



Reflections From Acts

Considering The 1st
Century Church

Sergio Ruben Tangari



REFLECTIONS FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS

My goal in writing reflections from the Acts account are the following: First, to encourage you the reader that if you will pay attention to the words on the page and listen carefully you will mine a lot of truth for life without the need of a commentary or any secondary source. That is, “take up and read” to enrich your soul Christian.

Second, I write to give you a model of how observations can be done in scripture that do not read into the text something foreign to the author’s intent. This will help you experience the joy of discovery and increase your confidence in your ability to comprehend God’s word.

Third, by doing the above my hope is that you will be able to hear God’s voice all the more clearly because it is the word of God that is forever settled in heaven, and not our subjective impressions however valid they may be. That is, we have a more sure word of prophecy according to Peter—meaning the inscripturated word of God—then a glorious experience we may claim to have (2 Peter 1:16-21). Too often we Christians have bizarre ideas of what “God” is supposedly speaking to us and when it contradicts the Bible, be assured we are not hearing his voice.

ACTS ONE: “SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT”

PERSONAL PRESCRIPT: This Good Friday morning is appropriate to contemplate Passover, the Last Supper of Jesus before his crucifixion, and the last meal to touch his lips until we with the throngs of the redeemed eat this meal in the kingdom of heaven. I’ve taken a long break from writing thoughts on scripture because I’ve been memorizing the Sermon on the Mount in its place. Yet, I longed and my soul hungered for this most precious exercise of expression through language.

This chapter sets the record straight about who Jesus was, what he did, and what he expected his disciples to do. First, Luke’s account has stamped all over it the: space-time-history of the events recorded herein. He wants Theophilus to recall his gospel account of Jesus’ works and teachings. Noteworthy is Luke’s focus on the final three to four years of Jesus’ life rather than on the earlier ones (vv.1-2). Luke doesn’t bother to satisfy our contemporary curiosities. Instead he gives us what we need to know to attain eternal life.

Second, through the Holy Spirit Jesus chose and ordered the disciples/apostles to be his witnesses, not God’s prophetic end time forecasters (vv.7-8). The reason is because he who was dead was now alive forevermore (the core message in Acts), he “*presented Himself alive after his suffering, by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over a period of forty days and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God*” (v.3). Note the centrality of the resurrection account and the duration of forty days.

Biblically, when forty years or forty days are disclosed in scripture God either: reveals His law (E.g., to Moses), disciplines His people (E.g., Israel’s wilderness wanderings), or prepares His people for ministry (E.g., Jesus tempted in the wilderness). Now with the resurrected Jesus walking, talking and eating with the disciples, God demonstrates his faithfulness to perform His promise.

So, what do all these events have in common? They demonstrate that: God illumines our darkness (thus we need his law), God desires our holiness (thus we need his discipline), God will rescue His own (thus we needed Jesus, the second Adam, to ready himself), and God accomplishes this rescue by conquering death itself. The resurrection of Jesus is God's exclamation mark in history that He is there and He is not silent. And for those who doubt, the text reveals that just as Jesus was taken up from their midst, he will return some day in like manner (vv.9-11).

Third, the community of believers consisted of the apostles, the women, Mary Jesus' mother, Jesus' brothers and about 120 others. What they didn't know was how their message would spread and eventually effect human history.

Fourth, Peter stood among these and spoke concerning the need to replace Judas and points to his tragic end as that which had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold through King David long ago.

Fifth, Peter articulated Judas' wicked deeds as one who was either: innocent, forgiven, self-righteous or one who was truthfully setting the record straight concerning these events. Not long before this, it's Peter who betrays Jesus by denying him three times. But something happened to Peter; Jesus prayed for him and was thus kept from eternal ruin. Peter was neither innocent nor self-righteous, he was forgiven and a bearer of the truth.

What does Peter teach us today? We learn that death is swallowed up in victory because of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. That's why Peter was forgiven and now as Jesus foretold, Peter is strengthening his brothers (vv.16-20).

Sixth, Judas' place had to be occupied by an eyewitness of Jesus' life and deeds (vv.21-22) and the drawing of lots was the means used to replace Judas. This fell to Mathias who filled the vacancy.

As I think about this glorious gospel of God's grace in Christ my prayer is that I will live a life worthy of the calling, that I would lay aside the sin that so easily entangles me, and that I would run this race with perseverance by fixing my eyes on Jesus the author and finisher of my faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross despising the shame and has sat down at the right hand of God's throne.
(SDG)

ACTS TWO: "FULFILLED PROPHECY"

The Day of Pentecost arrived, a day where in Jerusalem people from many nations gathered for worship. It's during a feast, where celebration is the focus, that God fulfills his joyous promise of pouring out his Spirit on all mankind, not just the Jewish nation. There are three different occasions here where God does what he previously promised to accomplish (2:15-21; 25-28; 34-35). Here, the fulfillment of God's promise is occasion not for grief but

rejoicing. There are several observations I'd like to make. First, the phenomenon of speaking in tongues caught the people's attention and thus stimulated their inquiry. Much like signs and wonders, God here is using a physical occurrence to point to a spiritual reality.

Second, Peter's second sermon is recorded (His first was to the 120 concerning Judas) where he explains the meaning of the tongues and goes back to Christ's death, burial and resurrection as the basis for the glad tidings (vv.22-24). Peter points to God's acts of power through Jesus as evidence of his claims, he points to God's sovereign activity through the choices of men to crucify Jesus, and declares his victory over the grave because of his sinlessness, "...it was impossible for Him to be held by its power".

Third, the resurrection was the focal point of his preaching for it demonstrated that life swallows up death, death no longer has the poison it once possessed (vv.29-36)

Fourth, this Jesus whom the Jews crucified is both Lord—*kyrios* and Adonai, the Christ—Messiah, the anointed One by God's doing (v.36). That is, Jesus of Nazareth in space time history is the fulfillment of the coming One in Genesis where God would provide "himself" a sacrifice and he's the Son of David, one like Moses, but so much more.

Fifth, this preaching caused the hearers to be pierced to the heart (v.37) and so they asked, "Brethren what shall we do?" The word of God effected and affected the hearers. Fulfilled prophecy was the sword Peter used and the Holy Spirit pierced the hearts. The proper response of sinners is only one: Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is a promise for as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself (vv.37-39).

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus are preached and the proper response is repentance for the forgiveness of sins. But what is this?

Repentance speaks of making an 180^o turn from death unto life, from worshipping the creature to adoring the Creator, from listening to fools to heeding the all-wise God. If (when) the Gospel is faithfully preached, these elements will obtain. Yet, today the word sin or repentance is often omitted from pulpit ministry. How then can people be saved? How many people are being falsely healed as in Jeremiah's day when the false prophets and idolatrous leaders spoke peace to Israel and Judah while they were on the precipice of disaster and exile was certain?

Sixth, those who received the word numbered about 3000 people. We see that the activities of God's people were four fold: a) They continuously devoted themselves to the apostles teaching; b) They continuously devoted themselves to the fellowship; c) They continuously devoted themselves to the breaking of bread; d) They continuously devoted themselves to prayer.

Note that New Birth produces new desires, new passions like a hunger for God's word, a desire to be with God's redeemed community, table fellowship, and a life given to prayer. Where did the disciples get the idea to concentrate on these four elements? They got it from Jesus himself.

All these components are essential to a vibrant, authentic Christian experience, remove one of them from our "Christian experience" and things go quickly awry. Too often professing

believers and churches don't practice the above (privately or corporately) and are puzzled as to why their lives are not impacting people for Christ.

Seventh, awe at God's power through the apostles gripped the community of believers (signs and wonders) such that all things they had they shared with those in need. Here, there was no state coercion as in socialism or communism, but rather it was voluntary kindness that overflowed from souls that were transformed by God's power of new birth (vv.43-45), a power grounded in the Creator not the creature. And thus the Lord continued to add to their number as many as were being saved (v.47)

Pentecost among other things demonstrates that the Gospel is for all the nations not a select few, gospel preaching has definite content and true conversions produce lives committed to Christ's teaching and Christ's church. To call ourselves Christian's and not be part of the gathered church is not only disobedient, it's not Christianity. And those who practice such isolation need to ask themselves if their profession of faith is merely verbal, because it contradicts the plain account of Scripture.

(SDG)

ACTS 3: MORE FULFILLED PROPHECY

It amazes me how the little details tell us big things. Solomon says that there's a time to for everything under heaven including its opposite (E.g., Birth-Death, Plant-Harvest, War-Peace). In this chapter we see that it was the *time* for *prayer* which Peter and John practiced. Through this practice, God had an *appointed time* for something the apostles did not anticipate—a miracle which made the lame man walk (vv.1-10).

Much can be said concerning this section but one thing that strikes me I show at the Beautiful Gate something so ugly was present—a lame person. Brokenness, not beauty, twistedness rather than wholeness obtained and the irony here is that a time for healing was about to be fulfilled for one who had accepted his ugly plight since birth.

This man was merely asking for aid to eat in order to subsist, but God had other plans for him—to have the ability to walk uprightly, to ambulate as he pleased. Rather than moving about with his hands, he would now (as originally designed by God) use his feet to accomplish his travels. This healing is a manifestation of God's beauty where what is ugly ("lameness" not moving according to God's design) is turned into something beautiful ("wholeness" progressing according to God's purposes).

Peter and John gave this man what they had—God's power to heal. Now, this new found ability to walk allowed the healed man to express praise and honor to God by leaping and walking. This beggar's life was forever changed and it aroused the people's amazement such that Peter speaks up and delivers his third sermon.

The content of the his sermon is salvation history and Peter demonstrates that Jesus of Nazareth is not a "new" message with zero basis, but actually his life, death, and resurrection had been long ago prophesied. Consider the following observations:

First, he connects Jesus to the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as the fulfillment of God's promise to the covenant people (v.13). Second, he recounts the crucifixion and again accentuates the historicity of these events in space and time. Note that the people could have protested to Peter's accusations of their guilt but these events were common knowledge in all of Jerusalem. That is, Christ's ministry and death were a public reality

Third, he points out that it's because of Christ's name and not the apostle's power that this miracle occurred for the lame man. He was granted "perfect health" for all to see. Again, these events are publicly displayed, not secretly performed behind closed doors.

Fourth, he preaches Christ and the resurrection to which the only proper response is repentance from sin. Sins can't be wiped away by any other means and this Jesus is a gift from God to the Jew first.

Fifth, he points out more fulfilled prophecy which Moses foretold concerning God raising up another prophet like himself to which the people must hear and obey. Disobedience to this prophet equals destruction for the guilty and it's through Abraham's seed that all this has occurred.

(SDG)

ACTS 4: "PERSECUTION BECAUSE OF THE NAME—Part One"

The healing of this lame man who was more than forty caused a raucous among the authorities in Jerusalem. The priests, temple guard and the Sadducees opposed the apostles because they preached Jesus' resurrection from the dead and thus jailed them (vv.1-3).

Here, the first account of persecution because of the name of Jesus (c.f., Mt.5:9-16) and assuredly the apostles demonstrate what it means to be salt and light in the world.

Noteworthy are the following observations:

First, as already mentioned persecution breaks out because of the word—of Jesus Christ. It's this word that accounts for the power to heal the lame man.

Second, the word that's preached is the resurrection of Christ from the dead and this miracle performed is what gets the apostles incarcerated.

Third, Peter preaches his fourth sermon to the elite of Jerusalem which is an apologetic sermon based on the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene—"whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead..." The name is what healed the lame man (v.10). The name reveals the attributes of the person. In this case, Jesus is both the Lord of Life—because the grave was conquered—and thus he is also the Lord our healer—Jehovah Raphe. Moreover, because of the above, he is also the Lord our Savior—there is salvation in no one else, for there's no other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved."

By the way, in this section Peter refers to more fulfilled prophecy the fifth time by my count where Christ being rejected is actually the chief cornerstone. There's so much Bible in Peter that it's overwhelming.

Fourth, the rulers note because of Peter and John's confidence that they had been with Jesus even though they lacked education and training (v.13). Something happens when we immerse ourselves in the word of the WORD and commune with him. Too often seminarians be astute but not in the word of life and while I believe in the value of Biblical education and all it entails (E.g., Biblical Languages, Church History, Logic, etc.), it's no substitute for individual immersion in the Scriptures bathed in a life of prayer. It's what Jesus modeled and certainly habits the apostles practiced.

Fifth, persecution came because of the word but so did civil disobedience. Peter's response to the threats breathed against him and John were God-centered and rested on being

eyewitnesses of Christ's life and deeds (Vv.17-23). And while they were bold they were also mindful of God's sovereignty in creation and again recall fulfilled prophecy the sixth one where God's predestined purposes prevailed, even though they felt intimidated (vv.24-28).

When they were threatened they did not cower, but cried out to the God of heaven for boldness to speak faithfully Christ's message (vv.28-31). What an amazing example of God-focused devotion in the midst of the pressure to comply with cultural norms at odds with the gospel.

Lastly, these events continued to catapult the churches growth through acts of power which attested to the resurrection of Christ from the tomb and an amazing outpouring of grace manifested in the community.

Conclusion: the word of God brings the mixed bag of blessing and persecution, his ministers require boldness to walk in this way, and his Word provides the power of the resurrection to see us through any circumstances.

(SDG)

ACTS 5: "PERSECUTION BECAUSE OF THE NAME—Part Two"

The persecution from chapter 4 continues through into this chapter. This persecution results from the Name of Jesus being preached and signs that follow the preaching attest to Christ's resurrection. The following observations are instructive concerning the power of the word and the persecution continues to follow its: declaration, explanation and practice.

First, the death of Ananias and Sapphira because of their greed and deception served as an opportunity for God to affirm the apostolic authority and unique position in the church. Note how lying to God ended these people's lives. The text, nowhere says that this couple were eternally lost. This has the earmarks of God's discipline that too often Christians consider an abhorrent thought. But if this is God's church, and it is, then He will do all His good pleasure for the glory of His name.

Second, God continued to grow the church such that the sick were brought within the apostle's reach in order to be healed. These acts of power were signs of the new age which had come into this evil age through the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth and now extended through his apostles.

Third, persecution, imprisonment, flogging and shame came as a result of the Name of Jesus. [Quick note here: the name of Jesus (possessive) is not what is referred to when it's talking about the name. The name Jesus was common (I.e., Joshua), but the name above all names is "I Am" referring to the self-existent One Moses spoke to on Mount Sinai. It's this name Jesus says to the Jews, "Before Abraham was I Am" in John's Gospel that triggered in the hearers a desire to stone him]. Anyway, and while they were apostles, they nevertheless must have felt the danger they were in before the leaders of the land.

Even though they were commanded to cease preaching in Jesus' name, Peter and the apostles civilly disobeyed because God's is much weightier than the command of the creature. And as always, Peter is preaching, as an eyewitness, the fulfillment of prophecy God demonstrated through the resurrection of Christ from the dead.

Fifth, this manner of preaching did not get them killed just yet because it was not their time and God used the Pharisee Gamaliel to speak sense to those enraged. Essentially, his message was that if these deeds and movement are based on human power, then it would not last as was the case with Theudas and Judas of Galilee as examples.

But, if these men and this movement originated in God, not only will you not be able to overthrow it (Jews), you will also find yourselves to be enemies of God. There's much wisdom here and yet, the apostles were released after being flogged. It seems the Jews weren't convinced they were beating God's servants.

Lastly, instead of recoiling, the apostles rejoiced after being flogged because their theology of suffering was God-centered (E.g., they knew about Job, they witnessed Jesus' passion). The text reads:

⁴¹ So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name.

⁴² And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

Assuredly they recalled the Sermon on the Mount where rejoicing is the only response worthy to be expressed after being persecuted for righteousness sake and because of Jesus' name (Mt.5). Moreover, they must have understood that in God's providence their lot included such shame which was a seal of honor, not disgrace. Ironically, the shame suffered before men results in honor before God—that's much to consider.

(SDG)

ACTS 6&7: "PERSECUTION BECAUSE OF THE NAME"—Part Three

With growth comes pain that must be addressed. Apparently, the Hellenistic Jews were not being cared for as the native Hebrews, for the widows portions of daily sustenance were not being allotted fairly to the former (6:1).

It's the human experience here that God points out us that even while all of these exciting events are occurring (E.g., signs and wonders, church growth, etc.), all is not well. Sin remains and manifests in *favoritism*. The Twelve did not excuse the situation, but realized they were not to neglect their duties in order to serve tables. Thus, they wisely ordered the brethren to select a certain seven men from the Greeks to rectify this matter.

This order solved several problems and demonstrates God's wisdom. First, through delegation, those complaining were now responsible for solving the issue. Second, these were to choose men from a Hellenistic background so that the Hebrew/Hellenistic rivalry would be quelled at the apparent source—the issue of ethnicity. Third, ethnicity and favoritism were only symptoms of the real problem—the need for leaders with specific qualities in order to rule well.

These men had to have a good reputation, but more than that, they needed to be "full of the Spirit and wisdom." One of these men was Stephan and his life illustrates what it means to have the "Spirit and wisdom." He is seen ministering through acts of power because he's filled with the word of God—Acts 7 his salvation history sermon.

How desperately the church in every age needs deacons like Stephan and the others mentioned, for they are like a fount that gushes out life from God's throne as they submit to God in word and in deed. In their obedience to the word persecution assuredly follows as Jesus predicted because of the His Name's sake (Mt.5:9-12). It's amazing how through Gods word spreading (6:7) the church continued to grow. [*I say amazing because true church growth here occurs through gospel proclamation, not programs and clever ideas. Today, the church would do well to heed this example so that less false conversions occur*]. And yet persecution was just around the corner.

When someone picks a fight against you, like Stephan, don't back down (6:9-7:1), but also like Stephan, you must be filled with the Spirit and wisdom which comes through the word of God richly dwelling in you, or else you will cower.

Stephan faced a mob who falsely accused him of doing many things, but the text says: "But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking" (6:10). In Jesus' ministry this often took place where the rulers presented him some difficult dilemmas in order to catch him in a falsehood or contradiction only to be silenced through the Spirit and wisdom in which he walked. Jesus is described as one who spoke with authority and not as their scribes. Why? When the Spirit and the word are working alongside each other any falsehoods or lies are exposed and the truth is seen. The effect is silence and awe.

Stephan knew the story of redemptive history as he so cogently displays in (7:2-53) and because the hearers rejected God's word they opted to kill him through stoning (7:54-60). If we reject God's word as Stephan's executioners did, we may find ourselves imitating their hard hearts. But even in death, the genuineness of Stephan's faith hearkens back to Jesus crucifixion, "Lord do not hold this sin against them!"

It seems that Luke here wants the reader to be clear on what it means to be filled with the Spirit and wisdom—it includes living to God's glory which will often include the death of his servants for the sake of the Name. What will become of me and my family, or what will become of you friend?

(SDG)

ACTS 8: "PERSECUTION—THE MEANS FOR SPREADING THE GOSPEL"

Sometimes for us to be moved, God must act. Before Jesus ascended he commanded the disciples to wait for power from on high, his purpose was so they would start witnessing in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and so forth. This is finally occurring in chapter eight. How many years have transpired is not clear. Perhaps it wasn't years nevertheless it's through the furnace of suffering that the Gospel went forth.

Ironically, Saul who would become Paul the apostle is the key figure used by God to bring swift persecution on the church. He ravaged the church and dragged off men and women to prison (v.3). The irony is that he would eventually become the apostle to the Gentiles. So both as an enemy and then as a bond servant of Christ, god used this man to get the word out.

Like Stephan, Philip too was filled with the Spirit and wisdom, he preached Christ to Samaria and performed signs and wonders which included casting out demons (vv.4-8). He preached on the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. Note that God's rule and reign and God's chosen Messiah filled the content being preached.

Moreover, Philip is seen preaching to the individual Ethiopian Eunuch and explaining to him the meaning of the Isaiah passage he was reading. Philip from this text preached Christ and assuredly he went to others (vv.25-35). Eventually the Eunuch was baptized in water and Philip was snatched away by the Spirit of the Lord in order to continue preaching in Azotus and the surrounding cities the gospel of Jesus Christ.

As in Acts 6 & 7 and now in chapter 8, the key figure is Philip the deacon doing what God called him to do: preach the gospel and perform acts of power. The office of deacon in many Christian churches seems to have fallen on hard times. Hardly are the qualities of preaching and acts of power seen in those who wait on tables and yet this is exactly what Acts reveals.

Could it be that looking for these qualities is of no interest to us today? For as long as the chairs are set up, the Sunday school room prepared and the coffee and donuts in place (these things are important—maybe not donuts) with these we seem content. Could it be that we as a church are making a massive mistake by not asking God for those filled with the Spirit and wisdom to fill this diaconal office?, perhaps, perhaps?

To perform diaconal duties (serving tables) is not equal to having diaconal qualities (1 Tim.3), but the example of those chosen by the people seemed to be an election of men known to already have a dynamic walk with God. So maybe, if we installed leadership of Philip's ilk we'd do the cause of Christ more service? Setting up chairs and performing menial tasks are very important and they are to be performed all to the glory of God. But when we neglect the biblical pattern for leadership within the church everyone loses—including the lost. (SDG)

ACTS 9: "SAUL'S CONVERSION & SUBSEQUENT EVENTS"

This chapter in Acts is one of the most significant in all of Scripture because the enemy of the Cross is confronted with the risen Lord. There are many different "kinds of conversions", but according to Jesus, there's only one kind that is authentic—where the seed of the word is planted on good soil and thus brings in a harvest of kingdom fruit, be it 30, 60, or a 100 fold. The text reads of Saul in verses 1-2:

Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest,² and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

There's nothing more resolute than a religious zealot for here, belief fuels all of life, and such conviction can't be bought nor bribed to compromise—usually. Saul was a zealot but his encounter with the resurrected Christ would forever change the course of his life and that of the Gentile world. While Saul could not be bought, he would be broken as Jesus' interrogation ensued:

³As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him;⁴ and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"⁵ And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And He said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,⁶ but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do."⁷ The

men who traveled with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one.⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; and leading him by the hand, they brought him into Damascus.⁹ And he was three days without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

This is the event where Saul converted to the Way where he became a disciple of Christ. This was as radical as it gets. One author has commented on Saul's conversion to be akin to the catholic Pope converting to Protestantism, this was huge but so is He who conquered the grave.

Jesus had to prepare the disciple Ananias of Damascus to receive Saul because there's no way he could believe that this murderous zealot was genuinely converted (vv.10-14). Jesus however assured Ananias of Saul's purpose:

¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; ¹⁶for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake." (Vv.15-16)

Plainly Jesus describes Saul's ministry call and the suffering allotted to him because of the Name. Jesus is hammering the issue of persecution because of the Name which comes from religious and pagan alike (Mt.5:9-12). Up to this point, persecution seems to be the norm, not the exception in Acts. Not only does Ananias give Saul back his sight, but he immediately begins to proclaim the risen Jesus in the synagogues that, "He is the Son of God"...and proving that Jesus is the Christ (Vv.17-22). It's as if Saul's temporary physical blindness served as a reminder of his spiritual sightlessness concerning Jesus.

On two occasions we read that the Jews were plotting to kill Saul because of his message (Vv.23, 29). When Jesus said, "You are either for me or against me" the hearer must not understand it's actually a matter of life or death. Side with Christ now and eternal life is assured with persecution and temporary death. Come against Jesus now, and eternal doom is assured with temporary life.

If this is the case and Christ's enemies have no chance, why then don't they bow the knee to the Master? They also can't see as was true of Saul. Spiritual blindness is lethal and satanic forces are all too glad to assist. Interestingly, while Saul boldly preached Christ, he did not desire to die as is evidenced by his two escapes from death in Damascus and Jerusalem. He did not have a death wish even though he was consumed with God's zeal in truth and in deed.

The marvel of Saul's conversion should not be missed. Consider how the disciples feared him (Vv.21, 26-27) and if it were not for Barnabus, Saul's reception among the disciples would have taken much longer. We must nevertheless remember that the God of the living raises the walking dead. Saul's an example of just that. We ought never to loose heart but always pray as Jesus commanded because of who God is. For in God's time and providence many of our requests will be the means through which God ushers souls into the kingdom. What a Savior!

(SDG)

ACTS 10: “PETER’S WORLDVIEW SHIFTED”

Just as it took some time for the Jewish believers to scatter for the sake of spreading the Gospel message, it appears that Peter, the early church’s leader needed to be reminded of Jesus’ words. He needed to be “scattered” regarding his worldview.

In Acts 9:32 and onward, Luke focuses his account on Peter’s ministry where he raises Tabitha from the dead, thus fulfilling Jesus’ words of the greater works his disciples would perform. But as we move into chapter 10 we see the extent to which the Holy Spirit goes in order to reach a non-Jew.

Cornelius a Caesarean centurion from the Italian cohort is a God fearing man who continually gave alms to the Jewish people and prayed. An angel of the Lord was sent to him not to preach the Gospel but to get him to Peter who would. The details needed to get a hold of Peter were specific; his name, his location, and so forth (Vv.1-8).

Concerning Peter, he too needed a vision from God in order to prepare him to meet Cornelius. Jewish customs, some of which Jesus eradicated (E.g., all foods are now clean) would have kept the Gospel from going forth to this God fearer but the Lord’s mercy vanquished this exclusion. Why Peter was still stuck with dietary restrictions after Jesus declared all foods to be clean is puzzling to me. Perhaps he forgot or letting go of certain things for him was difficult. Regardless, this obstacle had to first be removed for the Gospel to go forth.

The chapter ensues with Peter proclaiming the Gospel to Cornelius and his household. As is the pattern in Acts, the historicity of Jesus the Nazarene, his life, works, death and resurrection are the centerpiece of Gospel preaching and so is the fact that the apostles were eyewitnesses of these events (Vv.34-38). Real conversions occurred only after divine intervention followed for both Jew and Gentile alike.

It’s as if this account is bringing to the reader’s attention the need to remove any obstacle/stronghold (I.e., false ideas) from the hearer before Gospel life can be experienced. May God have mercy on the church and those she longs to reach with His life giving truth, and may God’s people labor to understand those outside the fold so that we are not a hindrance to those coming into the kingdom.
(SDG)

ACTS 11: “PETER’S WORLDVIEW CHALLENGED BUT THE GOSPEL SPREADS”

News got out that the Gentiles had received the word of God (V.1) which indicates a very important aspect of what true conversion is: it’s the reception of God’s word and submission to it that produces kingdom life as it is preached (Rom.10:9-10). Without the word preached there’s no salvation, but by submitting to the word one evidences genuine conversion.

This implies that the apostles’ model is to be ***the model*** we use for reaching people for Christ. Without the word, men remain dead in their trespasses and sins, they remain in darkness. In the same way Peter needed his worldview to shift, so did the Jewish community in Jerusalem who disapproved of Peter’s exchange with Cornelius:

“And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him,³ saying, “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.” (Vv.2-3)

Apparently they didn't get the memo that Jesus had declared all foods to be clean. According to Jesus, what makes men unclean is not foods but motives and attitudes of the heart that lead to murder, adultery and gossip (Mk.7:1-23). By this declaration Jesus admitted to be divine for no prophet ever spoke on his own initiative as he does in Mark's account.

Nevertheless, Peter explains the turn of events and points out the following which Luke emphasizes. First, ***what God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy***. In the New Covenant the ceremonial laws which God instituted to make Israel stand out in the world, no longer apply (V.9). It's because these have been already fulfilled in Christ.

Second, ***“the Spirit told me to go with them”*** (V.12). Peter and six of his companions obeyed God's command so that Christ who came to seek and to save the lost might be glorified by rescuing this Gentile—Non Jew! There should have been much rejoicing here but it was slow coming from the Jews.

Third, ***God's angel had to instruct Cornelius to specifically ask for Peter—the preacher***. Why Peter? Because he, *“will speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household.”* (V.14). Here again emphasized is the primacy of preaching the word in order for sinners to be saved.

Fourth, ***“...who was I to stand in God's way”*** Peter concludes after explaining that these saved received the Holy Spirit as the disciples did when they had first spoken in tongues. If God wants to gift them as he did us, then something much bigger than we anticipated is taking place in the Name of Jesus.

Fifth, ***“well then God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance which leads to life”*** the Jews rejoiced in God only after Peter explained the meaning of the events. The early church's theology was developing concerning the gospel of the kingdom and salvation.

In short, only after the light of God's word is revealed, explained, understood and received can anyone be set free. The hesitation of preaching to the Gentiles was unfortunately remained to be an issue of contention for many Jews (V.19), but thankfully others got the message that Gentiles, not Jews alone, need the word also (Vv.20-24). God answered prayers and converted many through the preached Gospel evidenced by many who “turned to the Lord” (V.21).

If the word of God is not central in our Gospel proclamation then many will not come into glory, but everlasting doom. It's sobering and yet it seems that many today enjoy their stupor in church week after week, not preaching this most glorious message.
(SDG)

ACTS 12: “PERSECUTION AND JUDGEMENT BECAUSE OF THE WORD”

Whenever God moves we should not flinch at the opposition that often accompanies it by His enemies. The purpose for why rulers oppose the disciples is because they really hate Jesus and his message. The text says:

“Now about that time Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them.” (V.1)

The king's purpose was nothing less than to mistreat his captives such that he had James the brother of John put to death by the sword (V.2). Peter is then incarcerated but an angel of the Lord rescues him from his chains (Vv.4-11) and those praying for Peter's release doubt he's been rescued (Vv.12-17). O men of little faith! Can't we relate?!

So persecution came because of the word and it's that same word which will judge and end Herod's life. Not only does Herod have the guards executed because of Peter's escape but (Vv.18-19) he's eaten by worms in Caesarea after the angel of the Lord struck him. This death took place because the people cried to Herod "*the voice of a god and not of a man!*", as he was delivering a speech in royal garb (Vv.21-23). Somehow it seems that the king's appearance and voice so captivated the hearers that they were moved to adore him.

Nevertheless, the word of God the king tried to squash continued to grow and multiply (Vv.23-24). Herod reminds of king Nebuchadnezzar who also did not glory God—he did not acknowledge from where his might and pomp came—and was as a beast for seven years grazing with the cows.

Luke is however making the point that the church has angelic help even when persecution erupts. These angels both rescue God's people and kill the church's enemies. The word preached caused all this unrest!

Today the word of the Cross, Christ's exclusivity and many other things are bringing persecution to the church through a totalitarian system increasingly being unleashed in the West. Yet believers should not forget that there are more with us than those who oppose us (E.g., Elisha angelic vision). God's word can't be chained if those who belong to Him will proclaim and live the message. Maranatha!
(SDG)

ACTS 13: "THE SPIRIT SPEAKS AND THE MESSAGE IS FULFILLMENT"

In this section of Scripture there are two big ideas I will consider: First, in what circumstance does the Spirit speak; and secondly, what's Paul's central message in his preaching?

First, the Holy Spirit spoke, "While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting..." (V.2a) What it means to minister to the Lord, is not clear here, other than the fasting. Scripture teaches that one way for us to humble ourselves before God is through fasting and prayer (Ps.35:13). In light of this, all kinds of prayer must have been offered such as thanksgiving, intercessions, and petition. Moreover, in this gathering they probably also included the reading or recitation of the Law—Torah, the Prophets and the Writings.

The point here is that as the prophets and teachers from the church in Antioch ministered to the Lord, the "Holy Spirit said set aside/apart for Me Barnabus and Saul for the work which I have called them." (V.2b) Here is an example of God doing the unusual and speaking—how though we are not told. Was it through a vision, or an impression, or an audible voice like at Jesus' baptism where it's recorded that the Father's voice was heard? The text plainly says, "The Holy Spirit *said*".

I think Luke is focusing on something essential that we do well to heed: *monumental work which these two are about to embark (the First Gentile mission) comes at a cost. It's birthed from a posture of humility (fasting) and dependence (prayer), rather than self-reliance and the latest business model on how to grow or run the church.*

Humility and dependence on the Father's will and purposes *is* what Jesus demonstrated in his earthly ministry for us to consider and to emulate. ***It's how the work of the kingdom is accomplished as the message of the kingdom is proclaimed and lived, as it's explained and defended.***

Second, Paul gives a salvation history message when he's asked to speak. He gives a "topical" sermon using texts from the Psalms, Genesis, Exodus, I Samuel, Judges, Kings, Habakkuk, and Isaiah explaining their own Hebrew history, the promise of the coming Messiah, the fact of Jesus' resurrection and the doom awaiting recalcitrant souls who reject Yeshua (Vv.14-43). This preaching as always is first rejected by the Jews (Vv.44-47) even if others received it with joy (Vv.42-43). The message is ***fulfillment!*** What God promised he accomplished in Christ Jesus! This is ***not a new message*** but the completion of what had already been preached to the patriarchs and the prophets.

This fulfillment included salvation for the Gentiles which for many Jews was difficult to bear. Why? It was because they neglected heeding God's word. Now, if the word of the Lord that's central to all this ministry is what caused many to be saved—to those "as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed", ought we do any less?

Consider what the text says, "those appointed, chosen, elected for eternal life—believed". The scripture, in other words, was the means of salvation for those "appointed". This appointment ***preceded*** their believing and is marvelous to consider. For it seems to me, that something ***outside*** the creature, not something ***within*** the believer is working to effect salvation. I think that something is someone—the Holy Spirit.

Nevertheless, the word is central for salvation to be realized and it must always be if our converts are going to be genuine. Thus, God does extraordinary things when his people choose to like a child walk humbly and dependent before Him—he brings life where death once reigned! And as always, God's faithfulness is on display when the fulfillment of prophecy occurs. Let God be true and every man a liar!

(SDG)

ACTS 14: "THE WORD IS PREACHED, RECEIVED, & REJECTED"

The saga of word proclamation, reception of and opposition to the Gospel continues in this chapter. There's a few incidents that caught my attention, first, the text says, ***"they entered the synagogue of the Jews together, and spoke in such a manner that a large number of people believed, both Jews and Greeks."*** (V.1)

This struck me because somehow their *speech* and *mode* of delivering the message deeply impacted the conversion of the hearers. It reminds me of accounts in the Gospels where Jesus spoke or taught such that amazement and wonder seized the listening crowds. What manner of speech is this?

I've experienced in the preaching of the word (both in hearing and delivering the message) an unusual dynamic where the words seem to take you from one realm of reality to another and the soul is strengthened with hope. Other times I've heard preaching where (and this is unusual) the atmosphere in the room changes—often attributed to the Spirit's special manifestation—and the weightiness of the message causes the hair on the back of my neck to arise. These are moments I "know" the message is directly for me. I've also experienced this when reading the bible alone.

Clearly the Lord's power was present with Paul and Barnabas to not only teach and preach but also to perform signs and wonders as they boldly continued to preach the word of God in the midst of opposition (Vv.2-3). Thus, much joy came to those converted, but those opposing the message put together a death squad in order to quell the propagation of the gospel.

Second, a recurring theme in Acts is that the word is received on the one hand, but rejected on the other hand with lethal opposition. Here the one who murdered and incarcerated Christians is now receiving what he previously "dished out". Was this "karma" as some would suggest or was this by Christ's "design"? I deny the former and affirm the latter because the karmic view is an "impersonal force" that operates on cause and effect, whereas the biblical view demonstrates that the "personal" Son of God is working out his specific plan for Paul on whom he's had mercy (Acts 9:15-16).

Moreover, the cause of Paul's suffering ordained by the Savior was not based on Paul's previous life (i.e., before he converted) but was for the sake of Jesus' Name. Many Christians in America don't have a theology of suffering for the Christian. This is unfortunate because the means to follow Christ is to deny ourselves, take up the Cross, and then follow him—the metaphor is telling.

While sufferings are multifaceted, the grace of Christ is present to bring us through whatever circumstance (Whether we are healed in this life or not). Sometimes God chooses to deliver us from suffering, but other times, because of His hidden purposes for us, we must endure them. Regardless, we must not conclude that God has removed His love from us (Read Rom.8:28-39) because He never will.

Third, signs and wonders can be misinterpreted by pagans so that they don't attribute the power to heal to the infinite God, but to some contingent false god like Hermes and Zeus (Vv.8-13). But faithful servants of the Lord correct such misunderstandings with the word of God even if it's difficult to persuade men otherwise (Vv.14-18) and note what Paul says:

*"Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you that you **should turn** from these vain things to a living God, WHO MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM."*
(V.15)

Paul affirms he is like they, denies the existence of their gods, and points to the God who is the fountain of all that exists. Note also the phrase, "*should turn*" implying that to not turn to the living God is wrong, immoral, sin. So thus far, we have: *conversions, reception and rejection of the gospel, signs and wonders*, and now...

Fourth, Paul is stoned for the faith (Vv.19-22). The natives were not passing around a "joint" here, but they were actually trying to kill the apostle. This is part of God's ordained plan according to Jesus' words in Acts 9 so that through the hands of culpable sinners the Name would be glorified (See also Acts 2:14-47). Thinking Paul to be dead after having been dragged out of the city (not sure if he was or not), the disciples around him witnessed Paul get up and go back into the city to preach the gospel. Amazing!!!!!!! What must have his executioners thought when they saw him back at it in the city?

After going to Derbe and making disciples there, Paul returned to Antioch and Iconium and warned them that, *“Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God”* (V.22) which is in line with Jesus’ teaching of denying self, taking up the cross and following him.

This section is quite overwhelming, filled with varied action all of which in spite of opposition, the message of the gospel went forth. This truly emboldens me for witness and perseverance, may many others also be strengthened.
(SDG)

ACTS 15: “BECAUSE TRUTH MATTERS—THE WORD IS DEBATED & DISSENSION ARISES”

The second part of the book of Acts starts with chapter fifteen and the Jerusalem council being gathered because some Judaizers and Pharisees insisted that Gentiles must be circumcised and observe the Law of Moses in order to be saved (Vv.1-6).

Paul and Barnabus confronted this belief and thus engaged in “verbal combat”, they, “had great dissension and debate with them—[the men from Judea]” (V.2). When God’s word is being twisted to “mean” something its authoritative spokesmen never intended, its cause for intense debate. Essentially, these Jews wanted to add works of the Law of Moses in order for someone to be declared saved. When in the 21st century someone wants to skew scripture to mean something it never meant, and salvation is at stake, we’d better get in the fight for Christ’s sake and those who are entering into eternity.

After this debate had ensued for some time, Peter gives a mini-apologetic by explaining his account of how Cornelius a Gentile had received the Holy Spirit even as they had from the beginning (Vv.7-12). Then James speaks up assuring the Jewish hearers that God had through the prophets included the Gentiles in his scheme of salvation (Vv.13-20). It’s as if the notion of reaching the Gentiles with the gospel was a foreign concept to many Jews as Peter’s account revealed in Acts 10.

To the Gentiles a letter was then written by the council and they were encouraged to grow in God’s grace but to guard against idolatry and fornication, the contents of which were read in Antioch and much joy resulted (Vv.21-31). Paul and Barnabus continued in Antioch, “teaching and preaching with many others also, the word of the Lord” (V.35). But not long afterward, these two had a “sharp disagreement” over whether or not to bring John Mark along with them. Here, the “dynamic duo” parted ways (Vv.36-41). Here’s a reminder that no matter what quality work people do for the kingdom—and Paul and Barnabus did—issues arise and do separate ministry partners.

There are several things from this chapter we learn; first, ***doctrine matters*** and specifically what it means for one to be saved is crucial. There’s no casual approach here. Christ plus anything is a distortion of the gospel and thus damnable (see Galatians), thus ***verbal combat must be had for love’s sake***. Today, this view of love is foreign to most outside the church and to many within her walls. Sometimes love requires for there to be dissension within the ranks in order to uphold the word of the Lord in truth when distortions are arising.

Second, note that ***no burdens were placed on the Gentiles to be circumcised*** but they were warned to ***guard against idolatry and fornication*** because these go contra what it means to be Christ's disciples. When we say "Christ plus anything is a distortion of the gospel" it clearly does not mean that how we live is inconsequential. No, new life produces new desires and holiness of living where love for God and others is practically demonstrated, one such way is to not be an idolater or a fornicator.

Lastly, Paul and Barnabus show us that ***God will separate even the closest of companions for His names sake***. Even though these two separated, rather than hindering the gospel, this propelled its propagation because now more ground could be covered than while they were together. This is ironic because I can imagine Satan thinking he's won a victory by dividing this duo, but God was providentially using this friction to reach more Gentiles in darkness with the gospel of God's light. Amazing! When we consider that God works all things together for good to them that love Him and are called according to His purposes, we should consider this account of Paul and Barnabus in order to derive hope, rather than sink into despair when we experience similar situations.

(SDG)

ACTS 16: "PAUL'S GOSPEL MINISTRY: EXHORTATION TO HOLINESS, JAILED FOR THE NAME"

Much has transpired in chapter 15 and now we see the continuation of gospel work. For example, here is the first time we hear of Timothy the disciple of great character whose mother was Jewish and father was Greek (Vv.1-2). After delivering the decrees the apostles and elders had decided from Jerusalem for the Gentile church to observe, it strengthened the churches faith and increased their number.

What's going on here? After the first Council of Jerusalem met, they came to understand that holiness which comes from salvation does not consist of foods and washings (all a shadow of Christ's reality) but now that Messiah had come his sacrifice was enough for not only the Jews but also for the Gentiles. The two decrees were: ***abstain from idolatry and fornication***. For a true believer these commands are not a death sentence for joy but rather a delight of new birth.

Another curious thought is ***the Holy Spirit forbidding Paul and his companions from ministering the word in Bythinia or Asia*** (Vv.6-7) perhaps because Paul was to go to minister the word to a man in Macedonia he saw in a vision (Vv.9-10). The thought is curious because we're commanded to go into all the world and make disciples. So why hinder the great commission, it seems contradictory does it not?

Actually, the great commission is going forth, not being hindered, for Paul's vision is showing him where the message of the gospel would be received. This is exactly the case with Lydia from Thyatira whom the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message of salvation (Vv.9-15).

Again, we see ***Paul and Silas imprisoned because of the word of the Lord and its power to liberate a demonized slave girl*** who could soothsay (Vv.16-21) and bring much profit to her owners. Being a slave in those days was not uncommon, being demonized seemed to be. The point is that when a person's in bondage and God's power rescues them, if someone's income

is adversely disturbed as a result, then persecution will follow. Thus for now, jail would be home for the two apostles.

But bars can't keep God from converting the called. Thus, the jailer who had already determined to commit suicide—thinking the prisoners were gone due to the earthquake—stayed his sword by heeding Paul's word that none had escaped. When he asked, "What must I do to be saved" (which is a response to the preached word) the answer is, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household" (Vv.27-34). We're told that this man and his house converted.

Does this account therefore guarantee that if we believe, those in our homes will follow Christ? Experience would say no, however some believers hold that this is a promise to claim when praying for loved ones. I'm reticent to claim this to be a *general promise* because Luke is reporting what happened, he's not setting forth doctrine like "believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved". Moreover, there are too many believers through history whose families were often at odds with them because of Christ (E.g., Jews disowned by family who converted to Christianity).

Having said that, I think Luke is showing how the gospel can and does spread from one family member to another, after one is converted, many do follow. This is especially true in Patriarchal cultures or in the lives of indigenous tribes. As a point of theological dispute, Acts over and over again preaches salvation in Christ alone, through repentance and trust in the risen Savior. That's a fact. But how God deals with individuals as He chooses within the context of redemption is clearly different.

Again, if we want to believe God to save our loved ones, there are clearer passages that affirm generally God's will for salvation. The list is extensive but John 3:16-18 is a good starting point, where the necessary condition and definition of "belief" is trusting obedience in the Son of God. Pray that God would do *that* in their lives. Another way to pray is for God to have mercy on them as He's had on us, that He would show our loved ones the beauty of Christ, the realities of His wrath and judgment, and the blessedness of Christ's kindness.

(SDG)

ACTS 17: "PAUL'S GOSPEL MINISTRY TO THE GENTILES CONTINUED"

This chapter is a key section in Scripture where we get to peer into how the apostles dealt with non-believers and how the gospel was to be preached. I've written more extensively on Paul's address to the Greeks on the Areopagus (Vv.16-34) so my attention will be on the Berean Christians (Vv.10-15).

According to Luke's report, these Bereans were more noble-minded than the believers in Thessalonica because they weren't bored with the Scriptures but engaged Paul's message intensely. They were called "noble-minded" which could mean that their use of reason was being more accurately appropriated according to God's design. The reason is that when the word was preached and taught:

“They received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so” (Vv.10-11)

They had an attitude God lauded. They heard the same message of Christ’s life, suffering and resurrection as the Thessalonians had (Vv.1-4) but what set them apart was “disposition of soul”.

The Bereans teach us several things; first, the word is above the messenger in authority—even Paul the apostle was not above being scrutinized by the Scriptures. Too often, pastoral leadership abhors their teaching being questioned by hearers not convinced of their theological position(s). This attitude is cause for many sinful inclinations, the first of which is pride. We are to question and scrutinize through Scripture what is being taught from the pulpit because the gospel is so precious. The goal should be to get the gospel right, not blindly submitting to a leader’s ego.

Second, the examination of Scripture and coming to terms takes time and work. The sluggard in the book of proverbs is abhorred by the LORD God; believers should not emulate him when it comes to the mining of the Biblical text, but rather the one who is incessant in the pursuit of treasure. We must have eager hearts and minds even as the Bereans demonstrate.

Third, the proof of what Paul was teaching was in the Scriptures concerning what Christ fulfilled, the pinnacle of which was the resurrection. That is, these believers were convinced of the truth of the gospel through examining the content of what was proclaimed to them.

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the core of gospel preaching. Remove one historical aspect from it and you end up with a shell, no substance. My prayer is that our preachers today focus on eternal truths revealed in Scripture, rather than vaporous empty platitudes which don’t bring our sons and daughters into the kingdom.

(SDG)

ACTS 18: “PAUL & APOLLOS MODEL WHAT GOSPEL PROCLAMATION LOOKS LIKE”

For quite some time Luke has been accentuating the message and methods the early church used in their preaching. They based ***their message*** of Jesus as the Messiah on the resurrection of Christ from the dead and thus repentance for the forgiveness of sins was the only proper response to said news.

Concerning ***their method*** of preaching, their goal was to persuade the hearers through reasoning (Vv.4-5). Paul’s concern was to continually teach God’s word (V.11). He was convinced that the message of salvation had to be presented through teaching, preaching, reasoning, and persuading the hearer with God’s word. Should our aim be anything less?

Consider Apollos, he was both eloquent and mighty in the Scriptures, fervent in spirit seen by his powerful refutation of the Jews in public demonstrating from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ (Vv.24-28). Luke wants the reader to note the hard work that’s required in order to persuade people to believe. Sometimes this occurs through acts of power where the Lord opens a door for proclamation, but more often than not, it’s through the custom of meeting where worship occurs (E.g., the Synagogue) and then the opportunity for proclamation presents itself.

LORD, help your ministers be word centered, help them follow Paul and Apollos' example rather than a 21st century business model to gather hearers, may they emulate this apostolic model of teaching, preaching, reasoning, and persuading with the Scriptures that Jesus is the risen Christ from the dead.
(SDG)

ACTS 19: "THE WORD BRINGS LIBERTY BUT WITH IT OPPOSITION" PART 1

As Paul's travels ensue so do the varied ways in which God confirms the word with both liberating acts of power and great opposition to what is preached. In Ephesus Paul explains to the disciples there that John's baptism was one of repentance to believe in the coming one who was Jesus, but when they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus the text says:

"And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they *began* speaking with tongues and prophesying." (V.6)

In the beginning here there's a place for further clarification of the fulfillment of Scripture. Namely, the Holy Spirit has been poured out for both Jews and Gentiles to receive. Now in this section when the men received the Holy Spirit it was evidenced by their speaking in tongues—a super natural gift of speech unknown to the speakers; and they also prophesied—a super natural utterance whose purposed is to edify those hearing.

We're not given much more details here, yet the question remains as to whether or not tongues and prophecy always accompany those who are filled with the Holy Spirit. Is this instance and others in Acts something we should always be expecting? Some believers today would say yes and thus whole denominations have been spawned (E.g., Pentecostal and Charismatic persuasions) from the understanding that tongues and prophecy are to be expected as the evidence for the Spirit's manifestation.

Nevertheless, Luke continues his emphasis on Paul's manner of preaching and teaching which were supported by reasoning and persuading (V.8). Paul eventually started a school in Tyrannus that lasted two years with the purpose of training the disciples in the word of the Lord. Make no mistake about it, Paul, like Jesus, gave primacy to teaching the Scriptures and to veer off that path does not produce Disciples of Christ, but eventually yields disciples of men.
(SDG)

ACTS 19: "THE WORD BRINGS LIBERTY BUT WITH IT OPPOSITION: DEALING WITH THE DEMONIC" PART 2

In this section of chapter 19 Paul performs extraordinary miracles such that his handkerchief or apron, "were carried from his body to the sick and the diseases left them [the sick] and the evil spirits went out" (vv.11-12). As Jesus healed the sick and cast out demons, so did Paul. Interestingly, the seven sons of Sceva tried to join in the action but what resulted is frightening:

"But also some of the Jewish exorcists, who went from place to place, attempted to name over those who had the evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, "I

adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches.”¹⁴ Seven sons of one Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this.¹⁵ And the evil spirit answered and said to them, “I recognize Jesus, and I know about Paul, but who are you?”¹⁶ And the man, in whom was the evil spirit, leaped on them and subdued all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.” (Vv.13-16)

Here’s an account of true authority recognized—by demons, and false authority trampled on by these same demons. The following observations regarding authority are therefore in order.

First, Jesus’ authority and thus Paul’s is recognized by the demonic host. Many accounts in the Gospels show the fear and utter terror demons have toward the Master, they “shutter”. Why such fear and submission? It’s because these spirits know they are before the Ancient of Days, the Creator and the One who will ultimately finish their doom long ago promised. They know Jesus is their judge. And if spirits are tormented by Jesus’ mere presence, what awaits humans who are tormented by evil spirits?

Second, authority can’t be assumed, it must be imparted, a lesson these seven sons learned well. Our society is fixated with horror movies, vampires and all things ghoulish, but behind the façade is a terrifying reality. To dabble with evil spirits or take them lightly is foolish because they’re lethal. Jesus gave authority to his church, to his disciples over demonic spirits to cast them out. While demonic manifestations like the one here in Acts don’t occur daily, the New Testament is clear that they are real and have limited power.

Third, demonic spirits imply there is an immaterial real realm of reality contra the naturalism that dominates much of Western civilization where it is held that matter is all that exists. These spirits are capable of knowing many things. They’re not necessarily stupid but crafty and when they inhabit a person’s body, their strength can be overwhelming to a mere man (E.g., the Gadarene Demoniac). Consider what the news of these events produced:

“This became known to all, both Jews and Greeks, who lived in Ephesus; and fear fell upon them all and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified.¹⁸ Many also of those who had believed kept coming, confessing and disclosing their practices.¹⁹ And many of those who practiced magic brought their books together and *began* burning them in the sight of everyone; and they counted up the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver.” (Vv.17-19)

Both Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus who practiced magic arts *willingly* confessed their sins and burned their books. Why? Perhaps because God’s power showed them whose ultimate and who must be served—Jesus! Maybe it’s because the Holy Spirit through the signs demonstrated unveiled to the warlock and witches their blindness that submitting to doomed spirits is folly because Christ will eventually slay them. Regardless of what took place in individuals—and it was glorious—all this occurred because of **the word of the Lord** which grew mightily and prevailed (V.20).

Could it be that many of our bi-polar friends and loved ones, not all, have some kind of demonic activity tormenting their lives? Is all insanity or madness purely physical or could

there be evil spirits lurking in the shadows? From this text and others in Scripture the answer is affirmative.

As I consider Western Civilization on the one hand, we have a sector that utterly denies demonic existence and another which likes to dabble in the magic arts (E.g., Psychic Readings, Tarot Cards, Ouija Boards, etc.). One denies demonic existence, the other embraces their influence seeing it as one means to enlightenment. In warfare, the most powerful tactics are deception and stealth. Sadly, both camps are deceived by demonic spirits that use these tactics effectively.

May I not deny demonic existence nor give into their influence. May I understand more deeply their lethal abilities to deceive with stealth and may I combat them with your word, prayer and a life given to increased sanctification.

(SDG)

ACTS 19: “THE WORD BRINGS LIBERTY BUT WITH IT OPPOSITION: DEALING WITH IDOLATRY” PART 3

Paul continues to uncover the idols people worship and they will fight, even cause riots if necessary (Vv.21-41). When the word of the Lord declares that there’s only one God, the world in rebellion will cry “No!!!!” In the Ephesian case, they cried out saying, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians” (Vv.28, 34). The idols these people worshipped were first a lucrative enterprise for Demetrius the silversmith (Vv.23-27) and second these gods were deeply loved by the people.

Thus, when the pocket book and our deepest affections are assaulted by the light of Scripture, unless God grants repentance, we as people will vehemently rebel. Again, in this chapter we see that both liberty and truth come with a price. Those spiritually in bondage will oppose the word and its messenger because it uncovers the lies of idols trusted and the greed that’s in men’s hearts.

Christians should not be surprised when such opposition happens. It’s part of walking on the narrow path where love demands we lay down our lives for our friends and also for our enemies, even as the Master demonstrated on Calvary. If we are not experiencing this kind of opposition more likely than not, it’s because we’re not speaking up nor living out the implications of the Gospel in our spheres of influence. Lord of truth, embolden your people to rise up in order to rescue those going into the eternal abyss of torment.

(SDG)

ACTS 20: “PAUL’S PASSION AND TENDERNESS IS REVEALED IN HIS EXHORTATION TO THE EPHESIAN ELDERS”

This chapter follows a tumultuous account of persecution arising from the idol of greed and the idol that is “nothing” which is exposed. Now, he is seen ministering but with haste. It’s as if Paul knew time was expiring in his life and those to whom he ministered. To illustrate the point, he teaches/preaches/talked for so long on one occasion that a young man (Eutychus) fell asleep and plummeted to his death three stories down while Paul was ministering in Troas (Vv.7-12). Nevertheless, Paul raised him from the dead and greatly comforted the boys loved ones.

I must mention that Paul also greatly exhorted the Macedonian disciples and those present in the uproar (Vv.1-2). He probably reminded them that persecution accompanies the preaching of the gospel word, yet a better reward awaits the faithful in the next life. I say this because Jesus always reminded his disciples of the reward that awaits those who are persecuted for his name's sake (Mt.5:10-12). Again, the plot by the Jews against Paul must have been unnerving to the apostle but this was to fulfill Jesus' words "*He is a chosen vessel of mine to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel, for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake*" (9:15-16).

Paul's suffering resulted from his obedience to the word of the Lord, not in spite of it. This grace of God in Paul humbles me because in order to walk in God's grace it will often be accompanied by opposition—vehement—rivals will arise!

Before the Ephesian elders, Paul now enumerates his many accomplishments that are impressive. **First, Paul faithfully and humbly served Christ with tears and trials from the Jews** (Vv.18-19). His ministry was forged in the crucible of obedience. His enemies and that of the Gospels (i.e., the religious establishment) were the primary means for said opposition. This is instructive because often, not always, those who hinder the Gospel ministry from flourishing are not *pagan* non-believers but *religious* non-believers.

Second, Paul's opposition and the "octagons" in which they manifested demonstrate his courage and resolve to speak the truth for his hearers profit even if it cost him dearly. This speech was done publicly and privately to both Jews and Gentiles whose content was: "*repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ*". The man Christ Jesus and the message of the Gospel were the cause of Paul's deep pain and sufferings. Mine tend to be because of my sin and disobedience, but sometimes they are a result of what Paul experienced (i.e., suffered because of the Gospel).

Third, Paul knew that wherever he went, hardships would meet him because of the Gospel; that is "*bonds and afflictions await me*" (Vv.22-23). To know that afflictions await you wherever you go with the message of redemption must have been a badge of honor on the one hand (E.g., martyrs receive a more honorable resurrection), but on the other hand it must have been very difficult psychologically and physically. What would I do if placed in similar situations? Short question, multifaceted ways of answering it, but assuredly, without God's grace I could not do it.

Fourth, Paul's resolve was so singularly kingdom oriented that hardships did not deter him from that goal:

"But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God."(V.24)

Years ago this was the text I used as a guide when I planted a Hispanic Church. It's now a distant memory but to this day I ask myself, "Did you stay the course and complete what Christ

put before you Sergio?" Did I stay my course; perhaps not, perhaps not. Nevertheless, Paul's single-mindedness kept him on track in spite of the hardships.

Fifth, Paul not only reminds them they will never see his face again, but he affirms his innocence of any blood shed:

"Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. ²⁷ For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God."
(Vv.26-27)

This is a bold statement considering Acts 7-9 where he's clearly the cause for putting to death many believers. Yet, part of God's purpose is to rescue hell bent sinners and declare them just before the throne of God because of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross! This is where God's mercy and justice kiss and because of this amazing Gospel, Paul can declare his innocence (C.f., 1 Tim:1). This message was not only intellectually rigorous (See all of Romans) but practically transforming. That's robust "religion"!

Sixth, Paul assures them that this Gospel must be protected by faithful men against false teachers that will arise from their ranks. How? They must guard their own lives and that of the flocks by shepherding the flock of God which God purchased with his own blood. (V.28, 29-30). Too many believers (leaders, pastors) naively think this does not include part of what it means to shepherd God's flock, but it's an intricate part of love's demonstration.

Spiritual warfare is fought through *argumentation* 2 Corinthians 2 and *through intercession* Ephesians 6. Jesus, the apostles, and especially Paul knew this, lived it and thus saw much fruit with persecutions. If Pastoral leadership in the 21st century is to be faithful to the Chief Shepherd, then engaging *both* fronts of warfare will be the focus of ministry.

Seventh, Paul reminds them of his manner of life and ministry (Vv.31-35). I think he does this because he is one worthy to be emulated by God's grace. This is not boasting in his accomplishments (Read his letters) because Paul knew intellectually and experientially that anything good in him was sourced in God alone ultimately, not in human effort. He's boasting in the Lord. If we were to do that today, we'd probably be called egotistical, arrogant, prideful, but not humble. Paul is humbly telling the elders to imitate him—because it's Christ in him doing the work they witnessed.

Eighth, Paul concludes his address with prayer. As always, his life of word and prayer (modeled by Jesus) can't be separated from a faithful account of Paul because these two aspects demonstrated his ultimate dependence on God. This is followed by loud weeping and repeated kissing of Paul to the elders. They grieved because they knew they'd never see their beloved Paul again (Vv.36-38). This is very intimate moment and for many westerners too "touchy-feely" but let's face it, this is genuine love being expressed—very moving.

Conclusion: Paul loved God and others, his is a testament to this fact and said love for God was birthed and continuously stoked by the gospel and prayer which worked itself out in

love for others. What of my life and yours friend? God helps us be more like Paul in word and deed. In our brokenness teach us to trust You, in our joy teach us to thank You, and in our calling(s) empower us to follow You wherever Lord you lead us.
(SDG)

ACTS 21-22: “PAUL’S TRIALS AND DEFENCE ARE APPOINTED BY GOD”

These two chapters show Paul traveling by boat to many places, the brothers begging him not to venture to Jerusalem for fear of the Jews and their wicked schemes for him, Agabus confirming through prophecy Paul would be in chains which was fulfilled as the apostle made his defense of the Gospel before the Jews. As Paul recalls his conversion story the term “appointment” caught my attention.

In 22:10 the text reads: *“Get up and go into Damascus and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do.”* And again in 22:14 the scripture says: *“...The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will and to see the Righteous One and to hear an utterance from His mouth.”* I’m arrested by this term because *appointments* are usually deliberations of time between two parties (E.g., I make an appointment with my doctor for a check-up on Monday 10am). Now these appointments can be changed, delayed or cancelled. But in Paul’s case, God did not deliberate with him. Instead, God set the time, day and place where Paul would be converted for the purpose of being God’s useful chosen instrument. Included in Paul’s calling were the marks of Christ on his body and imprisonment. Yet, Paul’s *chains* could not *chain* the word of God he preached which *un-chained* the captives who received the message.

May Paul’s life and message be ever more evident in our lives.

(SDG)

ACTS 23-24: “THE RESURRECTION AND COMING JUDGMENT ARE CORE TO PAUL’S DEFENCE”

Verbal confrontations can be quite difficult and I for one do not cherish them. They are difficult blows to the soul and yet the gospel message brings about not only verbal sparring but also peril to our lives as Paul experienced. He continues his defense before the council and again alludes to his innocence: *“Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day.”* (23:1)

Again, his former life and past things Christ has cleansed and thus before God Paul knows he’s upright. What amazes me is his confidence in Christ’s redemptive work where his conscience also is cleansed. No lingering residues of “guilt” because Christ does his work of justification and sanctification perfectly. The Devil could not bring up his past as a means to condemn Paul because he knew what it meant to be justified by faith through grace. This is worthy of note because the truth sets us free—only if we know it!

Nevertheless, Paul’s accusers and the High Priest have him struck on the mouth (23:2) to which he strikes back with words and then realizes that in ignorance Paul misspoke (23:3-5). Paul perceived one group in the council (1st century religious materialists—Sadducees) and the other group (1st century substance dualists—Pharisees). The former deny the resurrection the latter affirmed it (23:6-8). What transpired was a dangerous situation in the city that

threatened Paul's life: the resurrection of the dead (23:9-10). The irony of the message which brings life to dead corpses—the hearers—can and often will bring death to the messenger. Paul was all too familiar with this. So, the Lord at Paul's side brings word:

“Take courage, for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause in Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also” (23:11)

It's as if Paul needed this word from Christ because the mounting opposition can make one cower and plunge into ruin. This opposition could have kept Paul from finishing the course set before him. I can relate Lord! How I need your strength in my life Lord today because I feel beat down!

Regardless, this visitation from the Lord would certainly strengthen Paul as he heard of a plot to kill him:

“When it was day, the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul.¹³ There were more than forty who formed this plot.¹⁴ They came to the chief priests and the elders and said, “We have bound ourselves under a solemn oath to taste nothing until we have killed Paul.¹⁵ Now therefore, you and the Council notify the commander to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case by a more thorough investigation; and we for our part are ready to slay him before he comes near the place.” (23:12-15)

Forty people wanting one man dead must have been very frightening. Yet, that was part of Paul's course set before him by Christ as an ambassador of the Master. Fortunately the plot was foiled (23:16-35) and Paul was spared because Christ assured him that he needed to testify also in Rome. This objective could not be thwarted in God's providential purposes.

In chapter 24 Paul makes his defense before those who described him as a: real pest; one who stirs dissension, a ringleader of The Way (24:1-6). Paul was on trial because of the resurrection of the dead (24:21) and the rest of this chapter demonstrates his reasoning.

Paul gives the back drop of the resurrection from the Law and the Prophets as *evidence* for its truthfulness. Moreover, it's this future event that presently moves the apostle to maintain a blameless conscience before God and men (Vv.10-11). Knowing that judgement awaits him, Paul is not careless with how he lives but purposes to walk in the light of Christ to the best of his abilities.

We finally see Paul before Felix discussing righteousness, self-control and the coming judgment to which this ruler seemed to reject (V.25).

Conclusion: the message of the resurrection implies Christ's work of atonement, the rescue of sinners from the coming judgment. This future event is to inform and guide how believers presently live. For although believers are forgiven and not under wrath, our lives and future rewards nevertheless depend on how we respond to the gospel message, how live out the implications of what it means to be born-again.

(SDG)

ACTS 25-26: “PAUL’S DEFENCE BEFORE FESTUS AND KING AGRIPPA”

Paul continues his witness of Christ by making a defense of the Gospel through answering and setting straight the false charges that have been raised against him. He describes his life before conversion, the Damascus road experience and the fulfillment of the Prophets and Moses’ words in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This is instructive because he not only gives his *personal testimony* but also points to the *objective reality* of fulfilled prophecy as an apologetic. So *both* his life and God’s promise fulfilled anchor his approach, not *either/or*. I stress this point because some within evangelical circles argue that the only thing needed to reach people is our testimony, not some defense like a lawyer performs in a court of law. Scripture just doesn’t support this notion nor should we.

After much of Paul’s account before Festus and Agrippa, the king says:

“In a short time you will persuade me to become a Christian” (26:28)

Paul responded:

“I would wish to God, that whether in a short or long time, not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains.”
(26:29)

Hear Paul’s heart; he longs to see the lost rescued through the only available means—repentance and faith in Jesus Christ of Nazareth. After hearing Paul’s testimony it was obvious to Festus and King Agrippa that Paul was innocent of charges hurled against him (26:30-32).

The apostle here is experiencing the joy of witnessing for Christ through false accusations as Jesus promised would occur for believers (Mt.5: 10-12). It seems that this turn of events constantly repeated itself in the book of Acts. The fact is that the word of the Gospel is an offense to those who are perishing; it’s a stench in their nostrils.

This word rescues sinners and often kills its messengers. Let me repeat that; *this word of the Gospel rescues sinners and often kills its messengers*. This seems to be the norm in the early church and to this day in many regions of the globe Christ’s messengers are murdered because of the word of the Lord.

What ought we to do as disciples? Cower and disobey or follow the Master wherever He may lead us, not loving our lives even unto death? The rhetorical here is unnerving and oh God strengthen the feeble to follow no matter what!

(SDG)

ACTS 27-28: “PAUL’S JOURNEY AND ARRIVAL AT ROME”

These two chapters give a detailed explanation of the places, people, and hardships Paul experienced at sea. For example the destination is Italy (27:2) sailing on an Adramyttian ship along the Asian coast, and the prisoners were to be delivered to a centurion of the Augustan

cohort named Julius (27:2). This ship was accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian of Thessalonica and Julius it is said let Paul get care (27:3). Luke is making sure that he leaves a clear “paper trail” of historical details so that this testimony and that of Acts can be verified by many unbiased sources.

The nautical knowledge to me is fascinating, the perils at sea horrific, and the number of passengers aboard the ship (276 persons) all point to a historic event, not a mythological invention (27:37). As the ship safely arrives in Malta and Paul ministers to the sick, he does so in the open, not behind closed doors (28:1-10). Paul finally arrives in Rome where he explains among the Jews the reason for his chains, “*the hope of Israel*” (28:20) and as was his custom, he began preaching Christ from the Law and the Prophets.

The result was a familiar one to Paul; some believed, but others refused to believe. He thus indicted them from a passage in Isaiah that prophesied Israel’s heart of stone (Is. 28:25-28) and that this message would now go to the Gentiles who will receive it.

POSTSCRIPT: As I conclude this book of Acts, Luke’s part two, his Gospel being part one, I’m amazed and freshly challenged at the following observations:

First, the historical tenor of this work is daunting. The names of cities, countries, and people can be mostly verified by extra-biblical sources. Thus, Luke’s first goal in his Gospel (Lk.1:1-4), and now in Acts of putting forth a historical account of the early churches comings and goings has been accomplished.

Second, the fulfillment of prophecy in the first four chapters especially is stunning and can’t be ignored. God is faithful to keep his promises and that is why both Jew and Gentile received the Gospel.

Third, the source of fulfilled prophecy comes from the Jews, from the Law and the Prophets. This Gospel is not new but was part of God’s eternal plan and its verification seen in the life of Christ, the promised Messiah.

Fourth, the fulfilled word was the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon all flesh. The Jewish nation was not the only people in God’s purview, but all the nations. This is something the apostle Peter and others needed to understand which often eluded them and sadly eludes us also.

Fifth, the core message of the Gospel is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and repentant sinners can be rescued from Gods just wrath freely because Christ paid for their redemption.

Sixth, the message while free and liberating to those who receive it, is costly to live and to preach evidenced in the varied trials the apostles endured (E.g., stoning, imprisonment, reasoning and argumentation, persuasion, theological disputes, etc.).

Seventh, the manner in which the message was preached was through reasoning, argumentation and persuasion. This was often, but not always, accompanied by acts of power where healings, exorcisms and raising corpses from the dead obtained accompanied by persecutions.

Eighth, the message was culturally conditioned. When Jews were present persuasion occurred by appealing to the Law of Moses and the Prophets. When Greeks were present, their writings and general revelation were used to get to the Gospel message. Lesson: the Gospel message *must* be adapted to the audience in order to be clear and persuade.

Ninth, Saul's conversion was massive. Through it God's purposes to reach the Gentiles and the issue of *Jewish-ness* brought about much conflict within the church (E.g., Jerusalem Council). I don't think Westerners appreciate this aspect of God's providence nearly enough.

Tenth, and so much more can be said, but to me is how much Jesus loves his church that through the crucible of affliction the word was, is and will always be central to rescue sinners and justly punish the wicked—all to the glory of God. Let God be true and every man a liar:

"Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! ³⁴ For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? ³⁵ Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? ³⁶ For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen."
(Rom.11:33-36)

May the Church today in our milieu shine the light of the glorious Gospel so that many more might come into the kingdom that alone is without end.

(SDG)