the world began, foresee the fall of man and establish the sacrifice of His Son. As to the responsibility for this deed insofar as human instruments were concerned, we must leave that for God to judge. We can only assume that when all is finally fulfilled in God’s purpose, no one will be able to say that they were unjustly treated. To begin with the premise that God predetermined the death of His Son, and make assumptions regarding God’s involvement in all the events of the world, would involve us in what the philosophers call *non sequiturs*. That is to say, that the conclusions do not always follow from the premise. And so, it is best, where our understanding of God is concerned, to be humble and reserved in drawing our conclusions, and to leave the final harmonizing of truth to God Himself. Again, it is the human pride in demanding to know everything, and in the insistence upon being right. Where the Scripture is clear, we can be clear; where Scripture leaves unanswered questions, it is best not to speculate, or if we do, at least to admit to the speculation.

The Master of the universe responded to the simple band of supplicants—their chamber of prayer was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. The expression “filled with the Spirit” should not be taken as an indication that these

particular disciples had not been a part of the earlier Pentecostal experience; nor as a general term to classify what some people refer to as a “second work of grace,” (assuming that one could be saved without the coming of the Holy Spirit within, or that the coming of the Holy Spirit could only be in part, and a fuller experience reserved for the future). The Holy Spirit is either in us or He isn’t. If He is within us, He cannot just be partly there. If He is not in us we are not saved. In other passages in the New Testament, this expression of “being filled with the Spirit,” refers not only to the initial coming of the Holy Spirit in salvation, but to subsequent experiences, repeated throughout the course of one’s life with Christ, where there seems to be a very special anointing of the Holy Spirit, and the presence of Christ seems more readily felt than at other times.

It is imperative that we realize the difference between the natural mind, which is the seat of the emotions, and the spirit, at this point. When the Holy Spirit comes into our spirit, He comes to stay. He is always there, whether we feel Him in the emotional or psychical sense, or not. One can be filled with the Spirit, and be the recipient of all the blessings of that presence within and still not have a sustained emotional appreciation of His presence. The Spirit does His work within us continuously, whether we are always aware of that activity or not. In fact, the human mind is probably not capable, at this point, of handling the full reality of the meaning of the presence of the Spirit of God within. Therefore we go along in our daily lives with an effective power functioning within us, and yet, are not

fully able to sustain the emotional impact of that experience. For example, it is not necessary for us to feel faith in order for faith to be functioning within us through the work of the Holy Spirit. Our entire lives, after we have taken the Spirit of Christ into us, are lived in the reality of an energizing faith within us, evidenced, not by feelings, but by the capacity to communicate readily with God, or to function in the deep conviction that the whole thing of God is not just a fairy tale.

The disciples, at this point, needed a very special touch from God, and He responded with a shaft of His glory. The end result of this anointing was not an indulgence in ecstasy, but a surge of boldness to speak the Word of God.

The impact of the ministry of the Spirit upon the economic and social aspects of the lives of the believers is once again noted. There is no effort made here to impose this as the standard for all believers for all time. The simplicity of the economic situation lent itself more readily to this kind of communal interaction. But the spirit of giving and sharing, here illustrated, is indeed one of the evidences of the presence of the Spirit within—the Christ-caring for others, not characteristic of the normal human mood of self-centeredness. Nor does the presence of the Spirit within necessarily guarantee an immediate readiness of each individual for the same degree of commitment and devotion. In fact, the effort to press beyond one’s spiritual capacities has led to much facade and falsehood among believers. A poignant illustration of this awaits us in the next chapter.

Acts 5:1-11

TRANSLATION

And a certain man by the name of Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession and kept back part of the price, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a portion of it, and laid it at the feet of the apostles. And Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit, and to retain a portion of the price of the field? Was it not yours when it remained with you? And having sold it, was it not in your authority? Why has it been placed in your heart to do this thing? You have not lied to men, but to God. And when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and expired. And there was great fear upon all who were hearing of it. And young men rose up and prepared him, and carried him out and buried him.

And about the space of three hours having passed, his wife entered, not knowing what had taken place. And Peter asked her, "Tell me, if you sold the field for so much?" And she said, "Yes, for so much." And Peter said to her, "Why have you conspired to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who bury your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." And immediately she fell at his feet and expired. And the young men entered and found her dead, and carried her out to bury her with her husband. And great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.

COMMENTARY

The Counterfeit Creeps Into the Fledgling Church

To the faithful followers of Christ and to the multitude around them in Jerusalem, the Spirit of God was obviously at work in the world. Not that He had not always been at work in the world, but now more manifest—more manifestly personal, and more manifestly dividing between the false and the true.

The evidence of the work of the Spirit had been striking. All manner of human maladies had been effectively assuaged. At the same time, the human element

had remained, **stubbornly** persistent. Paul himself would soon lament this tragic reality. To the Romans, he cried out, "**Oh wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from this body of death**" (7:24) And again, "**The good that I would, I do not, and the evil that I would not, I do**" (7:19). Nor is there any validity to the theory that this was the state of Paul before conversion, or before some crisis experience of sanctification. There is no support for such a thesis. If such were the case, we

could have expected a clearer statement to this effect. To be sure, Paul saw his ultimate deliverance in Christ, but his constant confession as a member of the human race was, as to the Philippians—**“I count not myself to have apprehended (arrived), either were already perfect”** (3:12). And again, **“The flesh wars against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary the one to the other, so that you cannot do the things that you would”** (Gal. 5:17). Paul saw himself as the chief of sinners; the offscouring of the earth; weak and weary, and buffeted by a “thorn in the flesh”. But his trust was not in the flesh, but in the Spirit. In his own spirit, he worshipped God; made his boast in Christ Jesus; spoke with power; and found the strength of Christ all-sufficient.

According to Paul, herein is the most fundamental problem of the human race—to develop the spirit in the midst of the overwhelming impulses of the flesh. And indeed, the most significant and fundamental mission of the Holy Spirit is to unite human spirits with the Spirit of God, and to fashion those spirits in the divine image. And such was his work at the dawn of creation, when he “moved upon the face of the deep,” and fashioned the magnificent cosmos and its inhabitants, so like the Deity Himself. The pristine magnificence was, alas, distorted in the so-called “fall” of man. Whatever the circumstances of such a “fall”—literal or symbolic—the net result has been alienation from God, devitalization of the spirit, and distortion of nature. As He fashioned and vitalized in the first place, so now He must refashion and revitalize. This is the most fundamental and most significant work of the Holy Spirit. To focus on earthly benefits that might be derived from the work of the Spirit in the world—healings, prosperity, etc.—is to totally trivialize the work of the Holy Spirit as the Fashioner and Refashioner of human

spirits in the divine image. To accommodate and acclimate the human flesh to be content and comfortable in this transient world, is to distort the true purposes of God in His original creation.

And so we come to Ananias and Sapphira. But what have they to do with this noble delineation of human destiny? A great deal. They are the very epitome of all that Christ came to correct—the relationship to God based upon legal and contractual obligations, in which sterile conformity was the focal point, irrespective of the condition of the inner spirit. Thus, one could fulfill the religious obligations without ever having the inner spirit revitalized.

The action of Ananias and Sapphira, in a way, showed contempt for the sacrifice of Christ and the gracious gift of His Spirit to mankind. It placed a premium on the outward trappings of religion and ignored completely the inner vitality of the Holy Spirit. Peter shattered their illusions. God was not interested in tokens, but in truth. In effect, Peter was saying, “Do you think you can buy God? Do you think you owe Him something for His sacrifice? His gift was freely given. And so must your gift be.” It is not a matter of obligation, but dedication. The central message of the New Testament is that man has failed in his efforts to satisfy God’s requirement. He has not the power to purchase the redemption of God. The only one who had that power was the Son of God Himself, Jesus Christ. Having satisfied that requirement, He offers salvation as a free gift. To attach a price to the gift is to despise the gift.

It is incredible that the theologian should always attach a price to the gift. The common concept in the church is that salvation is not really free, but implies an obligation. If Christ has saved us, then we owe Him something. Not only is this contrary to the New Testament concept of salvation, but robs the

individual of the right of giving to God a free gift. Given the pressures to perform services to Christ, one never feels that he has done enough to satisfy the requirement. This puts one in bondage even greater than that of the Law of Moses.

The episode of Ananias and Sapphira, coming early in the saga of the new covenant, written in the blood of Christ, served notice upon the body of believers that it was not a light thing to treat with contempt, the free gift of Christ. It was an insult to God, in the same sense that the giver of a gift would be insulted if the recipient should immediately offer to pay for it.

It is most difficult for the church to accept the fact that the followers of Christ do not owe Him anything. If they owe Him something for salvation, then the gift is not free. The offer of service to Christ must be based upon the inner compelling of the spirit to offer Him a gift of love. This was Paul's motivation: "The love of Christ constraineth me." It was not love 'for' Christ that constrained Paul, but the love **of** Christ within, expressing itself in the compunction to serve. Service on any other basis—for reward, for penalty, for love of people, for love of God, is an inadequate motive. To serve **because** we love God is fleshly, and vastly different than serving because the love of Christ within, compels us.

Ananias and Sapphira did not necessarily lose their spirits. Perhaps they were like the profligate man in I Corinthians 5, involved in incest. Paul delivered him to Satan for the destruction of his body, that his spirit might be saved. Jesus made it quite clear to the Pharisees that pursuing the truth, by engaging in fleshly religious works, was like pursuing life in the midst of the tombs. And such was the gift of Ananias and Sapphira. It was a religious deed—to give an offering to God—but not a true act generated in the spirit. And this, of

course, is what the book of Acts is all about. This book is a record of the acts or deeds of the apostles, as they were indwelt and inspired by the Holy Spirit.

This narrative was not put in here, to warn people about "cheating on God," so much as it was to make quite clear that only that which is born of the Spirit is of value to God. The Jewish people destroyed their nation and their place with God, engaging in offerings that were not from the Spirit, but from the flesh—an empty religious ritual. It was an offense to God, because it was a hollow mockery. Whenever one gives a gift out of obligation, one makes a mockery of giving and insults the one to whom the gift given. It would, of course, be absurd to take the attitude that, after all, one receives the gift and should not complain.

Young men carried out Ananias and Sapphira and buried them. So harsh a penalty for so small a crime? From the human perspective it would seem so. But we humans have never been good at judging. We are either inordinately harsh or injudiciously soft. The matter here was serious. God would not have His new bride flirt with pagan patterns of religious ritual, as did His first wife—Israel. Had God condoned, by silence, this infamous gesture, it would have signaled to the world, for all time, that the gift itself was more important than the spirit of the giver. Yet, so it would seem, alas, in some quarters of Christendom today.

The intensive effort of Christian leaders to raise vast sums of money in a cacophony of competition, brings them perilously close to this position. The basis for giving is so constantly fleshly in these appeals—material reward (He'll give back ten-fold); obligation (after all He's done for you); need (if you don't give, we'll have to close down). None of these things have anything to do with giving in the spirit. True giving is based upon an

inner compunction, irrespective of any of the above considerations. If giving is based upon reason, such reason is likely to be a response of the flesh. True love is shown, not by giving for the sake of an occasion, but for no reason at all—merely the inner impulse to give. Such free giving brings joy to the giver as well as the receiver. Much holiday giving has a large measure of obligation in it. Where giving in the church is done out of obligation—“After all He’s done for you”—it belies the insistence by the church, that salvation is free. Giving must be an exercise in the spirit, or it betrays the very sacrifice of Christ, whose death and resurrection were prelude to the coming of the Holy Spirit. It was God’s intention from the beginning that there would ultimately be a rebirth of the human spirit, that it may be united with God and become, in effect, an extension of His power. Thus, the true motivation of the believer is not either reward, or penalty, or any human reason at all, as in the old covenant law, but in the simple compelling of the Spirit within. Paul declared this truth to the Corinthians, to whom he said, **“The love of Christ compels me”** (II Corinthians 5:14). He was not saying that love for Christ compelled him, but the love of Christ, which he possessed within his spirit. So thus, it was not either love for Christ, or love for people that compelled Paul, but the Spirit of Christ within him.

We must, again, mark the distinction between the flesh and the spirit. This is a vital distinction. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews makes this point—**“For the Word of God is living and energizing, and sharper than any two-edged sword, dividing between soul and spirit, and joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the inner feelings and inner thoughts of the heart”** (4:12, Greek). The division between soul and spirit, here referred to, is between the human psyche, including one’s intellectual and emotional capacities, and the spirit, where the

Spirit of Christ dwells. The human psyche, or mind, functions in terms of one’s personality, which in turn has been formed within the brain, and affected by numbers of factors—genetic, physiological, and environmental. The way one reacts to all human experiences is based upon the patterns of personality inscribed on the cortex. The spirit, on the other hand, functions independently of this process. Possessing the Spirit of Christ within our spirits, we possess also His attributes—love, faith, joy, peace, etc. Because of the inadequacy of the human instrument, although we possess these attributes, we have difficulty in expressing them. Thus, for example, human feelings of love, and faith, and devotion become confused with divine love, and faith, and devotion. It is difficult sometimes to separate between the two. And thus, religious devotion, even to the extent of martyrdom, can be merely an exercise of the flesh and have nothing of the Spirit of Christ in it at all. This, of course, was the case of the Pharisees. Many members of religious sects exercise sacrificial commitment to an extent even beyond the followers of Christ. That does not mean that they are themselves possessed of the Spirit of Christ, but that they are exercising religious flesh, as have countless zealots throughout the centuries of human history. The key word in true devotion of the spirit is rather, “spontaneity”—a devotion that is beyond reason and apart from either reward, or penalty, or any other motivation of reason. Because it is so difficult to tell the difference between human religious effort and the true worship of the Spirit, Jesus gave the “Parable of the Tares and Wheat” in the Gospel. When the question was raised as to how to go about separating between the two, Jesus said, **“Leave them alone until the day of harvest, and let them grow together, lest the wheat be pulled up with the tares.”**

But what has all this to do with Ananias and Sapphira? A great deal. In God’s

view, the false sacrifice of Ananias and Sapphira was the same human religious exercise that brought His people Israel to destruction. When the two sons of Eli, the priest (from the days of Samuel), offered a false sacrifice on the altar, they were slain. It is not to be assumed, of course, that either the death of the sons of Eli, or of Ananias and Sapphira, would be the standard fate of all false worshipers. They were rather object lessons of the seriousness of such mockery of true devotion. God's greatest wrath has never been directed at raw immorality, per se, but false worship and idolatry. God was saying, in effect, by the example of Ananias and Sapphira, "Let the bride of Christ beware, lest it fall into the same patterns of false religion, as did His first wife, Israel."

There is, alas, much evidence of religious flesh in the church today. Whenever our services to Christ are out of human reason—reward, penalty, need—they take on the aspect of "false fire." It is not to say that such efforts are insincere, nor intentionally hypocritical, but there is certainly a danger. The leadership must be careful to appeal, not to the flesh, but to the Spirit—not to religious devotion and causes, but to the wellsprings of the Spirit within. This is done by lifting up Christ, rather than promoting religious causes.

For the believer, there is both warning and encouragement in this passage. Warning, of course, lies in the peril of religious exercises apart from the Spirit. The encouragement is that one has complete freedom in the spirit to exercise one's faith and devotion, in the spirit of a **child** of God, and not a **slave** of God. To the Romans, Paul says, "**But we have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear, but the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father**" (Romans 8:15). We are God's children, and not His charges. We are His friends, and not His slaves. Thus, our life with Christ on the earth may be

conducted, not in the pressures of performance, but the pleasure and *camaraderie* of a family fellowship.

Service to Christ ought to be based upon an inner, spontaneous conviction, and not on someone else's concept of Christian obligation. If one's heart does not respond to "challenges" to service, it ought not to produce a feeling of guilt, but rather the sense that perhaps this particular challenge has not been directed of the Lord. If the Lord has a particular service for us to perform, it will come with a compelling from within, and we will receive it willingly. Until such a compelling comes to us, it is well to be at peace and to await the touch of the Spirit. "If it doesn't flow, don't go." This applies especially to the matter of "witnessing." If Christ has someone to whom He wants us to minister, He will establish the circumstances, and we will feel at peace about it. If the situation is strained, and we do not feel at ease, it is quite likely that it is not something the Spirit has directed.

The constant message of Christ and His apostles is that He has called His people unto peace. Much of the turmoil in the heart of the believer is not of the Spirit, but of religious flesh—to attempt to conform to human ideas and traditions about the meaning of the relationship to Christ. If one comes to Christ to find peace and then finds His way constantly disrupted by human appeals to devotion, it belies the promise of Christ that "**These things have I spoken unto you, that in Me you might have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world**" (John 16:33). The Greek word, which is translated "tribulation", really means "pressure." The very pressures with which religious leaders attempt to urge the people to religious performance are characteristic of the world, and not of Christ.

The word of Christ to His people is,
**“Come unto Me, all you that labor
and are heavy laden, and I will give
you rest. Take My yoke upon you
and learn of Me, for I am meek and**

**lowly in heart, and you shall find
rest to your souls. For My yoke is
easy, and My burden is light”**
(Matthew 11:28-30).

Acts 5:12-16

TRANSLATION

And through the hands of the apostles, many signs and wonders occurred among the people. And they were all together in Solomon's colonnade. And of the rest, no one dared to join them, but the people magnified them. And rather, those believing were being added to the Lord—a multitude of both men and women—so that also into the streets they were bringing the infirm and placing them upon cots and couches, in order that while Peter was passing by, even his shadow might fall upon some of them. And the multitude of those around the city of Jerusalem were coming and bringing the infirm, and those possessed by unclean spirits, which ones were all being healed.

COMMENTARY

Signs and Wonders—The Seal of The Holy Spirit

There was no doubt that marvelous things were happening in Jerusalem. And they were happening through the hands of the apostles. And they were happening just as Jesus had foretold. The sick and infirm were being healed and the demons were being expelled. It was like a mighty stream of benevolence flowing from the very heart of God. It was not a power that was in the possession of the apostles, however, as they themselves were most careful to confess, but rather a power flowing through them, as channels anointed by the Holy Spirit. It was apparently a free-flowing surge of power through God's appointed channels. There seemed to be none of the religious exercises or "theatrics" that so often accompany similar phenomena in the religious world today. To observe modern day "methods of miracle," it would seem that God doles out "droplets" of mercy for buckets of prayers and perseverance. In many quarters of Christendom, it is assumed that if we wait enough, and weep

enough, and work up enough fervor and faith—if we touch just the right button—God, at last, will deign to grant the request. Such thinking tends to put the weight on human worthiness rather than divine willingness.

But what then is the difference between the church then and now? The servants of Christ seemed to have much more power when the church was young. What has happened in the intervening centuries? The answer is, of course, that there is no difference. The Spirit of God is just as much at work today in and through His church, as He was in those days. The constant quest on the part of some to return to the "New Testament church" is a totally misplaced effort. Doubtless, if we could be transported in time back to those days, we might be quite disappointed. As we read the letters written to the various groups of believers, by the apostles, we discover that human weakness was no different in those days than it is today. There is a

constant theme running through the epistles, not to say the message of Jesus Himself, that the flesh is weak and totally incapable of pleasing God, apart from the Holy Spirit. Paul was both open in his confession of such weakness within himself and constantly declared his reliance on the Spirit, rather than on the flesh, for his own ministry.

The truth is that God has always done what He wanted to do in the affairs of men, in spite of the human condition. This was made abundantly clear, even in the Old Testament, in the famous episode of Nebuchadnezzar. The Babylonian monarch had been boasting boldly about his achievements, when he was struck suddenly with a mental state which reduced him to an animal-like existence. When he was restored, he confessed his pride and declared that God does what He will in the affairs of heaven and earth, and none can hinder Him (Daniel 4). When Jesus was ministering on the earth, He was often surrounded by unbelief, not only among the multitudes, but even, in most cases, among His own disciples. But except for the prominent issue in Capernaum, this doubt never really deterred Him from accomplishing His purpose. He often called attention to the lack of faith on the part of His followers, but that was for their own instruction. This was notably proved in the episode of Lazarus, where even Mary and Martha were in faithless despair.

The fundamental question, then, is on what basis does God respond to human needs? Some would put the question, "Is the age of miracles passed?" Strictly speaking, there is a distinction between the phenomenon called "miracle" and that which is simply divine assistance. The Greek word translated "miracle" is *semeion*, and means a "sign." The miracles Jesus performed were signs, or proofs of His Messianic office. They were not even proofs of the existence of God. They were performed before Jewish

audiences, who were already followers of God, but needed affirmation that Jesus was indeed the Messiah sent by God. Later, the miracles performed by the apostles would affirm their authority as the representatives of Christ and the true witnesses of His Word to the world. Prior to the compiling of the New Testament, there was no reason to give heed to one self-styled "prophet" over another. The New Testament era was a period immersed in philosophical and religious thought. Even the marketplaces abounded with self-styled prophets and prognosticators. Who could possibly sort out the truth? Or who could claim credibility?

Since the New Testament writings were authenticated, the seal of authority has been the Bible, itself. One's accreditation has been in terms of fidelity to the "faith once delivered," as inscripturated in the inspired Word of God. The familiar text, "**These signs shall follow them that believe,**" has reference to this need of authentication of the apostles' work. To assume that these "miracles" should be the common experience of all believers today is to misapply this important concept.

On the other hand, the idea of "divine assistance" is universally valid among the believers today. In fact, not only is there the timely expression of divine power in crises, but there is also the continuous energizing of His power within us. By this power, the inner spirit is sustained continuously during the process of time, and will be sustained forever in the process of eternity. On the other hand, the flesh, which is the natural body, is ministered to by the power of God in a complex variety of ways. When unusual healing is indicated, there is an abundance of divine power to accomplish this. However, it does not always serve the Lord's purpose to provide smooth circumstances on the earth, but rather through trial and affliction, to cultivate

the strength of our spirits. Therefore, while the power of God is always adequate and available to heal physical maladies, it does not always suit His purpose to do so. The failure to realize this practical reality has caused a great deal of confusion, to say nothing of heartache and sorrow in the ranks of the believers, who are often led to believe that the only reason that healing does not take place is some fault of their own—lack of faith, lack of perseverance, or lack of purity. Tragically, this places an extreme burden upon the poor sufferer, already struggling with the weight of affliction. The overwhelming evidence of Scripture is that the Lord's people suffered exceedingly, in both Old and New Testament times. Sometimes their suffering was brought on by disobedience, but often, as in the case of Job, God had purposes beyond human understanding. In the New Testament, Paul suffered many afflictions, and in a classic example, in his letter to the Corinthians, he finds God refusing his request for deliverance on the grounds that Paul's afflictions served a greater purpose to the glory of God.

Passages such as this one in Acts 5, which set forth spectacular evidences of divine power, can often cause confusion and discouragement in the assumption

that these experiences were the norm for all time and in all conditions. The truth of the matter, however, is that God had a great multiplicity of expressions of His power—physical comfort being, perhaps, the least of these. It is not God's fundamental purpose to focus on earthly comfort, but rather on the cultivation of the spirit within. To whisk away all affliction with the touch of a "prayer button" would be to belie this purpose. If the death of Jesus taught us anything, it taught us that our focus is not ever to be on material goods and earthly comforts. Yet, this is precisely the focus of some quarters of Christendom, who press assiduously for the right of the believer to earthly well-being.

Take heart, believer, if yours is the bed of affliction. Heed not the "miserable comforters" who would lay upon you the burden of guilt, as though any of us could ever be worthy of God's help. It is not a sign of faith, but unbelief that requires God to respond to our slightest whim and earthly fancies to prove that He is with us, or we with Him. It is to the greater glory of God and a tribute to yourself, that He trusts you with suffering. **"For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for His sake . . ."** (Philippians 1:29).

Acts 5:17-26

TRANSLATION

And the chief priest rose up, and all who were with him (the sect being of the Sadducees), and they were all filled with envy, and put their hands upon the apostles, and placed them in the common prison. And an angel of the Lord, by night, having opened the doors of the prison, and having led them both out, said, 'Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life. And having heard, they entered at dawn into the temple and were teaching. And when the chief priest had come, and all who were with him, he called together the Sanhedrin, and all the elders of the children of Israel, and sent unto the prison to have them brought. And when the temple officers approached, they did not find them in the prison, and having returned, they declared, saying, 'The prison we found shut in all security, and the guards standing at the doors, but having opened within, we found nothing. And as they heard these words, both the captain of the temple and the chief priest, they were perplexed concerning them, whatever this might be. And a certain one approached and declared to them, 'Behold, the men whom you placed in the prison are standing in the temple, and teaching the people. Then the captain of the temple went with the officers and brought them, not with violence, for they feared the people, lest they be stoned.

COMMENTARY

Attack and Counterattack!—The Impossible Mission, Hounded By the Implacable Adversary

Harassment by the enemy was an ever present reality to the small band of nondescript followers of Jesus, to whom he had committed the staggering task of converting the world. The task alone would have overwhelmed the average person. The constant hounding by the Jewish leaders added to the astronomical assignment, a formidable *obstacle*.

Yet here, the apostles learned a crucial lesson—the greater the obstacle, the greater the manifestation of the power of

God. Paul would learn the same lesson—the greater the human weakness, the greater the glory of God. In response to Paul's cry for deliverance from some frustrating weakness, God, who had declined to deliver him, said instead, "*My grace is sufficient for thee, for My strength is made perfect in weakness*" And Paul said, "*Most gladly, therefore, will I rather glory in my infirmities, in order that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions,*

in distresses for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then am I strong" (II Corinthians 12:9,10). It matters not, the magnitude of the obstacles; they are no match for God. As Paul discovered, "*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me*" (Philippians 4:13).

The religious leaders sought to silence this audacious and aggravating band. They would have their hands full. The high priest cast them into prison, awaiting the gathering of the Sanhedrin—that august religious body that had presumed to be the spokesmen for God. In reality, they were set implacably against all that God was doing in the world. They were insolent imposters! Daring to call themselves agents of God, they were, instead, agents of the adversary of God. So blinded were they by Satan, that they did not even know the difference.

In the night, an angel of the Lord came and freed the apostles in a stroke. Nor can all the chains forged in the fires of hell ever hold one servant of God against God's will. Why then should there be a single child of God languishing in the bonds of the adversary? This question stands as a constant enigma in the entire issue of adversity among the children of God—especially those that are trying desperately to do His work on the earth, in the face of constant hindrances and frustrations. It is patently true that Satan is no match for God. Over the millennia of human history, God has brought incomprehensible deliverances for His people, both *en masse* and individually. Why does He not do this for all His people, on every occasion? To attribute this to some lack in the believer is too simplistic and puts too much weight on the human capacity. To focus on this issue, we might ask why God delivered Paul from the Philippian jail, on the one hand, and yet allowed him many years of imprisonment, on the other. Or why was John the Baptist allowed to be imprisoned, and finally

beheaded at the whim of a seductive dancing girl? On the other side of the coin, one may ask why did Jesus elect to raise Lazarus from the dead, in the face of the unbelief of the sisters of Lazarus and the faithless mourners gathered about the tomb?

The most obvious solution to the enigma is that the servant is more important than the service, and that the purposes of God are sometimes served more by delay than by dispatch; more by adversity than by prosperity. A classic case in point is the incarceration of Paul. A number of his inspired letters were written during his imprisonment. It was highly unlikely that Paul knew at the time, that the letters he was writing would become the inspired Word of God. He certainly must have been as frustrated by the hindrances to his work, as the servants of God, today, are frustrated by Satan's harassment.

In the particular episode before us, it served God's purpose to release the apostles. Boldly, they resumed their tasks in the face of the escalating animosity and overt attacks by the religious leadership.

The high priest and his cohorts were completely baffled, but so irrational were they in their resistance to the Messiah and His apostles, that they were blind to all the facts of surrounding reality. The spectacular stream of miracles that had occurred in Jerusalem and throughout Judea, since the coming of Jesus had no impact on the "case-hardened" religious opportunists, who were obsessed with envy, and a satanic hatred of Jesus the Messiah and all His followers. The reality of this attitude is certainly convincing evidence that miracles, per se, can never be adequate to produce faith. Remember, a miracle is a "sign" whose purpose is not to produce faith, as such, but rather to confirm the Messiahship of Christ to those who already were looking for His coming. The human mind is not capable of producing faith in God. The Bible is

very explicit in telling us that faith is rather, a gift from God Himself, The classic text is in Ephesians—“*By grace are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast*” (Ephesians 2:8,9). In a certain sense, God must send “energy waves” of faith to awaken our spirits. The mind is not capable of producing this kind of energy. It can never reach beyond itself, because it is not capable of the kind of signals necessary to interact with God. This is the failure of theistic philosophy in attempting to find God through human reason. It is no more possible for human reason to pick up signals about God, than it is for the eye to receive sound signals from a painting. As the eye receives impulses pertaining to vision, and the ear receives signals pertaining to sounds, so the spirit receives signals pertaining to God. The mind can be guided by the Spirit in developing understanding of the nature of God, but it is incapable of using that capacity for understanding to produce faith in God. It is not the instrument for producing faith, any more than the otic (ear) nerves are instruments for producing sight.

What has all this to do with the imprisonment of the apostles by the high priest? The ultimate impact of all that has been said, so far, is that the prison experiences of the apostles were but a very small part of a great floodtide of harassment and hindrances by the adversary; that deliverance from God in these adversities, is governed by the purposes of God for His servants, and not

the spiritual qualifications of the servant; that the animosity of the Pharisees for Jesus the Messiah was not based upon any true religious convictions, but rather upon unbridled envy and irrational hatred; and that no miracles, however great, or manifold, could suffice to persuade them apart from the work of the Spirit of God within.

But if faith can only come from God, wherein lies the human responsibility? How can God find fault? On what basis does He give such faith? The apparent answer to this question lies in the area of recognition of the need of God, and the consequent willingness to seek Him. To receive signals from a given radio station, one must first turn on the set. To receive signals from God, one must at least open the channel if, per chance, God may indeed be there. To open the channel is not necessarily to acknowledge the existence of God, but rather to give Him the opportunity to communicate that existence.

And so the Pharisees, sated with self-ambition, willed not to believe, remained stubbornly ignorant of the Truth, and became the instruments of Satan, destined for eternal destruction. The apostles, in contrast, elected to open the channels of communication with God, received the Spirit of faith, and became instruments of God unto eternal life.

Upon their release from prison, the apostles had gone straight to the temple to pursue the task to which they had been assigned.

Acts 5:27-42

TRANSLATION

And they brought them and stood them in the Sanhedrin. And the high priest interrogated them, saying, "Did we not charge you emphatically not to teach in this name? And behold, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you are determined to bring upon us the blood of this Man." And Peter and the apostles answered and said, "It is necessary for us to obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you killed and hung upon a tree. This One, God has exalted at His right hand as Sovereign and Saviour, to grant repentance to Israel, and the forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses of these matters, and so also the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who follow Him."

And they, having heard, were enraged and determined to kill them. But a certain one in the Sanhedrin rose up a Pharisee by the name of Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, esteemed by all the people, and directed to put the men outside immediately. And he said to them, "Men, Israelites, take heed to yourselves concerning these men, what you are about to do. For before these days, there rose up Theudas, saying himself to be something, to whom a number of men joined themselves (about four hundred) who was slain, and all, as many as followed him, went away and became nothing. After these, there arose Judas the Galilean, in the days of the Enrollment and drew away some people after him. And that one perished, and all, as many as followed him, were scattered. And now I say to you, withdraw from these men and let them alone; because if this council or this work, be of men, it will come to nought; and if it be of God, you will not be able to bring it to nought, lest also you be found fighters of God."

And they were persuaded by him, and having called the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak concerning the name of Jesus, and released them. But they, then, were going from the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they were accounted worthy to be dishonored on behalf of the Name. And every day in the temple and in the houses, they were not ceasing teaching and proclaiming the Christ Jesus.

COMMENTARY

Of Undone Dogmatists; And Undaunted Disciples

In perplexity and desperation, the high priest dispatched the temple guard to retrieve the intrepid apostles. And so, the faceless Pharisees confronted, yet again, the fearless followers of Jesus. Frustrated and fuming, but totally ignoring the enigma of their escape, the chief priest interrogated them about their daring defiance of his emphatic demand not to teach concerning Jesus. Not only had they defied the demand, but they had filled Jerusalem with their teachings. With incredible simplicity and utter indifference to dire consequences, Peter gave his classic response—*“We have to obey God, rather than men.”* And then, with calm deliberation, he charged the Jewish leaders, once again, with the crucifixion of Christ. *“You slew the One whom God had appointed Sovereign and Saviour and Deliverer of Israel from her sins.”*

This was the ultimate outrage. Peter had touched the raw nerve of their rebellion and had thrown them into a murderous rage. They might have executed them on the spot, but for the intervention of the more judicious Gamaliel. This was no doubt God’s method of deliverance. He was not yet ready for His servants to die. As with the miracle of their release from prison, their deliverance was not so much a matter of personal fate, as of divine purpose. Gamaliel, the consummate Pharisee, teacher of the soon-to-be-an apostle, Paul, was acting, not out of any regard for Christ, but for an apparent regard for God, more genuine than his colleagues. The term “Pharisee” has become a synonym for hypocrisy and ruthless religious opportunism. However, it should be noted that there were among them some who were, apparently, sincere. Nicodemus, the night visitor to Jesus, was one of these. And the apostle Paul, so driven by an inordinate

antagonism to Jesus was, nevertheless, sincere in his allegiance to God. Gamaliel was no doubt the recipient of a moment of inspiration from God, as had been the high priest at the time of the crucifixion of Jesus, in making a statement regarding the meaning of the sacrifice of Christ, which the writer of the Gospel identified as a word from God through a vehicle, admittedly unworthy. In the incident of the apostles and the Sanhedrin, God had, indeed, orchestrated the episode to suit His purpose.

In his charge to the Sanhedrin, Peter had spoken of the Holy Spirit as a witness to the truth about Jesus the Messiah. In his statement, he indicated that the Holy Spirit was given to all who would “follow” this Messiah. To clarify a misleading translation, some versions use the word “obey” rather than “follow.” On the basis of that translation, some have taught that it is necessary for one to be sure that one is obeying God in all aspects of one’s life, before one may receive the Holy Spirit. The problem with such a teaching is that the natural man, or “flesh,” is not capable of obeying God without the Holy Spirit. To be required to get one’s life in order before one can receive the Holy Spirit, puts an impossible condition on the free gift of God. Nor is it possible to separate between a gift of the Spirit, adequate only for salvation, and a greater gift of the Spirit adequate for a more dynamic relationship to God. Such teaching is based more upon unwarranted inferences and undependable human experiences, than upon a careful exegesis of the Greek text itself.

The Greek word that is in question is *peitho*, which is used in other verses in the same passage to mean simply, “to be

a follower.” It is so used in connection with the ill-fated leaders to whom Gamaliel referred. “As many as *followed* (*peitho*) Him, were scattered.”

Thus, in this chapter, the Greek word *peitho*, is used, not of obedience in specific matters, but more of following another. Verse 32 should then read, “*So also the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who follow Him.*” This is certainly more in keeping with the concept of the Holy Spirit as the source of our strength, rather than as a reward for having strength. The tendency to require a number of steps before one can receive the Holy Spirit, complicates the whole matter and places too many human limitations on the divine gift.

The invitation of Jesus was so blessedly simple— “*Come unto Me, all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly in heart; and you shall find rest unto your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light*” (Matthew 11:28-30). There is not a single exercise of the spirit that can be entered into, apart from the Spirit of God. The only step we can take is to come. Come in weakness; come in sinfulness; come in doubt; come in waywardness. These are the human conditions Christ died for. They can hardly be conditions to overcome before we come to Him. It is, in fact, the recognition of these conditions that is the prerequisite—“*They that are whole need not a physician, but they that are sick.*”(Matthew 9:12). Only the sick will seek the Saviour. So, come! Bring not your virtues, but your weaknesses. Come not with vows and promises, but your

rebel human vacillations. The One who bids you come, said also, “*Without Me you can do nothing.*” It is a sad travesty of misinterpretation that makes the fruit of the Spirit the prerequisite for receiving the Spirit. It is the Spirit that brings submission, and not submission that brings the Spirit.

From the crisis encounter, the apostles departed, rejoicing. This was not a rational evaluation of relative values— “We won our case against the Pharisees”—but rather an irrepressible expression of a spirit possessed by Christ. Joy is in the spirit, not in the flesh. It is the kind of joy that Christ expressed on the way to the cross. “*These things have I spoken unto you, that My joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full*” (John 15:11).

Once again, that which is a fruit of the Spirit has often been made a test of the Spirit. Do you have joy? The obvious question is, what do you mean by joy? The Greek expression used in Galatians 5:22 and used by Jesus Himself, does not mean bliss, or ecstasy, or ebullience (“bubbling”). It is rather the inner energy that comes from the deep sense of identity with that which is real. The Greek word is *chara*. It was used of the exhilaration of the athlete or warrior, about to enter the contest. It was also used of the ecstasy of childbirth; and even the victory one has in the midst of intense sorrow and pain. There are no guarantees of happiness for the Christian, but possessed by the Spirit of Christ, our ultimate fulfillment is assured, and we rest in the reality of eternal oneness with God.

Acts 6:1-7

TRANSLATION

And in these days, while the disciples were multiplying, there became a murmuring of the Greeks against the Hebrews, because their widows were being neglected in the daily ministrations. And the twelve called together the multitude of disciples, and said, "It is not proper for us to neglect the word of God to serve tables. But brethren, select from among you, seven men, attested to and full of the Spirit and wisdom, whom we shall appoint over this necessary matter; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and the ministry of the word." And the word was acceptable before all the multitude. And they chose out Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenos, and Nikolas, a proselyte of Antioch, which ones stood before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands upon them.

And the word of God grew, and the number of disciples in Jerusalem multiplied exceedingly, and a large number of priests submitted to the faith.

COMMENTARY

Murmurings and Ministries in Matters Mundane

It is not easy for us to separate, during our earthly odyssey, the processes of the flesh and the spirit. Perhaps the most thorny, and, as yet, unresolved issue is the problem of the responsibility of the church (or of God, for that matter) for the earthly well-being of mankind. To what degree are the people of God responsible for correcting the mundane inequities of this life?

Absorbed in the epochal events of God's spiritual and eternal destiny for His people, the apostles were unwittingly oblivious to the social dynamics of the groups that were evolving in the cohesive effects of the newfound faith.

It is all well and good to talk of celestial glories, but what about bread and

survival on earth? What about the widows and orphans? The homeless and hungry? And oppressed? What shall be done for them? And, of course, the charge of discrimination is not far behind the clamor for aid. The Greeks felt neglected (were not the apostles, Jews?).

The issue of charity remains unresolved until this day. There is so much need—such overwhelming wretchedness in the world. What can any individual do? And how avoid human bias in the doing? Who can even escape preconceived patterns of the mind? If we avow immunity from bias, we may fall into the greater trap of blindness and self-deception. The human mind, scarred in the Fall, is never completely free from the potential of

prejudice (which really means “prejudging” something).

If there was neglect in the matter, or discrimination, the apostles, as befits the compassion of Christ, took immediate steps to correct the matter. But avoiding the snare of indifference, they did not fall into the other snare of substituting ministry to the flesh for ministry to the inner spirit. Making the world a better place to live in was neither the stated, nor implied task of Jesus. And the apostles were, if anything, the “relay” team appointed to take from Jesus the baton of the Evangel—the proclamation of redemption. They were not appointed to see to the welfare of the participants, nor the condition of the stadium.

This is not to suggest for a moment that the earthly welfare of God’s people is unimportant. God was, Himself, the ultimate Provider in seeing to the physical needs of His people for forty years in the barren wasteland of the Negev. In reviewing the wilderness interlude, He likens His care to the eagle, who bears its young in ultimate security midst the rocky crags and towering peaks. On the other hand, this entire segment of the life of Israel was only a symbol—a type of the process of spiritual redemption. If Moses led the people of God, undaunted and unscathed, through the wilderness to the Promised Land, Jesus, the Antetype, leads His people through the wasteland of the spiritual wilderness to the promised land of redemption. As God cared about the welfare of His people in the wilderness, so He cares about them today, but His primary concern is the deliverance of the spirit.

The truth of this principle is fully demonstrated in the attitude of Jesus. Surrounded by poverty and wretchedness, He touched the earthly ills of a small representative number. In today’s world, He would have been charged with callous indifference to the

plight of the oppressed. Not a stranger to hunger Himself, He resisted Satan’s temptation to turn stone into bread (which He could have done), with the classic comment—“Man shall not live by bread alone.” Had He entered into His earthly ministry with a commitment to solving earthly ills, He would have had to spend His entire time in an ancient “stoneground” bakery. But had He filled every empty belly in Israel and rid the world of misfortune forever, He would not have solved the essential ailment of mankind—alienation from God. Better to lose the body and save the soul, than to save the body and lose the soul. So spake Jesus in fixing His eyes, resolutely, on the goal of universal salvation, rather than universal satiety.

But what has all of this to do with Grecian widows? A great deal. The apostles were not, as might have been supposed, indifferent to the material needs of the people. Indeed, as soon as the situation was known by them, they took immediate steps to resolve it. Their response to the issue is very instructive to us. *In the first place, they kept their perspective in the matter.* Preserving their priority of the ministry of the Word and prayer, they appointed others to the task of providing for the earthly needs of the people. *Secondly, they placed appropriate importance on the matter.* They regarded it as significant enough to give it their immediate attention. *Thirdly, they picked the proper people for the task.* They insisted that those appointed to the responsibility should be well-favored by the people and filled with the Spirit of God.

This task of ministering to the earthly needs of the people was regarded by the apostles as requiring the same qualifications as those who were appointed to the ministry of the Word. As Paul lucidly points out to the people of Corinth (I Corinthians 12), we are all members of the body, with equal value. No single part of the body is more

important than another part. In the physical sense, we may feel that we can do without some parts of the body more than others, but in God's eyes, all are of equal value. The thing that gives value to the body of Christ is the vital life flow of the Spirit. Whether a toe, or a leg, or a hand, or an eye, they are useless without life. A mechanical robot may be incredible in its capacities to duplicate human action, but without life, the most minute element of the human body is far superior.

For the body to function sufficiently, there must be the coordination of a great many diverse muscles and neurons and not just the simple action of one member. "The head cannot say to the foot, 'I have no need of thee . . .'" Only Christ, the "Head of the body," can coordinate the vast multiplicity of the body of believers into an effective single instrument for His purpose. It is not so much necessary for one to know, certainly, one's special gift. It is necessary only for one to respond to the compelling of the Spirit in accomplishing a particular task. It is not ours to evaluate our own importance or the importance of another. In the analogy of the body, if we tried to concentrate on each muscle and neuron that we thought were needed in a given action, we would confuse the entire system. An important rule in the matter of lifting heavy objects is to focus on where we are going to put the object. It is not so much a matter of lifting with the legs, or the back, or the arms. We must let the mind direct the muscles. Many injuries would be avoided if this simple rule were followed. By the same token, we must let the Spirit of Christ coordinate the members of His body. Who knows the place of some seemingly minute task in the ultimate plan of God?

Thus, what seemed to be a most mundane assignment was regarded as equal in importance and qualifications to the assignment of public ministry.

The so-called "Great Commission"—"Go ye unto all the world and preach the gospel"—is actually a corporate commission. To suggest that everyone who participates in this charge must personally engage in some kind of vocal activity—preaching, teaching, witnessing—is to ignore this principle of coordination. Those gifted in public speaking are exercising a ministry of the entire body. The public speaker is only the mouthpiece of the entire body. Sometimes one is left with an impression, in the handling of this text by some, that everyone must be a "mouth." The mouth is only an exercise of an infinite number of neurons, and muscles, and tendons, and cells of all descriptions. The cooking of a pot of soup may thus be as important as the declaration of the promise of salvation. If one cannot cook, perhaps one can, at least, cry. Weeping for the souls of others may be as important as preaching to the souls of others. Certainly praying is a universal privilege and power exercised by every member of the body of Christ.

Remember, only Christ can coordinate the function of His body. No one member of the body can ever presume to know, much less dictate, what another member of the body ought to do. Although God has established leadership in the church, that leadership must always be exercised with a keen sensitivity to what the Spirit witnesses to the individual. Unfortunately, the leaders who are responsible for planning programs in the church, often assume that their kind of gift must be exercised by all. Thus, a leader assumes that everyone has the capacity to function as they themselves do. This has been the cause of much guilt feeling on the part of those whose gifts are not of a public nature.

Only Christ can coordinate the functions of the body, and only those functions that flow in harmony are likely to be directed

by Him.

Acts 6:8-15

TRANSLATION

And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. And certain men rose up of the synagogue which is called "Libertines," and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, and they were debating with Stephen. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. Then they brought in men underhandedly who were saying, "We have heard him speaking words of blasphemy concerning Moses and God." And they influenced the people, and the elders, and the scribes; and they rushed him, and seized him, and led him to the Sanhedrin. And false witnesses stood forth saying, "This man does not cease speaking words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him saying, "This Jesus, the Nazarene, shall destroy this place and shall change customs which have been delivered to us from Moses!" And all who were seated in the Sanhedrin, gazed upon him and saw his face as it were, the face of an angel."

COMMENTARY

Stephen—Minister of the Mundane; Man of the Spirit

Stephen was one of those men appointed to the more earthly matter of seeing to the material needs of the group. He had not been selected (nor had his colleagues) for business acumen, nor administrative ability, nor fund-raising capacity, nor any of the qualities that are the common prerequisites for those who are, today, appointed to tasks of governance within the church. The essential qualification sought for in these men by the apostles was the presence of the Holy Spirit within. The vital need of this would soon be evident. For no sooner had Stephen been appointed to the office, than he became the channel for divine ministry to the people of God. And, of course, the envy of the religious leaders "followed fast and followed faster." Proud purveyors of sterile religious formalities,

they were totally inadequate to meet the needs of the people and watched in fury, as the people, frustrated and desolate, shifted their allegiance to the fledgling prophets of a new faith, rooted, not in the faltering formulae of human traditions, but in the power of God.

Stephen was doing "great signs and wonders among the people." As with the apostles, the signs and wonders were essential to accredit Stephen's ministry. Since the validity of his message could not be checked against a written revelation, as is possible today, he could only be accredited as from God by these miracles or "signs." But it is important to realize that the Holy Spirit deemed it necessary to accredit him. It is important also to note that gifts and callings are not

so easily distinguished. One may have a number of gifts or only one gift, but who can really say what is in God's mind for that individual. For human beings to classify themselves, or others, is a rather presumptuous thing. It is best for us merely to respond to whatever opportunities God brings to us and not to try to sort out what particular gift is being exercised.

It is evident that the Holy Spirit did not see Stephen as attached only to the commissary. In the course of his work (whatever the time lapse might have been), Stephen was engaged in intensive debates with a number of different religious groups. The classic statement here is that those with whom he was debating, **“Could not resist the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spake.”** This does not mean that they could not help themselves from receiving his word. It rather meant that they had no power to successfully contradict what

he was saying. When they saw that their reasoning was inadequate, they immediately left their reasoning and resorted to force. It was ever thus. In today's world, in the clamor by special interest groups, it is obvious that those who must resort to violence have discovered that their logic is inadequate.

The passage is also a study in human nature. When the mind is closed to truth, it is open to deception. Not only the people, but also the leaders were influenced by false witnesses that were garnered in guile. Blinded to the truth by greed and arrogance, the religious leaders became sniveling slaves of Satan, sated with his deception and eager to be his instruments of perfidy and perdition.

Nor could the glory of a radiant angelic countenance strike a single chord of spiritual sensitivity, so totally captivated were they by the Prince of Darkness.

Acts 7:1-8

TRANSLATION

And the chief priest said, “Are these things so?” And he said, “Men, brethren and fathers, listen. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran, and He said to him, ‘Come out of your land and from your kinsmen, and come unto the land which I will show you.’ Then having come out of the land of the Chaldeans, he settled down in Charran. And from there, after the death of his father, he migrated unto this land in which you now are dwelling. and He did not give to him an inheritance in it, not even a foothold; yet He promised to give it to him and to his seed after him, for a possession, while as yet, he had no son. And God spoke thus to him, that his seed would be aliens in a foreign land, and would serve it and be evil-treated, four hundred years. ‘And the nation to whom they will be enslaved, I will judge,’ said God, ‘and after these things they shall come out and they shall worship Me in this place.’ And God gave to him a covenant of circumcision; and so he begot Isaac and circumcised him the eighth day; and Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob, the twelve patriarchs.”

COMMENTARY

Stephen’s Story of Israel—Sad Saga of Apostasy

Had the Jewish people been an especially winsome and gracious group, there might have been some rationale for their selection by God, as His special oracles for the revelation of His truth to mankind. Certainly, one might have expected them to be exceedingly grateful, if not overawed by the phenomenon of the God of the universe electing them for this singular honor. The truth of the matter is, however, that from the jealous perfidies of Joseph’s brethren to the witless attack upon the guileless Stephen, the history of the people of God had been a ceaseless saga of stubborn resistance to His plans and purposes for them.

It would seem, from the human perspective, that God could have been more judicious in the selection of His earthly emissaries. But then, what group of humans under similar circumstances would have done better? Even to suggest some superiority would, itself, be to succumb to the dual deception of pride and unwarranted confidence in the flesh.

On the other hand, the whole matter becomes a wondrous revelation of divine grace and longsuffering toward His creatures. To the present hour, God has not abandoned His people, in spite of their infuriating indifference to their holy calling. Indeed, according to the

great flow of evidence in the prophetic Scripture, they are going to be, one day, totally restored to their special place. The history of this little speck on the globe—Israel—is one of the sublime witnesses to the validity of the Bible, which has, from the beginning, assured Israel that, though she may suffer greatly for her sins, she shall never be forsaken and one day will occupy her appointed place forever. The Ptolemys and Caesars of ancient history have come and gone; the rulers of the modern day, however fierce, will join them, but Israel goes on forever. All the furies of fire and sword and social devastation have not been able to eradicate the inexorable destiny of the people of God.

One day Jesus will stand on the Mount of Olives and, with His heavenly hosts, will deliver His people from the fearsome Antichrist, who will have been ruling over the holy city. And as of that point described by Zechariah, Israel is alive; Jerusalem, intact; the nations around her all in place; and the world has not been destroyed by nuclear devastation. Whatever happens in the current power struggle in the Middle East (and the struggle will be ceaseless until then), at the time Jesus comes back, Israel will be there, and certain other powers (Syria, Iran, and Libya, at least) around her.

So Israel remains, for all time, God's chosen people. This fact should be of great encouragement to all of us who struggle with human inadequacies. God has identified Himself forever with the human race and will not abandon His commitment.

Any human being who desires to stay with God may be assured that God will remain with that one. With the coming of His Spirit into the human spirit, one partakes of the very nature of God. The evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit is the desire to be identified with God. As long as one desires to be with God, it is evidence that the Holy Spirit is

within. The longevity of His people, Israel, is a tacit testimony to the faithfulness of God to His commitment.

Having now considered the promises and persistence of God, we are ready to confront the tragic history of Israel in its resistance and apostasy. This is the burden of Stephen's soliloquy. The resistance of the Jews to Jesus the Messiah, in spite of overwhelming evidence of His divine appointment, fits the perennial pattern of their forebears for continuous generations. Stephen is not attempting to give a resume of Jewish history, but rather a thematic accounting of the endless episodes of insubordination.

Stephen begins with Abraham. Abraham was the human vessel through whom God had conveyed the declaration of His intentions to establish a special people on the earth. *"And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing. And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curse thee, and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed"* (Genesis 12:2,3). These promises are, in a broader sense, the foundation of the redemptive process. The implications of Abraham's life are worked into the redemptive message of the New Testament. He is a symbol for all time, of faith and faithfulness.

The promises of God are gracious, generous, and timeless. Never had a people been so singularly endowed by the Master of the universe. The kingdom of God was theirs. The price? Faithfulness. Not goodness, or cleverness, or greatness—only faithfulness.

Suffer a moment of application. So you want to be His? You are. Not because you are good, or clever, but because you want to be. Israel wanted other gods—she got them. And with them, a ton of short-lived, phony glitter, and a thousand leagues of hell. Satan makes a dirt-clod

look like gold, and gold look like a dirt clod. Many a rueful dupe is crawling through an earthly hell with a backbreaking load of glittering dirt clods.

Jesus said, *“My yoke is easy and my burden is light.”* Yet in Satan’s world, on the other hand—*“The way of the transgressor is hard.”* Satan promises freedom and bliss. He delivers bondage and misery. The Jews have had their share of both. The tragedy is that their leaders were the very agents of hell, purveying its damnable deceptions.

The story of Israel begins with Abraham, in Ur of the Chaldees. The time is about 2000 B.C. Abraham was a descendant of Shem, one of the sons of Noah. How he was involved with Ur is unknown. Ur had become the center of pagan idolatries. A most magnificent city, it hosted the myriad of deities that presided over the multiple processes and necessities of life. Only a few miles from the historic site of the Garden of Eden, the people had early lost their touch with God and become prey to the evil imaginations of the heart. Superstition replaced submission to God; fantasy swept away faith, and every function of nature became a god. The producing of life being an awesome power, sex became the substance of worship, and licentious liturgies engulfed the minds of the people, eclipsing all that they ever knew of the one true God.

From this darksome “porneic” pit came Abraham, untouched by the foul forces of the Evil One. In itself, this would be a wondrous work of God, but more remarkably, the sensitivities of Abraham to personal communion with God were the basis of his conviction that he must leave Ur and follow the leading of God to a new land, which he sensed would be given to him for a possession. Such identity with God was utterly unknown in Ur and rare even in Israel, until the coming of Christ. For the most part, the Israelites identified with God through

priests and prophets and had little personal communion with Him. The experiences of such beacon lights as Moses, Elijah, and David, were largely unknown to the individual Israelites. It was not until the sacrifice of Christ had torn asunder the fixed veil that had separated the people from personal contact with God, and the Holy Spirit had soon followed, that the individual believer could enter into a dynamic interpersonal relationship with the God of the universe. Abraham is, literally, wrenched from the domain of Satan, to be the forerunner of this very foundation of the redemptive process, which would restore personal communion with God.

The awesome beginnings of Israel’s history are carefully chronicled by Stephen, in order to emphasize the pitiable pit into which the people of God had fallen.

Abraham had plunged into the void. On an assumed word from what he presumed to be God, he had taken his considerable family and entourage of attendants across the Fertile Crescent to the Mediterranean coast, down through Syria and into Palestine, a distance of over one thousand miles. Many have made similar treks, but Abraham had not known, when he set out, where he was supposed to be going. We are thus dealing with a most remarkable man, and with a God who has not only the power to communicate with such a man, but to persuade him to make such a venture. Abraham is clearly designated as the father of all God’s people—not only those of the Old Covenant, but also those of the new. It is, therefore, significant that his relationship to God should be on such a personal level. It prefigured the establishment of a familial kind of relationship between God and His creation, rather than the concept of the deity, universal in the Middle East, of the fearsome controller of life forces before whom the people trembled. So powerful and persuasive were the

words of God to Abraham that he accepted, without question, staggering prophecies concerning future possessions and circumstances of a seed which had, so far, been denied him. Subsequently, the prophecies came true. Abraham had a son, indeed, when he was nearly a century old. His descendants did, in fact, go through four hundred years of bondage in Egypt and then were delivered and established in the land that was promised to them.

In this account of Israel's remarkable beginnings, Stephen has laid the groundwork for an excoriating exposé of Israel's continuous and senseless rebellion against the One who had promised them such a glorious future.

Abraham's faith became a symbolic part of the story of redemption. Paul refers to him in establishing the point that our salvation depends rather upon our faith in God's grace, than our deeds of righteousness. In the fourth chapter of his letter to the Romans, Paul says, "*What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found? For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God. For what saith the Scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness*" (Romans 4:1-3).

Abraham was the father of both Jew and Gentile. The rite of circumcision, established with Abraham, was peculiar to the Jewish people in that day. It was a

physical mark (removal of foreskins) which would make an unmistakable distinction between the Jews and the rest of the world. To the Jews, it was a matter of obedience and national identification. It was an irrevocable requirement of the law. For the Gentiles, there was no such requirement. Whereas the rite was required as a matter of distinction for the Jewish people, it was not an essential part of salvation. Abraham was the natural father of the Jewish people and the spiritual father of all peoples. His promises and prophecies encompass all who would ultimately become the people of God—Jew and Gentile alike.

In the story of Abraham, we are taught more eloquently by example than by proposition, that the grace of God excludes none. The Jews had their special place, but all the world is included in God's provision of redemption and recovery. By the same token, the Jews did not have a corner on rebellion. The Romans and Greeks of yesteryear, as well as the cosmopolitan cultures of today, have their tragic segments of resistance to the concept of God. Individuals and institutions, sects and societies, have persisted in pursuing their own blind course into perdition.

But for all who will, the sacrifice of Christ stands as the *fait accompli*—the deed done—which secures the right to redemption—the recovery of the spiritual identity with God forever.

Acts 7:9-16

TRANSLATION

And the patriarchs, having been jealous of Joseph, delivered him into Egypt. But God was with him and delivered him out of all his afflictions, and gave to him grace and wisdom before Pharaoh, king of Egypt; and he appointed him leader over Egypt and all his house. And a famine came upon all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction; and our fathers were not finding sustenance. And Jacob heard that there was corn in Egypt and sent out our fathers for the first time. And the second time Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and the tribe of Joseph became known to the Pharaoh. And Joseph sent and called for Jacob his father and all his kinsmen, about seventy-five souls. And Jacob went down to Egypt; and he himself died, and our fathers, and were transported unto Shechem and placed in the tomb which Abraham purchased for a price of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

COMMENTARY

The Promise of God and the Process of Evil

“And the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph.” God had given to Abraham glorious promises regarding His purposes for His creatures. It was an unmistakable indication of the personal interest which God has in mankind on the earth. It was the contradiction of Satan’s insidious innuendoes to Eve at the dawn of the human odyssey. “God wants to ‘clip your wings’; He does not want you to be like Himself.” God’s promises to Abraham exalt him to a position of very personal participation with Himself.

Accordingly, as in the beginning, Satan sought to frustrate God’s purposes. Joseph was the favorite son of Jacob, the direct descendant of Abraham, and father of that progeny, the patriarchs, who would be the very substance of the family that God was developing, who would be called “the children of Israel.”

In a crisis encounter with God, Jacob’s name (supplanter or deceiver), was changed to Israel, which meant “a prince with God.” His descendants would hence be known as Israelites. Joseph’s position of favorite son was possibly unwise, certainly common. The jealousy of his brothers, given the circumstances, was an equally human response and understandable. However, their jealousy was fanned into a vicious vengeance, and responding to satanic impulses, they would have killed him, but elected instead, due to the intervention of an older brother, Reuben, to sell him to a Midianite caravan, and thus to dispatch him into the oblivion of slavery. The treachery of the brothers and the grief of Jacob, who supposed his son to be dead, were no doubt intended by the Enemy to shatter the family unit and gravely affect the heirs to the promises of Abraham.

As usual, however, Satan's evil design became, instead, through the overriding power of God, a link in the chain of events, which would rather work to the fulfilling of the human destiny. Joseph was sold to Potiphar, a highly placed Egyptian official. Joseph rose to great authority in the household of Potiphar, and Satan saw, no doubt, a threat to his own destructive aims. If anything, Satan is an expert at exploiting human frailty. He engineered a frame-up through Potiphar's wife, and Joseph landed in jail. Satan was, no doubt, ecstatic. But once again, God used the matter to His own advantage. Through a contact with some luckless servants of the Pharaoh (a contact that would not have occurred without the jail experience), Joseph was brought to the attention of the Pharaoh and ultimately became something of a "prime minister" in the Pharaoh's regime.

In the entire sequence of events, which one may more thoroughly explore in the book of Genesis (37ff.), the entire family of Jacob was brought down to Egypt. Perhaps Satan felt, again, that he had frustrated God's promises. Wrong. God had a purpose beyond Satan's comprehension. As in the case of Adam and Eve, and of all who were key figures in the divine intention for His creatures, the children of Israel, who were to become God's channel of revelation of Himself to the world, had to be tested. The dross must be burned out. The potentials of human frailty must be thoroughly exposed. The ultimate need of redemption by God alone must be thoroughly realized, not only by themselves, but by all generations of the future.

A new Pharaoh arose. Hospitality turned to hostility. Four centuries of grinding bondage followed, and the pitiable people of Israel drank to the dregs the cup of suffering offered by the godless society. Remembrance of that bondage is celebrated in every Jewish home, to this day.

Why so much about Joseph? In the study of the Bible, one learns a most important principle—"Make much of that which God makes much of." In fifty chapters of the book of Genesis, a book which chronicles thousands of years of human history (especially as it affects Israel), ten chapters are devoted, specifically, to Joseph. Again, in this very brief and comprehensive resume of the history of Israel, seven verses out of fifty are devoted to Joseph—one-seventh of the space. What is it about Joseph's life that is so important? And why is it so significant in this particular context? Symbolism must be handled very carefully, lest we go beyond the intention of Scripture. Symbolism can be found in all literature, even where the author did not, himself, intend it. A case in point is the popular syndicated cartoon—Peanuts. A great deal has been written on "the theology of Peanuts." Seminarians love to extract underlying meanings. The author of the column—Schulz—disavows any such purpose. Thus, in the case of these Old Testament characters, we must avoid going beyond the obvious implications. What can we say with assurance? Genesis 49 gives us one unmistakable clue. Jacob, who was about to die, was presenting to his sons prophetic statements about each one of them. Concerning Joseph, he said, **"Joseph is a fruitful bough, even a fruitful bough by a well; whose branches run over the wall. The archers have sorely grieved him, and shot at him, and hated him. But his bow abode in strength, and the arms of his hands were made strong by the hands of the Mighty God of Jacob; (from thence is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel). Even by the God of thy father, who shall help thee; and by the Almighty who shall bless thee with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that lie under, blessings of the breasts and of the womb. The blessings of thy father have prevailed above the blessings of my progenitors, unto the utmost**

bound of the everlasting hills. They shall be on the head of Joseph, and on the crown on the head of him that was separate from his brethren” (Genesis 49:22-26). In comparing this comprehensive passage and many statements in the life of Joseph, with Isaiah 53, as well as many passages in the Gospels, one can readily see a pattern emerging which makes Joseph a very strong type of Christ in the following aspects:

1. He was likened to a vine, which put forth branches (compare John 15).
2. He was a man of grief (Isaiah 53).
3. He was despised and wounded even by his own brethren (Isaiah 53).
4. He bore a penalty akin to death, though he was innocent.
5. He was called the “Shepherd and Stone of Israel.”
6. He was heir to all the blessings of the Almighty, in heaven and on earth, even “unto the everlasting hills.”
7. The ultimate end of his suffering was for salvation.

Through Joseph, God presented the story of redemption, centuries before the coming of the Redeemer.

But what was the purpose of including Joseph in the context of Stephen’s address

to the Sanhedrin? As with Abraham, the recalling of the source and substance of their salvation was an eloquent portrayal of the grace of God, against which to contrast the senseless stubbornness and rebellion of the Jewish people. God had moved so mightily through the leaders of His people that it was abundantly obvious that He was indeed involved in the destiny of His people and would lead them to a glorious future. The stubbornness was not a matter of ignorance, because the Jewish people were well aware of their past. It was, rather, a willful rejection of God’s purposes in favor of the avaricious aims of their own.

In Jesus, the expression of human iniquity had come to the full when the creature would so desecrate the Creator. In Joseph, the meaning of treachery was fully expressed when one would sell his own brother into slavery, and again when a woman would let a man rot in prison in revenge for a wounded ego. In the Sanhedrin, the treachery of the human ego had come to the full in the total indifference of the Jewish leaders to the wretched state of their people in the pursuit of their own selfish ambitions. Before Stephen is through, their perverse and perfidious minds would reduce them to senseless savagery.

Acts 7:17-29

TRANSLATION

And as the time grew near of the promise which God had confessed to Abraham, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt until another king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. This one, having dealt treacherously with our people, treated our fathers evilly, in causing their newborn infants to be exposed to the elements, so that they might not be preserved alive. At which time Moses was born, and was splendid to God; who was nourished three months in the house of his father. And he, having been put out to exposure, was picked up by the daughter of Pharaoh, and she raised him as her own son. And Moses was trained in all the wisdom of Egypt, and he was able in his words and deeds.

And as forty years of time were fulfilled to him, it came upon his heart to visit his brethren, the children of Israel. And seeing one being unjustly treated, he defended the one being troubled and avenged him by slaying the Egyptian. And he thought that his brethren would understand that God was giving deliverance to them through his hand, but they did not understand. And the next day he appeared to them while they were quarreling, and sought to reconcile them unto peace, saying, "Men, you are brothers; why do you mistreat one another?" And the one who was mistreating his neighbor repulsed him saying, "Who appointed you as a ruler and judge over us? You do not wish to kill me, do you, in the same way you killed the Egyptian yesterday?" And Moses fled at this word and became a stranger in the land of Midian, where he begot two sons.

COMMENTARY

The Gathering Gloom and the Dawn of Deliverance

The epoch of Joseph was ended. A new Pharaoh had arisen. The period of peace and favor was over. Storm clouds gathered over Goshen.

Fearing the prolific expansion of the alien herdsmen from Palestine, the Pharaoh brought them under rigorous enslavement. But the more they were

afflicted, the more they multiplied. The darkest night of their history came in the decree to eliminate the newborn babies.

Then came Moses. The dawn of deliverance broke through the blackness. The Pharaoh had decreed the death of all newborn males. Moses was spared; he was adopted by Pharaoh's daughter; he

was trained in the arts and sciences of Egypt. He was being groomed to deliver the people of God from bondage.

But he was rejected. And thus, he was the second in a long line of deliverers, whom Israel would reject, from Joseph to Jesus. And, thus, the narrative finds its place in Stephen's woeful tale of the wandering and waywardness of the people of God.

The details of Moses' rejection and the flight from Egypt are recorded in the Exodus narrative. But an interesting commentary on this flight is given us, briefly, in Hebrews 11. There, it tells us that Moses fled from Egypt as an act of faith. An interesting insight, in view of the facts given in Exodus, where we are told that he fled for fear of his life. The inconsistency can only be resolved by a clear understanding of the meaning of faith. If faith be defined as a feeling of trust, or confidence, then we have a problem. But when we see faith in the light of its definition at the beginning of Hebrews 11—where this episode is recorded—the matter is clearly resolved.

Hebrews 11:1 tells us that **“Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen.”** The word “substance” is the Greek word—*hupostasis*—which means the inner essence of something. For example, the *hupostasis* of a building is the concrete and steel that makes up its structure. The plaster, or tile, or bricks are only a facade. Similarly, the energy flowing through a conduit is the *hupostasis*, while the conduit is only the vehicle through which it is carried. Thus, faith is the inner essence—the *hupostasis*—of our relationship to God. The brain is the vehicle through which that faith is carried. Our feelings, like the facade of a building, have little to do with the main structure of our faith. Within Moses, there was an effective flow of faith, like energy, communicated to him by God and motivating his actions quite apart from

his own personal feelings. If his feelings of fear were the immediate reason for his actions, the purpose of God was the effectual cause. In reality, faith is an energy flow from God to our spirits, establishing the vital basis of our unity with Him. Thus, Paul can say to the Galatians that faith is one of the fruits of the Spirit. Our human feelings of confidence, or lack of confidence, which are based on shallow and transient mental and emotional expressions, have little to do with the reality of the process of faith going on in our spirits through the indwelling presence of the Spirit of God. If human emotions could alter or deter the purposes of God in the world, then His own omnipotence must be seriously questioned. Faith is, after all, a gift of God, and not of human effort, as Paul clearly tells us in Ephesians 2.

Nor is it difficult to understand God's purposes in expelling Moses from Egypt. The forty years he spent in the wilderness were essential to his preparation for leading his people to the Promised Land. But however God's purposes might have been served by Moses' flight, the people of God had clearly rejected him as a leader. No doubt, there were many facets of this “visit” by Moses that were not recorded. In fact, the Greek word used in the narrative in Acts, translated by “visit,” could well imply some kind of effort at “overship.” However that may be, there was, nevertheless, a rejection for which they were called to account.

But now a deeper question arises, which we must face squarely. Why did a merciful God allow His people to suffer in bondage for four centuries? It is important here, because if the children of Israel be judged for their lack of insight into God's appointed leaders, it would be quite understandable, from the human point of view, since God had apparently neglected their plight for at least ten generations. It would be miraculous if any faith at all had survived. This is an

extremely difficult question, and one which has troubled inquiring minds for centuries, but it must be faced in the interest of integrity.

Of course, at the outset, we must realize that we are attempting to evaluate the actions of God from a human perspective. This, in itself, would certainly dictate an attitude of reverence and humility. Paul's question to the Romans—"Who art thou that repliest against God?"—is certainly appropriate, if it does not altogether exclude the inquiring mind. Nor can we hope to resolve the difficulty in any kind of absolutist terms. Nevertheless we, as humans, faced with the life and death struggle of survival on the earth, and the immense problems of communication between the finite and the infinite, certainly have a right to search for answers to their multifarious dilemmas. It is in this spirit of reverence and reserve that we open up this most perplexing area.

At the outset, it must be agreed that the Bible, itself, will be the source of our knowledge on the subject. If we approach the matter from human logic only, we are hopelessly lost in the labyrinth of finite limitations. There may be statements in the Scripture that we do not understand or that are subject to some variables of interpretation, but it is our only reliable resource. We have no quarrel with those who do not accept the Bible as the Word of God. That is their rightful choice. But we have no common ground for discussion. Equally excluded are those who claim special revelations from the Deity, since we have no way of validating their claims. Further, we must rely on those statements that are universally accepted in the Christian community, and not subject to interpretive variables. Given these terms and conditions, the human mind, though limited, ought to be able, if endowed by the Spirit, to find a degree of reasonable peace and satisfaction in the matter. Sometimes the debate between the theist and the

nontheist is seen as a conflict between reason and spirit. This is an erroneous view of the matter. Rather it is a conflict between reason that is based on the limits of our natural mind, versus reason that is germane to the spirit realm.

Again, preliminary to our discussion must be the recognition that we will not be able to fully comprehend God with our finite mind until that time when we no longer know in part, **but "know as we are known."** Even then, there will be a difference between the glorified humans and the ultimate Divine. There are many things about God's actions and interactions with the cosmos and the creatures that we do not understand. As the case with parents and children, there is a certain "generation gap" that we must always recognize. On the other hand, we cannot use this as a convenient "out" when confronting our questions about God.

Given the terms and conditions of our inquiry, we must then establish certain basic premises about the nature of God and His creatures from which broader perspective we may view the specific questions. Obviously, we are not going to be able to deal with the subject exhaustively in this short treatise. We are writing a commentary on Acts, and not a book of theology. We will trust the Spirit to give us enough help here to give us peace in the matter.

There are three major questions that we must ask here.

1. *What is the nature of God?*
2. *What is the nature of man?*
3. *What is the nature of the relationship between God and man?*

What is the nature of God?

When we speak of the nature of God, we are not talking about attributes which refer to what He does, as, for example, love or mercy or power, but what He is as to His essential nature. In this regard,

we must conclude that He is Spirit (John 4:24). As Spirit, He is also infinite and eternal (Isaiah 57:15; Psalm 147:5). Thus, He is neither confined to, nor governed by the laws of nature as applied to the material universe. The phenomena of space and time do not apply to Him in His essential being.

And thus, He views the world and its entire history as a unit, and not as a sequence of events. A good analogy of this is the fantasy fiction about a scientist who is looking through his microscope at a drop of water. He sees in it a little microcosm of vegetation. Suddenly, a lovely girl appears in the scope. He is enchanted by her. But just as suddenly, the drop of water evaporates, and she and her cosmos disappear. God views our entire cosmos in such a moment of existence. Time has no meaning in the ultimate implication of the eternal and infinite. Unlike the maiden, however, we will not disappear, but rather join the ongoing process of the Spirit of God.

That, of course, is what salvation is all about—being drawn out of the “drop of water” into the eternal reality with God. All other consideration of our existence in this world, with its transient phenomena, is secondary and of only momentary significance. Could the fantasy figure have been freed from her “hydro-cosmos,” what an incredible experience for both her and her “overseer.”

All of God’s interaction with His creatures must be seen in the light of the all-pervasive reality, that the earthly life of His creatures is as transient as the drop of water, and that the incredible truth is that we shall, in a “moment” of time, be delivered from our temporal prison and be joined with God for eternity.

To further expand on our fantasy, as all of the processes involved in the preparation of the slide and the focusing of the searing

light rays, were completely beyond the senses of the maiden, so most of what God is and does is, at present, beyond us. The glorious difference, of course, is that while she and her microcosm must be consumed by the light, we are energized by it and brought to eternal life.

The establishing of the essential nature of God as eternal and infinite Spirit, leads us to the second question.

What is the nature of man?

Here again, we are not concerned with what man does, at this point, but what he is, in his essential nature. And now, we have a complication. According to the Scriptures, man was created in the “image and likeness of God.” That image could not have been a physical one. God at that time did not have a physical image. Later, He would, through Jesus, take on the likeness of man. But at the point of creation, the Spirit-essence of God was imparted to His human creatures.

Subsequently, and under conditions not to be discussed here, man lost the vitality of his spirit nature; mortality pervaded creation; and the essential nature of man was submerged in a floodtide of decadence and death.

At this point in time, and, as the effectual cause of the decadence, there was the intrusion of an evil process in the race, which so alienated the creature from the Creator that it was necessary for God to institute a contravening process of redemption. It is this life and death struggle between the forces of evil and the redemptive purposes of God that forms the essence of the scenario of mankind on the earth.

In due course, this redemptive process will be completed, and then God’s creatures will be, not only restored, but glorified to continue their eternal existence with God, as spirit beings. So man is also, in his ultimate potential,

a being whose essential nature is spirit.

What is the relationship between God and man?

Given the spirit nature of both God and man, what is their relationship during the earthly epoch? The clues to this question are revealed in Jesus, who was the earthly, or fleshly expression of God. John expressly tells us, in his Gospel, that **“The Word (*Logos*, God) became flesh, and dwelt among us”** (1:14). Thus, whereas the knowledge of God would be out of reach for the human mind, it has been made available to us through Jesus Christ.

In a certain sense, though not in all respects, Jesus is a model of the relationship between God and His creatures. The apostle John, whose Gospel is the most thorough exposition of the nature and mission of Jesus Christ, says in his first epistle—**“ . . . as He is, so are we in this world”** (4:17).

Jesus is a model for us in the following respects:

1. Though He was in every respect human, He possessed the Spirit of God within.
2. His strength and power came from the Spirit within, and not from His human capacities.
3. His focus was on the Spirit issues and not earthly comforts.
4. Though He suffered privation on earth, and ultimately death, He lived in the realization that He would be soon delivered from subjection to earthly afflictions and given a glorified body.
5. While He was on the earth, He was a living revelation of God and the vehicle revealing the Spirit of God among the people of earth.
6. This revelation of God did not include the promise of earthly bliss. It rather focused on peace in the spirit, than

prosperity on the earth.

All of these expressions of the relationship between God and man are within the realm of possibility for all His creatures. These are not exalted goals for the highly spiritual. We have not said that we could successfully emulate His perfections. He was, after all, without sin. Nor have we said that we would always be victorious in our efforts to live above our earthly afflictions. However, if we want tranquility in this life, we must abandon the notion that health and prosperity are the unqualified legacy and right of every believer.

Using Jesus as our model, we must conclude that our relationship to God involves the following:

1. We are partakers of His Spirit, and thus His nature.
2. We are one with God as Christ is.
3. We have within us His strength to cope with life on the earth.
4. We have a continual channel of communication with Him.
5. We have continual care and protection of our spirits.
6. We have the assurance of complete victory over Satan.
7. While we are on the earth, we are His agents to reveal the triumph of the spirit over the flesh.
8. God does not preserve His people from affliction, but He preserves them in affliction.
9. He has His own schedule for His earthly purposes, but in due course, we shall all be like Christ and with Him through eternity.

These statements do not exhaust, by any means, the subject of the relationship between God and man, but they do provide basic considerations in the resolving of the question of God's dealings with Israel, and by analogy, with mankind in general. This, of course, brings us to the original question.

Why did God allow His people to be oppressed by Egypt?

The answer to this question has its implications for ourselves—why do we suffer on the earth? And why does the world suffer in general? The answer to all of these questions goes back to the basic premise that we have established—**THE ESSENTIAL NATURE OF BOTH GOD AND MAN IS SPIRIT.** The entire issue must be seen from that perspective.

From Adam to Abraham, the tradition of sacrifice kept alive the idea of redemption. But redemption from what? Tenuous and rigorous as it was, life, for God's people, seemed to move in an endurable process of survival—birth and death; pain and pleasure; continuing cycles of existence. What real need had they for redemption? Then came Egypt—the symbol of the true nature of evil. Four centuries of cruel bondage gave ultimate meaning to the wretched plight of mankind in the grip of satanic power. The final outrage came in the slaying of the children.

God could have righted all the wrongs of evil men, but He was after something deeper than earthly bliss. He had no intention of creating an earthly haven for the body—an endless playpen of fleshly comfort and bliss. His intention was to reverse the “Edenic” disaster—to restore the spirit realities to His creatures, snared like animals in the clutches of corruption.

But there must be the will to be free. God did not intend a universe of marionettes—puppets on a string. His creatures must have a free will to chose spirit over flesh; good over evil; God over Satan. But if the consequences of choosing the flesh were constantly obscured by providential intervention, the truth would never be known. It would be the fallacy of raising a child and sheltering it from all unpleasantness. The child would be crippled—unfit to survive in the world.

God did not engineer the Egyptian bondage. He merely did not prevent it. It took ten generations to teach His people that without God, the world lies in hopeless corruption. And, even then, in the wilderness, they were ready to fashion bovine gods and return to the fleshpots of Egypt. They would have chosen rather the wretchedness and death of their bondage, over the freedom of their society under the care of God.

The long years of Israel's bondage in Egypt was by no means a penalty for disobedience. It was rather a lesson for all time in the stark and unvarnished realities of a society without God. All of the magnificence and the wisdom of Egypt could not cover up the pervasive perversion of its abhorrent treatment of its fellow human beings. Shunning the only true God, they had become the victims of the host of demonic agents of Satan, who served as their overlords.

So then, Egypt had become the ultimate symbol of the inevitable issue of the godless society. Four hundred years of Egyptian history brought no improvement, whatever. Thus, it could not be said that Egypt was not given a fair evaluation.

So Israel could only find its meaning in the spirit. The effort to build a society on other grounds has consistently failed throughout her history, and will again until she says, “Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord.”

The lesson is the same for us today, as it was for Israel, and as it is for mankind. Only in the realm of the spirit is there peace and equity and fulfillment. The sufferings of this life serve to prove that in the flesh there is nothing but deception, disillusionment, and death.

To this day, as they strive to build their earthly kingdom without God, Israel does not yet believe this.

Acts 7:30-43

TRANSLATION

And when forty years had passed, there appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, an angel in the flame of a fiery bush. And Moses, beholding it, marveled at the vision; and while he was going to inspect it, there came to him the voice of the Lord, saying 'I am the God of your Fathers, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.' And Moses became terrified and did not dare to look. And the Lord said to him, 'Loose your sandals from your feet, for the place upon which you stand is holy ground. I have surely seen the afflictions of My people who are in Egypt; and I have heard their groanings, and I have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you into Egypt.' This Moses whom you denied, saying, 'Who appointed you a ruler and a judge?' This one, God has sent as a ruler and deliverer with the help of the Angel who appeared to him in the bush. This one led them out, having performed wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, and in the Red Sea, and in the wilderness for forty years. This is the Moses who said to the children of Israel, 'A Prophet like unto me, shall God raise up from among your brethren.' This is the one who was in the church in the wilderness with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and who received the living oracles to give to us, to whom our fathers willed not to be submissive, but deserted him, and returned in their hearts unto Egypt, saying to Aaron, 'I Make for us gods who will go before us; for as for this Moses who led us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' And they made images of oxen in those days, and offered up a sacrifice to the idol, and exulted in the works of their hands. And God turned and delivered them up to serve the hosts of heaven even as it is written in the book of the Prophets, 'You did not offer up to Me slain animals and sacrifices, for forty years in the wilderness, did you, O house of Israel? And you took up the tabernacle of Moloch, and the star of the god Remphan, whose images you made to worship them; and I will carry you away beyond Babylon.'

COMMENTARY

The Decline of Israel—Resistance to Rebellion to Ruin

From wonderland to wasteland; from the splendors Egypt to the barren

wilderness, Moses embraced the void. But as with his famous forebears—

Abraham, Jacob, Joseph—the pit became the purging and the preparation. Emptiness seems to be the inexorable requirement—the *sine qua non*—of men who move mountains for God. Emptied of human ambition, the vessel can be filled with the purposes of God. Had there remained in Moses, any fleshly notions to “do something” for his people, they were burned out with forty years of sand and sheep. No doubt, Moses assumed that he was finished. (Who wouldn’t, after forty years “on the shelf”.)

But Jethro, upon whose encampment, Moses chanced (?) to stumble, was not your ordinary nomad. He was, in fact, a priest (his name means “eminence”), and was a faithful servant of God, knowledgeable in the sacrifices and usages of true devotion. He was in fact, an important source of help at a crucial juncture of the wilderness trek. There is no doubt but that Moses’ years with Jethro expunged the last vestiges of Egyptian influence and saturated him with the simplistic spirit-essence of true faith in God. It took forty years to do this (although the number may be symbolic—forty years of wandering; forty days of temptation for Jesus, etc). When Moses was ready, the call was unmistakable. For such a momentous task, there was need of a momentous call.

Suffer a word of application. It is presumptuous to assume that every call must be unusual or spectacular. God suits the call to the situation. One thing is certain—to the willing harvester, there will be ample indication from the Lord of the Harvest. To specify what is “ample,” begs the question. It depends on the individual—what is needed. However, it must be noted that if one wants to know what God wants, one must spend the time to know Him. The sheep know the voice of the shepherd, because they are with him day by day. It is also a matter of input—learning the meaning of life with Christ, and establishing priorities.

But Stephen passes quickly from the details of Moses’ mission—miraculous deliverance from Egypt; providential sustenance and preservation in the wilderness; the endless episodes of murmuring and resistance—to the crucial turning point of Israel’s relationship to God. The constant grumbling and complaining, natural enough in the petty bickering of the “cosmic sandbox,” gave birth to rebellion. The smoldering spark of unbelief, fanned by the winds of discontent, burst into raging fires of idolatry. Impatient at the absence of Moses, they became the prey of satanic delusion. Satan had succeeded in gilding the memories of Egyptian oppression with the glitter of fleshly desire, and they agreed en masse to return to the “fleshpots” of their erstwhile tormentors. Nor was it enough that they abandoned Moses, and fled from God. Orchestrated by Satan, they must now dishonor God with a surrogate deity of human fabrication.

Her heinous adultery was complete. The “wife of God,” had bedded with His archenemy, and would forever bear the scarlet scars of her base humiliation. And it was only the beginning.

From the infancy of her national identity, to the closing scenarios of her earthly sojourn, she would, in a figure, indulge the harlot’s habit and bear the harlot’s shame.

Israel’s willful rejection of God’s servant started the avalanche, as Stephen points out. In the previous section, we raised the poignant but thorny question, “How could Israel be blamed for such a rejection, after four hundred years of apparent neglect by God?” The ultimate answer is that, whatever might have been the grounds for such a judgment, the Word of God plainly establishes their guilt. Obviously, there were aspects of the matter that were not revealed to us. From our human “perch,” we presumptuously observe an injustice. But

from God's infinitely higher perspective, He had reason to expect more of them.

Throughout the centuries of church history, there have often been extended periods of oppression and persecution, when the Christians, too, might have felt neglected. But through it all, there has been the steady assurance that they were not, indeed, abandoned by God. Just so, we may assume that, though it was not specifically so reported, God never left His people in doubt as to His presence, in spite of their suffering. We may conclude this from the readiness with which they understood the whole matter of the so-called "Passover," where it was necessary for them to slay a lamb and put the blood on the door posts.

In the matter of Moses, we may conclude from the plain statements of Scripture and the implications, that Stephen was being true to the Holy Spirit in charging Israel with willful rejection. Willful

turning from the light brought judicial blindness. What, then, they would not see, now they could not see, and the terrible blackness of demonic delusion enveloped them like a cloud. In a real sense, the cloud remains to this day.

Nor did the glorious light of Christ dispel the darkness of Israel. But many who sat in darkness saw the light and came forth unto deliverance. Similarly, the veil of the temple, which separated the worshipper from the Deity, was split in two at the crucifixion of the "Lamb of God" welcoming all to redemption and membership in the family of God. Large numbers of the community of Israel availed themselves of the offerings, but a larger number chose to remain in darkness. Now, Stephen is bringing the light to the religious leaders of Israel, there assembled. But hopelessly ensnared in a trap they had willfully embraced, the light only heightened their blind and senseless rage.

Acts 7:44-53

TRANSLATION

The tabernacle of witness, which was with our fathers in the wilderness, even as He who was speaking to Moses commanded, to make it according to the pattern which He saw, which also our fathers entered into, having received by succession with Joshua in the restraining of the Gentiles, whom God expelled from the presence of our fathers, unto the days of David, who found grace before God and asked to acquire a house for the God of Jacob. And Solomon built for Him, a house. But the Most High does not occupy dwellings made with hands; even as the prophet said,

*‘Heaven is My throne,
And earth is My footstool,
What kind of a house will you build Me?
Or, what is the place of My habitation?
Have not My hands made all of these things?*

You stiff-necked and obdurate ones, in your hearts and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit—as your fathers, so also you. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? And they killed the ones who announced, beforehand, concerning the coming of the Just One, of whom you have now become the betrayers and murderers—you, who have received the law concerning the institution of divine messengers and have not kept it.

COMMENTARY

Like Her Pagan Neighbors, Israel Wants Her Deity in a Temple

Despite the incessant effluence of carping and contrariness on the part of Israel, God had established His presence with His people in the grand symbol of the resplendent wilderness worship center—the Tabernacle. For all whose eyes were not veiled by the obdurate scales of willful resistance to God, the revelation of redemption was ceaselessly before them. Gold and silver, blue and scarlet; linen and acacia, and skins of sacrificial rams—all conveyed to the spirit of the

faithful, the irrevocable hope of the grace and mercy of God. Nor was it necessary that this revelation be fully understood by human minds, as yet untutored in the intricate theology of the atonement. The symbols, themselves, imbued with the sanctifying touch of the Spirit of God, would convey to the spirits of His true worshipers in a communion, not of the flesh, the ultimate reality of His redemptive purpose.

In a sense, it is like the fellowship of the “communion cup.” In vain does the human mind attempt to sort out the awesome and inscrutable implications of the blood of Christ and His savaged human frame. Only the spirit of the worshiper can truly absorb the mystery and find a nourishment, not of the fleshly mind. All efforts to “theologize” and analyze the meaning of the atonement in millions of pages of finite verbiage, have only succeeded in shattering the unity of the body of Christ with inane aphorisms and presumptuous postulations. We only know that the blood of Christ, the eternal sacrifice, is eternally efficacious in the expunging of the guilt of the fateful progeny of the flawed fountainhead of the race. How, or why, will not be known by us until the day we shall “know as we are known.” Meanwhile, it must be obvious that where the believers must argue and quarrel and discredit one another in the verbalization of redemption, the ultimate truth is not known as yet. The limits of the human mind must, unfailingly, be taken into account in the effort to reduce the glorious truth of God to human terminologies. And if it be argued that one has special revelations, then let all claimants to such special revelations come forth with the kind of unified expression one would expect from revelation by the same God, before credibility can be demanded.

But why this discussion in the context of a statement about the tabernacle? Simply because the question must inevitably arise as to how much Israel would have, yea, could have known about the symbolism of redemption. The answer to this question is vital to the understanding of how Stephen’s recalling of the desire of Israel to build a house for God should lead into the excoriating attack upon the flagrant resistance of Israel to the Spirit of God. The explanation lies in the totally fleshly assumption on the part of Israel, that their God, Jehovah, was no different than all

other deities of the pagan world—billeted in a building which was a fabrication of their own foolish fancies. They could not seem to get beyond their fleshly shackles, to see God in His spiritual reality. (Unfortunately, much of the carnival accoutrements of the so-called “worship” service of the church, today, reflect a similar fleshly fallacy).

But the faithful, where would they have gotten their understanding? From the same place that New Testament believers get theirs—from the Holy Spirit. Whatever the levels of human knowledge of the process of redemption, the Spirit of God goes beyond the human mind, to make real in the inner spirit, the ineffable truths of God.

Anyone who would have approached and embraced the tabernacle worship with an open heart for God, would have been affected by the Spirit of God, so as to see beyond the visible structure and symbols, to know that the God of Israel, unlike the pagan deities, was present only in His Spirit and does not need a “temple made with hands.”

But however our human minds may conceive this matter or assess the implications of this passage, blindness on the part of Israel was a constant problem, and was neither excused, nor excusable. God is not deceived by plaintive cries of ignorance. Jesus made this abundantly clear in His encounter with the faithless Pharisees. **“My teaching is not Mine, but His who sent Me. If one will to do His will, he shall know about the teaching, whether it is of God or I speak from Myself”** (Greek) (John 7:16,17). The Pharisees said, “How do we know you are from God?” Jesus said, “If you wanted to know, you would.”

In the final judgment, all self-justifications will be met with the same response. If you really wanted to know God, you would. **“He that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a**

rewarder of them that diligently seek Him” (Hebrews 11:6).

Stephen’s condemnation of the religious leaders of Israel was not as one human

being judging another, but rather God, Himself, Who ought to know, directing through Stephen the searchlight of truth upon the agents of the Prince of Darkness.

Acts 7:54-60

TRANSLATION

And as they were hearing these things they were being pierced through their hearts, and they were gnashing their teeth at him. He, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” And having cried out with a great voice, they stopped their ears, and ran all together upon him. And having cast him out of the city, they were stoning him. And the witnesses laid their garments at the feet of a young man called Saul. And while they were stoning Stephen, he was calling out and saying, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” And having gotten on his knees, he cried with a great voice, “Lord, do not lay this sin upon them.” And when he had said this, he went to sleep.

COMMENTARY

The Stoning of Stephen—Ultimate Response of the Blind to Ultimate Truth

Had Stephen not spoken the truth, their consciences would not have been shattered. They would have simply beat him, or imprisoned or dismissed him as a malcontent. Chapter seven is a long chapter but a very short speech. Whether or not all the speech was recorded, certainly its main points were. Hardly enough, if spoken in the flesh, to have stirred such violent reaction. We may not have properly assessed all of its implications, or understood God’s devastating judgment, but one thing is certain—“God’s judgments are just.” Even Paul, a tacit participant in this outrageous episode, and later devastated, himself, by the Spirit of God, confessed to the Romans, that his people, the Jews, are “without excuse.” Going about in arrogant and self-righteous judgment of the Gentiles, they themselves were

under the greater condemnation.

Shackled and scorned, the accused became the accuser. The symbol of oppression became the symbol of triumph. Stephen was not only touched by the Spirit, he was literally saturated. In the expression—“Being filled with the Spirit”—the verb for “being” is not the simple copulative—“to be”—but the word *huparcho*, which carries the idea of “substance” or “essence.” Literally—“*The very essence of his being, full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed unto heaven.*” Whatever Stephen was or was not, in the fleshly vessel, he was totally possessed of the Spirit in this special assignment from God.

And not only what he spoke, but what he saw, was itself a revelation from God to us. He saw “the Son of Man” standing

(literally “situated”) at the right hand of God. There is a certain mystery here. How literally should we take it? Will there be three thrones in heaven with three persons seated upon them? This presents a serious problem in terms of polytheism. After all, the Jewish revelation—“**Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is One**”—has never been revoked. To understand this, we must understand the very point Stephen was making when he was thus savaged. “God is a Spirit”—material categories do not apply. It is difficult for the human mind to comprehend fully, the nature of God as a unity and diversity at the same time. It is also difficult for three dimensional creatures to understand the possibilities of the fourth dimension.

Nor is the simple word “trinity” quite adequate. God is more a multiplicity. A major Hebrew word for God—*Elohim*—illustrates the point. While *Elohim* is the plural form of God, the verb forms used with it are always singular. Nor is it merely the “plural of majesty,” as some have suggested. There are many facets to the Godhead. We will simply have to leave it at that.

God is a unity—one God—but He projects Himself to His creatures in many ways. In this connection, compare Revelation 4:5—“**The seven Spirits of God,**” and Isaiah 11:2—the seven-fold spiritfulness. Apparently, God reveals Himself to man in three major functions—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and yet, the Holy Spirit is, at once, the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ. Christ, the Logos, is also God Himself and was incarnated in Jesus.

The Godhead, the fullness of all aspects of the Deity is Spirit in nature and thus beyond the reach of man. God projected Himself to man in Christ, the Logos, who, before the incarnation was the agent of God in creation (see John 1 and Colossians 2) and the functional and revelational link between the inaccessible Deity and His

creatures. In this aspect, Christ was said to be “at God’s right hand”—an idiomatic expression in Hebrew, which is applied to one who is the chief executor of the plans and purposes of another. Without Christ, there would have been no possibility of interaction between God and man.

Before incarnation, Christ, of Spirit nature, appeared on many occasions in a temporary, visible form—sometimes as an angel (to the parents of Samson); or a human person (as to Abraham). All we know of God was revealed through Christ in human terms. All the familiar relationships and expressions used to describe God in the Old Testament, as well as the New, were revealed in Christ.

When Christ was finally incarnated in Jesus, He took a human form permanently. Upon His resurrection, the Spirit of Christ and the glorified body of Jesus were eternally united. Today and forever, in heaven, Jesus Christ exists in visible form. He is the embodiment of all the fullness of the Godhead. “**In Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead in bodily form**” (Greek) (Colossians 2:9). When we arrive in heaven, we will not see three Gods on three thrones. We will see Jesus Christ, the visible expression of all the facets of the Godhead.

The expression, “Son of Man,” was applied in a special way to Christ as the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7:13.

The brilliant light of the truth shattered the fatuous facade of the Pharisees. Grabbing their ears, they ran upon Stephen in a senseless screaming body, dragging him out of the city (unlawful within the walls) and battered him with rocks.

Saul, the consummate Pharisee, watched dispassionately from the “cloakroom.” But the scene would burn itself into his brain, and he would never be the same again.

Acts 8:1-17

TRANSLATION

And Saul was consenting to his [Stephen's] death.

And there was in that day a great persecution upon the church which was in Jerusalem; and all, except the apostles, were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria. And godly men took Stephen for burial, and made great lamentation over him.

And Saul treated the church outrageously, entering the houses, and dragging out both men and women, he delivered them to prisons.

And they, then, who were dispersed, went about proclaiming the word. And Philip went down unto the city of Samaria and preached Christ unto them. And the crowd with one accord was giving heed to the things being spoken by Philip, as they were hearing him and seeing the signs he was doing. For many of those having unclean spirits, they [the spirits], crying with a great noise, were coming out [of them]; and many paralytics and lame ones were being healed. And there was much joy in that city.

And a man by the name of Simon had been in the city previously, working sorcery and amazing the people of Samaria, saying himself to be some great one, to whom all gave heed, from small to great, saying, "This man is the power of God which is great." And they were giving heed to him on account of the considerable amount of time that they were being amazed with the sorcery. But when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming to them the gospel of the kingdom of God and of the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, both men and women. And Simon also himself believed, and having been baptized, was waiting on Philip, and beholding the great signs and mighty deeds, was astounded.

And the apostles in Jerusalem, having heard that the Samaritans had received the word of God, sent to them Peter and John, who went down and prayed for them so that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For He had not yet fallen on any of them, but only they had been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their

hands upon them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit.

COMMENTARY

Saul and Samaria—Symbols of Redemptive Power

Saul's behavior toward the church had been, literally, "outrageous" (*lume*). We tend to see him centuries later, as the stalwart champion of the faith. Had we known him in his pre-Christian days, we would have doubtless joined the church in its early cynical appraisal of him—**"Has he not come to take us, bound, to the High Priest?"**

Even though he had experienced a miraculous conversion, the church was understandably skeptical, and without the intervention of Barnabas, might not have received him at all. As he became later the ceaseless champion of the faith, so he had been earlier, the tireless terror of the church. As later the love of Christ constrained him, so earlier, as the quintessential Pharisee, ignorance and bigotry drove him to a vicious vendetta against Jesus that shattered the lives and homes of his followers. But at this point, the story of Saul is tabled, and we are directed toward the Samaritans.

The Samaritans were hated by the Jews. Bigotry found its ultimate expression in the age-old conflict between these two ethnic groups. So bitter was the venomous spite, that the Jews would never pass through the land of Samaria, which was the direct route to Galilee, but would take the hot, dusty and perilous route down the Judean valley to Jericho and up the eastern bank of the Jordan. Rather would they brave the robbers and the hardships of the Jericho road, than risk the encounter with a simple Samaritan.

And they had reason (see author's commentary on John 4). Not only had the Samaritans usurped their land, but they had prostituted their religious symbols

as well. The holy Zion had been displaced by the alien Gerizim as the symbol of worship. The story goes back a thousand years before Christ. In fact, in a sense, it started with David. Indeed, it starts with David's sin—his dalliance with Bathsheba. The progeny of this inordinate union was Solomon. Upon David's death, Solomon came to the throne with great promise. He had riches and wisdom, and above all, the favor of God. He bartered that favor for a harem. With the harem came pagan deities; and with the pagan deities, the curse of God, who allowed the kingdom to be shattered. Under the son of Solomon, Rehoboam, the kingdom split apart. The ten tribes in the north formed a separate kingdom with Samaria as its capital and began a course that led them ever further away from their allegiance to Jehovah, and into an adulterous espousal to pagan deities. Two and a half centuries later, the Assyrians laid siege to Samaria, and in 721 Sargon II took over the city and began an extensive population replacement, removing Israelites, and replacing them with Assyrians and Arabs. Pagan deities of the population were mixed with the ancient traditions of the worship of Yahweh (Jehovah). The Samaritans accepted only the Pentateuch and derived from it only a partial revelation. This was emphasized in their retaining of Mount Gerizim as the place of the worship of Yahweh. In Deuteronomy 11:29, God had instructed His people to set up an altar there when they came into the land. Subsequently, of course, the worship center was shifted to Jerusalem, where the temple had been erected. But the Samaritans never gave up their insistence that the original edict was still in force. This was because of

their failure to accept the rest of the Old Testament. So the Samaritans had a religious *pot pourri* of traditional and pagan elements, which was totally abhorrent to the Jews, as it was to God Himself.

Nevertheless, the Samaritans were slated for redemption, as were the Jews, who were, in their own religious prostitution, no less unacceptable to God than their Samaritan neighbors. Given the persistent idolatries of the northern tribes of Israel (they had really begun with Jeroboam in the worship of calves, long before the imported population of Babylon), the Samaritans would seem unlikely candidates for recovery. But God identified them specifically in his redemptive plan. Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, in Acts 1:8, really represented the total population of God's people—both the ten northern tribes, whose capital had been Samaria, and the two southern tribes of Judah. The expression—"uttermost parts" represented the rest of the Gentile world.

Thus it was, that when a great persecution broke out in Jerusalem, God saw to it that the message of the coming of the Holy Spirit was dispatched to Samaria. Jesus, Himself, had paved the way in His urgent need to go to Samaria (John 4, q.v.). That the land was impoverished and its population scattered, made no difference. It still symbolized a segment of God's people. And thus it was that Philip was sent to Samaria to break ground, as it were, for the inclusion of the Samaritans in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

As always, the Holy Spirit was able to penetrate layers of tradition—even the fanatical ties to Simon, the Sorcerer—and **"all gave heed to Phillip,"** even Simon, himself. And all who believed were baptized. Miracles were wrought through Philip, confirming his authority,

and there was great joy in the city.

The apostles in Jerusalem heard the good news of Samaria's recovery and sent Peter and John to share with them the blessing of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit did not come upon the Samaritans until the apostles prayed for them.

This incident, taken out of its historical context, has given rise to two major errors. Both errors are based on the assumption that this unique experience was to be a pattern for all time.

The first error is that only through the hands of an apostle can anyone ever receive the Holy Spirit. But this action was unique to the historical coming of the Holy Spirit. It was necessary for the apostles to be the mediators of the experience, else the unity would be broken. Had the Samaritans received the Spirit by themselves, they would have remained divided from the church, as they had been from Israel for centuries in their religious traditions. After the episode in Acts, the use of "laying on of hands" to receive the Holy Spirit is never mentioned. References to the practice of the laying on of hands were for special needs, such as anointing for service. Even such scattered references to the practice would be wholly inadequate if such were the requirement for the most crucial experience of life with Christ. Beware of any religious group or teaching that requires another human being to secure our salvation for us.

The second great error, also arising out of ignoring the historical context, is the assumption that the apostles brought a "second blessing experience." That is to say, that the Samaritans had been "saved" in their receiving of water baptism, and that now they would have a second and greater experience of being baptized in the Holy Spirit. And further,

that this is the pattern for the Christians today.

In a previous discussion of this subject in chapter 2 (q.v.), we showed that the requirement of baptism had a peculiar significance for the Jews, as a rite of cleansing prior to conversion. That is what John was involved in when Jesus came to be baptized. According to Acts 2:38, the Holy Spirit would come to the Jews only after they were baptized. Such a precondition was not given to the Gentiles. Subsequently, baptism became the common rite of all Christians, only after the Holy Spirit came to them in salvation. Such was the case of the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius. Later in this chapter 8, in Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch, he tells the Ethiopian that he may be baptized **"if you believe with all your heart."**

When Jesus had come to John to be baptized, John protested. But Jesus said that it must be done to **"fulfill all righteousness."** Jesus, Himself a Jew, must join with His people in the "baptism of repentance." It was not that He had need to repent, but that He had need to share the lot of His people.

Thus, we have two kinds of water baptism—the "baptism unto repentance" shared by the Jews prior to conversion, and the baptism of confirmation, shared by all Christians after conversion. It was to the former that the Samaritans had reference. Now, having fulfilled that requirement, they were freed to enter into the experience of salvation as now energized by the Holy Spirit.

But what then was the meaning of salvation prior to Pentecost?

The salvation enjoyed by all of the people of God, prior to Pentecost, was a salvation by divine decree—a sort of national contract. (Although, even this

contract was abrogated by disobedience and idolatry.) After Pentecost, salvation was by a revitalized spirit. As far as the "national contract" was concerned, there were terms and conditions that had been violated and the consequences suffered. Now there was a national requirement of penitence, symbolized by the baptism of cleansing or repentance. This is what Jesus participated in as a member of the Jewish race—**"He must fulfill all righteousness"** and share His nation's sorrow.

The Samaritans had fulfilled this requirement and now were ready to enter into the experience of Pentecost—salvation by the coming of the Holy Spirit, in the revitalizing or rebirth of their own spirits.

There was nothing spectacular—no grand experiences, or rushing winds, or even tongues, recorded. But the Samaritans became, undeniably, partakers of the Holy Spirit, even as had the apostles and the people of Jerusalem.

It is important to observe that ordinary people with a simple desire to possess the Spirit of Christ may be assured that He had come in for the asking, whether or not one may have unusual feelings or extraordinary experiences. Feelings in the flesh are never a dependable indication of activity in the Spirit. The flesh can be so deceptive in the aping of religious experiences. Revelations, visions, ecstasies, or tongues can be so easily counterfeited. It is best to trust in the power of Christ to move within us, than in our capacity to express this moving with the faculties of the human mind.

Acts 8:18-25

TRANSLATION

And Simon, seeing that through the laying on of the hands of the apostles the Spirit was given, offered them a price, saying, "Give me also this power, that whomever I lay my hands on may receive the Holy Spirit." And Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought to obtain the gift of God for a price. You have neither part nor inheritance in this word. Repent therefore from this badness of yours, and plead with the Lord if indeed the conniving of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see you in great bitterness and in the bonds of unrighteousness." And Simon answered and said, "Plead with the Lord on my behalf, that none of these things of which you have spoken may come upon me."

Then they [apostles] having borne witness, and having spoken the word of the Lord, returned unto Jerusalem, having proclaimed the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.

COMMENTARY

The Ever-Lurking Counterfeit

From the sorcerers of Egypt, to the marketeers of the modern media, Satan has sought in every way to duplicate the power of God.

The incident with Simon the sorcerer was not taken lightly by the apostles. They did not pass it off as the excess of an ardent devotee. Nor did the Holy Spirit, who inspired the record, give it only a passing comment. The principle of interpretation which we have followed is to give attention to a subject in the proportion to which God gives attention to it. We must emphasize what he emphasizes. In this matter of Simon Magus, Luke accorded seven verses out of forty—over one sixth of the chapter—to this incident. The entire episode of the apostles' coming from Jerusalem and

ministering the Holy Spirit, in the first place, was only accorded four verses.

Having established the importance of the incident, we must give it careful attention. The crucial issue is power. God has made available to humans *through redemption* the vast energy of His own Spirit. To the apostles He said, **"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses . . ."** (Acts 1:8). The Greek word for power, here, is *dunamis*, which means "extrinsic force" of the kind God used in creating the universe, for example. The disciples needed this power for their work.

It is very important to distinguish, here, between the energizing work of the

Spirit, enabling us to function in faith, and the special gift of power for service. Everyone who possesses the Holy Spirit within, possesses the authority (*exousia*) to be a member of the family of God. **“As many as received Him, to them gave he the power (*exousia*) to become the sons [children] of God”** (John 1:12). The children of God also have the energy within to live with Christ. **“And what is the surpassing majesty of His power [*dunamis*] in us who have believed, according to the energy [*energe*] of the might of His strength, with which he energized [*energesen*] Christ when he raised Him from the dead”** (Ephesians 1:19,20). This is the power for life possessed by every believer. And this is what Jesus required for Nicodemus, who must have a new birth if he is to enter into the salvation of Christ. That is, he must receive new life in the Spirit as he had received life in the flesh when he was born.

The Samaritans, having acknowledged their need of repentance and salvation, had been baptized. Simon Magus was among them. Then came the Holy Spirit through the apostles and imbued them with new life.

Simon saw not the life, but the power. In a stroke of satanic “selfness,” he was more interested in the use of the Spirit, than in the presence of the Spirit. And here was the crux of the problem. It is not for human beings to “use” the power of God, but for God to use human beings as channels of His power. Simon was an opportunist. The world is full of them; indeed the church is full of them. God is not ever deceived by them.

But how can there be those in the body of Christ who are still seeking the Holy Spirit? Does not the Holy Spirit come with salvation?

That is true, of course, but many in the church have been led to believe that unless they see special signs or have

special ecstasies, they have not yet received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Thus, not content with the quiet presence of the Spirit within, they are seeking some more dynamic experience. The price offered is not usually so crass as money. But there are many more subtle bartering “chips”—good works, fervor, religious exercises. People want power; they want gifts; they want blessings, prosperity, special experiences. But they are not content with the quiet presence of the Spirit of God within. *“Oh, Lord, give me power”* Thus, the cry from many quarters. But power for what? What are you going to use it for? What will you accept as the token of His presence? Does it have to be spectacular? Does God have to patronize your fleshly feelings? If you have asked Him to come in, isn’t it enough to trust that he is there? Do you have to barter with promises and exhibitions of fervor? *“Oh Lord, if you will pour out your Spirit on me, I’ll go, I’ll give, I’ll do this and do that.”* It’s all a system of religious bartering. God doesn’t need your vows and grovelings. Just ask Him to come in, and go in peace. If you think He isn’t there because He doesn’t do something for you, you misunderstand the meaning of the Holy Spirit.

God gives His presence freely to all who ask. With His presence comes all the divine energy to live with Him, and for Him. But there is a special anointing of power for special assignments. This God gives to whom He will, when He will, and there is no use begging or bartering for it. It is a good thing to offer one’s life for service, but it must then be left to the Lord’s discretion to make use of that life when and where He will. The God of the universe does not dispense power to play with—to be dissipated in ecstasies and spectacles; nor for self ambition—to be a great Christian; nor for earthly “Eden-makers” who would have all of God’s children live out their lives on earth in trouble-free bliss. God has a much deeper destiny for His humans than that. He is

cultivating us for the Spirit realm, to join with Him in glory forever. If God does not choose to give ecstasies, or to heal, or to resolve distressing problems, it is because he has a higher purpose, and not because one has failed to barter successfully.

Simon Magus represents the extreme, of course, but his attitude was not all that different from those who focus on what the Holy Spirit can do for them, rather than on the simple but glorious reality of His own presence within. The mood of many in Christendom is akin to the attitude of children who would judge each other on their ability to get things from their parents—“*What have mom and dad done for you lately?*” If God never did anything to indulge our fleshly desires, the glory of His presence is enough.

Simon’s attitude was reprehensible and the warning, terrible, but the forgiving grace of God was equal to the offense. Were it not for that grace, we would all perish for our constant insolence and trifling with the God of the universe.

If you have asked the Holy Spirit to come into your life, trust Him to keep His word. Don’t try to barter with Him or demand of Him special experiences, just thank Him, and go in peace. Put your life in His hands. If He wants to do something special through you, or for you, leave that for Him. Make your requests of Him, but let Him handle the matter as He sees best. This is consistent with the message of the New Testament. God has called us to peace and not to a religious “treadmill.” Trying to barter with God for gifts that only He can give will keep you constantly in turmoil.