

Life Lessons for Leaders



From the book of
Acts

Ted Grosbach

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Lesson One

GAZING INTO HEAVEN

Acts 1:8-11

Leaders are, by definition, special people. They stand out from the others that follow. Spiritual leaders therefore are destined to be extraordinary individuals. And in knowing that, we can see the potential for both blessing and compromise.

The potential blessing is easy to see and understand. As leaders are given more and more to living the God-given vision for church growth, they will receive more and more of God's infinite grace, the necessary spiritual resources that support the effort of the body in evangelism. The potential compromise is harder to spot, however.

Unfortunately, a real danger lies in being closely associated with the Spirit of God in the performance of God's will on the earth. The expansion of the Church is priority number one, and leaders should expect to see the divine intervention of God's mighty hand in their lives and ministries. And this means that we might

sometimes lose focus on what is most important at the moment. In fact, we might even be looking at only one aspect of the Holy Spirit's action in the body, when another aspect should be the true priority among leadership. In other words, simply being around the move of the Spirit is never really enough. We must be joined to the will of God at the moment, working as He directs us in the harvest. Often, it is too easy to be distracted by the miraculous presence of God as He does something wondrous before our eyes, while we should in fact be readying ourselves and positioning ourselves for usefulness in the next steps of growing His Church.

Leaders might sometimes lose focus on what is most important at the moment.

Gazing Up Into Heaven

At first glance, "gazing up into heaven" doesn't sound so bad, really. After all, saints should sometimes simply gaze toward heaven and contemplate the majesty of the One who gave Himself as our ransom. But in the first chapter of Acts there was a serious problem with the followers of Jesus merely looking heavenward when they should have been actively moving toward Jerusalem and the next phase of God's revealed plan.

Looking, in lieu of *moving*, can often trouble leadership and impede the progress of the work of God in the earth.

In John 4:35, Jesus had admonished the disciples to “lift up” their eyes, and to look upon the fields which were already ready to be harvested. In that case, they had been looking downward or inward. They were focused on what there was at hand to eat instead of recognizing Jesus’ intervention in the life of a “lowly” Samaritan woman. In not recognizing that the Kingdom of heaven was meant for not just Jews, but for everyone, the disciples made the huge error of fixing their gaze on the wrong priorities. They had only marveled that their Master had even talked with such a woman as the one at the well of Jacob. And they had failed to understand the huge importance that Jesus’ conversation with her had signified, and that the time was at hand for everyone to be reconciled to God despite their nationality or race. The Lord then instructed them that his food (His true sustenance) was in doing the will of God and in finishing that work. The answer for the disciples, therefore, lay in lifting up their heads and seeing what Jesus saw, a world in need of a spiritual rebirth. Nothing less would be acceptable to the Almighty.

Leaders should rely less on guessing what God will do next and more on what He is doing presently.

There is a big difference in trying to “guess” what God might do next and in recognizing what He is doing now. Our responsibility as Christian leaders must be oriented toward the latter. In fact, by really understanding and participating in what He is doing presently means being properly positioned for usefulness tomorrow and in the future. One of the more important principles of the Kingdom is that by using what we are given now, we are promised even more. So what was really so wrong with gazing up into heaven that glorious day when Jesus was received up into the cloud? The answer to that question lies in what held their attention at the moment.

Misunderstanding His Instructions

Jesus had made it abundantly clear in Luke 24. Or at least it had seemed to be clearly communicated that the disciples were to carry on the fulfillment of God’s promised redemption by preaching repentance and remission of sins in His name beginning at Jerusalem. He had closed the story in telling them to go and wait for the promise in Jerusalem. Then, in Acts 1, we read a bit more of the same occasion. Here, He tells them that they would soon be baptized with the Holy Ghost. But they did not truly understand what God wanted to do in them and through them. Their first reaction was not unlike the thinking of their fellow Judeans:

"Lord, is this the time when you are to establish once again the sovereignty of Israel?" -
-Acts 1:6 (New English Bible)

There was no thought toward the command to preach repentance or remission of sins. There was no urgency regarding carrying the gospel message to the ends of the earth. And there was no obvious commitment on their part concerning becoming empowered by the promise of the Father for His purpose. There was only the feeble and selfish hope that Jesus would recreate Israel as a new world power and cast out the Roman oppressors. In other words, they simply did not get what Jesus was trying to say. His answer to their misdirected question was gentle, yet firm.

It was not for them to understand the times or the seasons which God had in His own hand. Instead of simply going to Jerusalem and preparing themselves to be given the necessary power to participate with God in His plan, they were focused on some kind of political and temporary fix for their fallen nation. Some things will never be understood by Christian leaders. Sometimes, we are instructed to participate here and now with the present plan, rather than expend energy in trying to figure out the next best thing that God should do. By substituting the latter for the former, we fall victim to missing the will of God in our lives and ministries *right now*. And so Jesus then tried to make their first priority abundantly clear: *receive the power and become His witnesses*.

For leaders, God's sovereign power to decide what is best and when and how it should be instituted is without question.

Perhaps it would do well for leaders to understand the difference between the two words that are translated "power" in verses 7 and 8. In verse 7, speaking of God's power to decide on the times and seasons (the ways in which He acts and why), the word in the Greek is "exousia," and actually speaks of God's *authority*. But in verse 8, speaking of the power that the disciples were ordained to receive (to participate with God in carrying out His will), the Greek word is "dunamis" and denotes *an abiding power or ability*. So for leaders, God's sovereign power to decide what is best and when and how it should be instituted is without question. But so also is the undeniable necessity of being empowered to move with God in the fulfillment of His will. While leaders do not always need to know God's schedule or timing or the specific manner in which He will carry out His divine will to reach the world, they do need to cooperate in that plan as it unfolds before them. And so with this simple exhortation to them, Jesus was lifted up from the earth and disappeared into the heavens.

Worrying About the Transition

Another reason that these disciples were fixated on Jesus' departure might have been the change and uncertainty that it represented. What would become of them once "left to themselves?" No doubt, they were faced with leaving a certain "comfort zone" that they had enjoyed in the physical presence of Jesus. They had already gone through this uncertainty shortly after Jesus' resurrection. He had appeared twice unto them in Jerusalem, but it was some days before they once again met Him on the shores of Galilee. In that time, they had revealed their doubts and returned to fishing, something that they felt secure in, rather than calling on their Lord to give them the next instructions regarding their responsibility. This encounter with Jesus in John 21 was a scene of both comfort and gentle rebuke: comfort in seeing Him once again in their midst; rebuke in choosing professional fishing over spiritual development in His physical absence. It is no wonder then that Jesus assured them that He would be forever with them, even until the end of the world (Matthew 28:20.)

Leaders recognize that losing one level of relationship is part of growing into the next.

The temptation here for leaders, therefore, is in relaxing in the past comfort of His manifested presence, and thereby ignoring an even greater and more effectual presence that is to come. The disciples could not have imagined how powerful the infilling of the Holy Ghost would be! While it was great to share the fish and the bread and the fire with Him at the lakeside, it would be so much greater to be filled with His presence in Jerusalem. Losing one level of relationship with God may seem daunting to most Christians, but leaders recognize that it is part of growing into the next level. And standing and gazing up into heaven would not bring this new level to reality.

Fixated On the Spectacular – Forgetting the Mandate

While leaders will certainly enjoy the spectacular and miraculous presence of the Lord in their lives and in their work for the Kingdom, they should never become fixated on any one moment longer than they should. To do so means to delay their moving forward in their mission. While Acts 1:10 does not reveal just how long they stood there and gazed toward the sky, it was long enough that two angels were dispatched to urge them onward in the mandate. There is no doubt concerning the glory of watching the risen Lord ascend into heaven. Nothing could have compared to the magnificence of that singular event; at least nothing up to that point in time. And that is something that leadership must recognize: *there will always be more.*

God sees the end from the beginning, while we see “through a glass darkly.” While we may only imagine what is next, God understands just how glorious the future can really be. Leaders, therefore, should learn to focus on the mandate given, rather than on the glory of the past or present. What comes next is in God’s capable hands, and it is our privilege to be part of it if we so desire. To put it simply, we should never spend too much time reveling in what He has already done and thereby miss what He presently desires to do.

What We Hear and How We Hear It

Acts 1:10 tells us that these disciples of Jesus “looked steadfastly toward heaven.” The Greek word is *blepo*, and denotes *an earnest contemplation*. They were sincere in what they were doing, no doubt. But they still missed the point. While sincerity is a key element in the character of a godly leader, it should not be misconstrued. Leaders, like others, can be sincerely wrong!

The story of Jesus relating the parable of the sower and his seed is told in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Most Christian leaders will know and understand the parable quite well. After all, it speaks of the Word of God producing eternal results once it finds its way to good ground. It warns as well of the uselessness of trying to see the seed grow on three other kinds of ground that simply have no potential for production. But in the accounts given by Mark and Luke there is a principle that emerges that should just as well be clearly understood by church leadership.

Mark tells us in chapter 4 that the crowd to whom Jesus gave His short sermon on the sower and his seed was a formidable one. There were so many people gathered to hear Jesus that He was moved into a boat and put a short distance from the shore in order to maintain eye contact with His audience. Whether it was hundreds or thousands, we cannot tell. But apparently it was indeed a large crowd. We should notice nonetheless that after the conclusion of this very brief address by the Master, only His disciples remained behind with Him after the great crowd had dispersed. And it was this small group of His followers that begged the question: what does this parable really mean? He replied in pointing out that first of all it was for people like them that the mystery of the kingdom of God would be known. In other words, such a parable was given to separate those that really wanted to know from those that took only a casual glance at what Jesus had to say. And then He went on to fully explain the meaning of the parable. But what followed after that is equally important.

Mark tells us in verse 24 that Jesus warned the listeners to “*Take heed what ye hear.*” This in itself is easy to interpret. Leaders must be diligent to listen carefully to what they

hear and filter the lies from the truth. They should be likewise meticulous in really hearing what God has to say to them. But in Luke's version of the same story, we find another slant on the message. Luke 8:18 tells us that Jesus said, "*Take heed therefore how ye hear.*" This is equally important for today's leaders. Once leaders have heard the truth of God's revealed will for their lives (what they hear), what will they do with this truth?

This, in fact, is the principle of the Kingdom that begins to define leadership and set it apart from the rest of the followers of Jesus. How leaders apply what God has imparted to them is just as important as gaining the information to begin with. Do we really see what God is trying to say and do? Do we insist on a clear understanding of His principles and their application in our ministries? If not, we may become satisfied with the presence of Jesus in our midst, but compromised in the comprehension of His true message to us. Luke 8:10 gives the insight we need here:

"Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God: but to others in parables; that seeing they might not see, and hearing they might not understand." (KJV)

It is possible to "look steadfastly" as they did in Acts 1:10, yet miss the target and lose the prize.

Now What Should We Do?

So it all really came down to the decision that had to be made after the angels' reproof. What should they do now? And there were in fact other options. They could have continued to dwell on the political aspect and engaged their popularity with the public in seeking to courageously overthrow an oppressive regime. Or conversely, out of fear they could have disbanded and fled each one to his respective place of refuge and comparable safety, thereby surrendering the dream altogether. But they didn't. They chose instead to follow the angelic command and go on to Jerusalem. In other words, they dared to believe what Jesus (and the angels) commanded them to do. And this made all the difference!

Leaders have to make the tough but necessary decisions. They rise to the occasion as often as necessary and make the way forward clear to those that follow. Leaders simply lead, and they do it with a strong conviction that what they do is both ordained and blessed by the Lord. They, like Paul, can say:

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"For I know whom I have believed, and am confident of his power to keep safe what he has put into my charge, until the great Day." 2 Timothy 1:12 (NEB)

"Then returned they unto Jerusalem." These are great words indeed! The disciples made their difficult decision and went on to realize the dream that Jesus had so desperately wanted them to see. But there was one more factor that was necessary to the fulfillment of this long-awaited promise.

Leaders recognize the origin of real unity.

Homothumadon

This giant Greek word is another key to the disciples' destiny. Acts 2: 1 tells us that once they had returned to the city, *"...they were all with one accord in one place."* Homothumadon is the Greek word that is translated "accord" by the King James Version. It literally means "of the same mind." And this is what real unity is made of. It only truly becomes a reality when members of the body are joined together in the same task and working toward the same objectives. By the decision to jointly participate in doing what Jesus had commanded them to do, they became genuinely united.

It had to be that way. After all, this was to be the birth of Jesus' Church in the earth. How else could it be inaugurated but in a unified manner, with all members dedicated to the common vision that they had received from their Lord? Leaders recognize this principle. Real unity (that we speak and preach about so often) only comes in a commonality of purpose and direction. Anything else is a poor substitute. It is no wonder that congregations (and some national churches) struggle with divisions and strife. Where there is no clear cut and God-given vision, people will perish in their efforts to move forward together. But the Church was far too important and valuable to be divided at its conception. This new body of Christ would have to be founded with members that were unanimously joined to God's will for their lives and for their individual and corporate ministry.

The disciples' feeble efforts at trying to walk with Jesus would be forever changed in a moment in an upper room at Jerusalem. But getting there was the challenge. Gazing had been great, but receiving the Holy Ghost would be greater still. Leaders in today's Church must have the same life-changing determination that took our early brethren to the place of real progress. Only this commitment will propel us into the harvest as God wishes. Leaders must match their priorities with the Lord's, and thereby reap the privilege of seeing His will carried out in the world.

Lesson Two

SEEKING THE DEAD AMONG THE LIVING

Acts 3: 1-8

The women bringing spices and ointments with which to anoint the body of the crucified Jesus were surely shocked that morning. Believing that they were truly doing the right thing at the right time, they had come to His tomb, only to find that the stone sealing the sepulcher had been rolled away and the body of their Messiah missing. In the midst of their confusion, two angels appeared and asked the poignant and pertinent question, *"Why seek ye the living among the dead?"* (Luke 24:5)

Despite their sincere wishes to slow the decay of the body of Jesus in His grave, they were acting in opposition to the fundamental truth that His own promise had declared, *"The Son of man shall be betrayed into the hands of men: and they shall kill him, and the third day he shall be raised again."* (Matthew 17:22-23) So just what were the women expecting that morning?

A similar question might have been asked by Simon Peter and his friend, John, in the third chapter of the Book of Acts. But it might have sounded too strange: *"Why are you seeking the dead among the living?"* Christian leaders need to understand that good intentions do not always pave the way to success. Sometimes, we may be guilty of the age old mistake of seeking the wrong thing, even when it may be at the right time.

An Old Routine

Every morning the lame man was carried from home and deposited at what was called the "Beautiful Gate" of the Temple in Jerusalem. It was certainly a very old routine for him and for those that had to bring him and leave there each day, only to have to carry him back home after he had made his meager profit by begging. It is noteworthy that although Acts 2:43 tells us that there were many signs and wonders done by the apostles after the birth of Jesus' Church in Jerusalem, this miracle at the Beautiful Gate is the first clearly recorded and well explained one. Perhaps there is a strong lesson for leaders in this story of the lame man's healing.

Leaders recognize the danger of routine and avoid it.

And the first part of the lesson lies in the fact that this man had a regular routine, and this routine seemed in some ways to actually work for him. He must have surely received something each day, for why else would he continue to come every day to the same place and repeat the same process? The Bible tells us that he was there, in position, when Peter and John arrived at “the hour of prayer.” Everybody knew the designated times for men like the apostles to arrive for their daily prayers. After all, it must have been a relatively good time to expect the benevolence of those that entered into the Temple. They would be going to worship their God, and wouldn’t they be in a spirit of altruistic giving? In other words, the lame man (and those that brought him) had found a certain niche in their society. He was lame, others were not. He had nearly nothing; others would have to give him some of what belonged to them. That was the system, and, again, it seemed to be working for him. He was simply in a routine that dictated that he should expect to receive something whenever he came to his post, but it would always be the same “nearly nothing” each and every day. He came expecting, but expecting the wrong thing the day that Peter and John and the Holy Ghost entered onto the scene.

Expecting the Wrong Thing at the Right Time

Today’s leaders should be aware that our church services, prayer meetings, and other Christian gatherings must never be allowed to degrade to the level of routine. The Church has a God-given vision that we are ordained to pursue, and nothing should hinder us from doing so. Unfortunately, like the lame man and his friends, it is far too easy to stumble into a comfortable routine that provides the very minimum for our spiritual survival.

Leaders are dedicated to pursuing a God-given vision.

Pastors bear the responsibility of ensuring a proper climate of seeking the very best from the Lord in every church meeting that is conducted. They, along with their trained staff of leaders, are the ones charged with seeking the manifested presence of God in the midst of the saints and visitors. To ignore this responsibility means that we may very well adopt a routine that just gets us by from one meeting to the next, without making major strides toward personal and corporate growth in the body. Sadly, though, this routine dominates the ministry of many churches.

Watching the clock, just waiting for the service to end, and hoping that there will be no altar call on Sunday are all signs that a routine has begun to set in. There is one thing about the man in Acts 3 that is abundantly clear: he was lame when he arrived each day at the Temple, and he was still lame each evening when he returned home. In other words, the minimum that he was used to receiving each day had never been enough to

truly impact his meager existence—it only prolonged it. What he really needed was a life-changing moment with two representatives of the Almighty God! And God had ordained that very moment. It was the right time, but would he be ready for it?

Spirit-filled churches are quick to point out their enthusiasm and zeal toward the action of the Holy Ghost in their gatherings. Often, the worship is lively enough to either inspire or offend visitors! But it still might simply be part of a routine that we go through, a set system of just coming together and looking for the wrong things at the right time. In every one of our meetings, Jesus is there, offering His hand of help to anyone who would dare to be different and receive something extraordinary, but are we ready for it?

Asking for the Wrong Thing

Only the Lord really knows how much energy and time have been expended in seeking the wrong things from Him! Certainly, there are times in our lives when we simply have to pray in order to discern the will of God, and in these times we are bound to say prayers that will be answered with a resounding, “No.” But there are also times when we are guilty of building a routine in which we are constrained to seek for the wrong thing. We set boundaries in our church gatherings (as well as in our personal lives) that pre-determine the outcome of the meeting. In other words, we set the parameters within which the members of the body will be allowed to reach out after God’s provision of spiritual things. If those parameters are not broad enough to allow the Holy Ghost to be free in our midst, we are helpless in seeking the right things and doomed to go after the minimum that will sustain us until the next meeting.

Pastors see this very thing far too often. They are grieved to see the same saints find the same small spiritual alms through their pitiful Christian begging in a church service. But these same pastors sometimes do very little to extend the boundaries of the service and allow the Spirit to do what is truly needed at the right time. And even if the pastor does try to lead the congregation onward to more and more of God’s best, are there leaders that will stand as the example of this kind of spiritual hunger? Leaders have to know that they will stand as “models” for true spiritual progress in front of the others in the assembly. Or, they will serve as models of the routine. Either way **leaders**

will be the models for the rest. This is one of the very important reasons that leaders must be carefully chosen. They should be spiritually-minded individuals who truly see the vision of the church and have started to pattern their lives according to that vision. Anything less than this kind of attitude among the leadership will begin to compromise

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the vision. And compromise must surely be one of the greatest enemies of true vision. Whenever we decide that enough is enough, and that we need very little more from God, we have compromised the vision that He has shared with His Church. And when we have begun to compromise the vision, growth comes to a halt. Someone once correctly said, “If we are not growing, we are dying.”

Seeing Peter and John entering the Temple, the lame man did as he usually did and asked for financial assistance. His routine, coupled with his infirmity, ruled his life. He no doubt felt bound to repeat this process day in and day out until he was too old or too sick to continue. This is not unlike many saints who, although having the best of intentions as they come to a church gathering, feel compelled to repeat the same things they always do. They might even acknowledge that this will continue until they, like the lame man, become either too old or too sick to continue. But the journey that God has ordained for our lives can be much more challenging and exciting than that! And leaders, of all people, must understand this principle. God will in fact challenge us regularly – to move up to more responsibility, to see more results in ministry, to grow more spiritually, and to participate more with Him as He works in the body.

God will challenge leaders regularly—to step up and see more.

If leaders, however, simply fall into a routine and ignore the challenges, who will lead us into more of God’s vision? If leaders ask for the wrong things (even at the right time), how will the body grow?

Take a Close Look

Hearing the pitiful demand of the lame man for money, Peter replied, “Look on us.” To the lame man, this seems to have indicated that he was about to receive something from the two apostles. The passage even tells us that he obeyed and regarded them with some earnest expectation of receiving. But what he was aiming for was not what he would receive that afternoon in Jerusalem. God had other plans for his life, plans that would rock the city at its very foundation, plans that would be the catalyst for a huge influx of new believers into the newly born Church. The lame man had no idea earlier that day of how his trip to the Temple would end!

It should not, therefore, be surprising to learn that God must surely utter the same command to us as we come together as believers in His house. “Look at me closely” might be what He says to leaders on a regular basis. “Take a closer look than ever, and really see who I am and what I can do!” He calls us to experience a touch of His Spirit

that could potentially shake the local and national churches in which we serve and which challenges us to step up higher and to expect much more. But leaders have to see Him on a personal basis. In other words, for just a moment, leaders need to take a good look at Jesus and see what He wants to do in their lives and in their ministries. It all starts with a fresh look.

Why Seek the Dead Among the Living?

One fascinating part of this story in Acts 3 is that even though the lame man then intently looked at them and expected to receive some coin or two, he was nonetheless positioned for the miraculous. His close look began to make the difference. It was his time to move forward from a place of constantly receiving the very minimum

Leaders challenge themselves to take a close look at God's power and promise.

to a place of greater impact in his life and in the lives of those around him. He would change from being an outcast of society living on the breadcrumbs that fell from others' tables to a man that influenced a revival in Jerusalem. But it had to start with that fresh look. He had to see, even for just a moment, the apostolic power that Peter and John represented. Leaders likewise must challenge themselves to take the same close look at the personality of the One that reigns supreme.

Looking for money when it was time for healing was like looking for something dead in the presence of the living. Leaders that settle for the routine are guilty of the same thing. There is always more for those that desire God's best. Compromise may kill vision, but deep desire moves God.

Nothing can substitute for spiritual leadership in the Church. Where leaders are engaged in active and relevant ministry, others will be inspired to move up in responsibility too. This Church is a living body, full of God's life and His power, positioned for usefulness in changing a lost and dying world. Why should we as leaders settle for seeking the dead among the living? There is more for those that are ready.

Lesson Three

SHAKING THE HOUSE

Acts 4:29-31

The recent miracle of the lame man's healing at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple had certainly had an impact in Jerusalem. More than five thousand new believers had been reached, and the Jewish rulers including the high priest and the captain of the Temple decided to act. Peter and John were arrested and put into jail for the night, and then brought before the rulers the following day to answer charges concerning the working of the miracle and the preaching that had followed. Peter once again preached, this time explaining that it was Jesus, the One who had been so cruelly treated and finally crucified by these Jewish rulers, who had brought the healing of the man at the Temple. He went on to declare the well-known precept about the name of Jesus—that there was no other name given to men that could save.

This boldness of Peter and John shocked the rulers and judges. They were confounded by the fact these so-called apostles were both “unlearned and ignorant men,” yet somehow possessed a powerful ministry of speaking; and also equally amazing was the miracle done at their hands that had changed so many lives just a short while before.

The Jewish council then made their somber decision: there was to be no more of this preaching “in the name of Jesus” in Jerusalem. No one was to be allowed to speak of this name that had so shaken the city. Peter and John were seriously threatened, warned, and then released. But the story of the name of Jesus would not stop there!

Behold Their Threatenings

There have always been “threatenings” issued against the Church and its leaders, and there will continue to be threats laid against those who dare to move forward and declare the soul-saving gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. The world, the flesh, and satanic influence will always combine in attempting to impede or even halt what God wants to do through His people, the Church. The Apostle Paul even counseled us regarding the devil with the truth that “...we are not ignorant of his devices.” (2 Corinthians 2:11) He will continue to resist our efforts and leaders should not be ignorant of nor intimidated by this fact. It is simply part

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of the reality of being used in spiritual ministry. How we react to these threats is of keen importance to church leadership. Peter and John quickly returned to the body of believers and reported the attempt to stop their ministry. The response was a call to prayer. And this prayer is noteworthy in its content.

The Prayer That Shook the House

The beginning of verse 24 of Acts 4 according to The Twentieth Century New Testament Version expresses something that spiritual leaders must both know and practice: *"...moved by a common impulse, they raised their voice to God in prayer..."* They were all moved by the same thing. They all recognized the threat, its source, and its potential to derail what the Lord Jesus was doing in the city. And so they all were moved by the same feelings of determination to resist the devil and his evil machinations. It was a time in which leaders must act, and act decisively. They prayed. And the brief account of the prayer offered in Acts 4:24-30 is worth studying by today's church leaders. There are six distinct parts to the prayer, each carrying its own impact and result. Some parts were certainly directed toward God, others seem to be a reminder to those praying that God was able in that crisis just as He is able in every crisis. Let us look at these six parts of the prayer that shook the house that day.

"Lord, thou art God"

These sincere church members, when faced with a very real and dangerous threat, first lifted their voices together and declared that Jesus was God. There was no other power that could help them at this time. There was no other power that had made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and all of the life therein. In other words, at the very beginning of their petition, they restated the fact of who Jesus was.

Without this foundation for their prayer, they would be faithless, for true faith comes by hearing the Word of God. In other words, the faith of a true leader is based upon the revelation of God's identity. Paul wrote to his beloved Timothy and reminded him that, though he was at the moment suffering in Rome and in bonds, the Word of God was not bound. (2 Timothy 2:9) Was Paul simply stating this to Timothy, or was he also reminding himself of this eternal truth?

Leaders re-declare the foundational truths of God's power and will.

Leaders will always be needed to re-declare the foundational truths of God's power and will. Simon Peter put it this way in 1 Peter 5:10:

"But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you."

The New English Bible quotes the last portion of that verse this way: *"...will himself, after your brief suffering, restore, establish, and strengthen you on a firm foundation."* The point is that God is the One who will faithfully lead us through the tough times, and that is a fact that leaders must openly avow.

He Shall Overcome

In verses 25-26 the believers reminded God (and themselves) of His overcoming power. After all, He had withstood the efforts of kings and rulers of nations that defied His will and God had always been victorious. Even Psalm 2 celebrated the overthrow of Jerusalem under the leadership of King David despite all efforts by the heathen rulers to keep it as their own. This Psalm serves as a prophetic declaration that the city would stand symbolically as the birthplace of a new kingdom (the Church,) and that the king in the Psalm represented Jesus is understood by most Bible scholars. It is no wonder then that those praying in Jerusalem in Acts 4 refer to this very Psalm as a statement of their faith in God's power to overcome any obstacle.

Christians often quote Mark 9:23: *"...all things are possible to him that believeth."* But do these same Christians act on that faith when faced with serious threats by the enemy? Leaders learn that this is part of being in leadership—regularly re-stating the power of God to act on our behalf when we are totally surrendered to His will and purpose. God-given promises must be revisited from time to time, and especially in a time of threatening crisis, leaders must stand their ground and quote these promises as a proclamation of their faith.

Recognizing His Will

If there is one thing that stands out about spiritual leadership in the Church, it's that they can discern the will of God. Recognizing what God is actually doing in the tough times serves as an indispensable part of a leader's contribution to the ministry of the body. Not everyone in a church will be united when the crisis arrives. Some will flee into a shelter of apathy. Others will choose to ignore the crisis, believing that someone else should be responsible for acting. But true leaders know that they can retighten their grip on the truths of God's Kingdom and stand against the threat. And part of this comes by simply recognizing the will of God in the midst of the crisis.

Leaders recognize the will of God in the midst of the threat or crisis.

Verses 27-28 reveal that the disciples in Acts 4 knew this very principle. While other people might have thought that the crucifixion of Jesus Christ was a sure sign of defeat, they had clung to the truth of the resurrecting power of God to change their world. And while others may have questioned why Herod, Pilate, and others had been “allowed” by God to exercise their powers in resisting Jesus, the leaders recognized that it was all ultimately part of the plan. Without His arrest and crucifixion, Jesus could never have triumphed over death, hell, and the grave. And so when threatened by the same resisting and rebellious spirit, these believers re-declared that His will would triumph once again, no matter what the situation looked like from outside. After all, they were not outsiders to what God was doing – they were essential parts of it.

And Now, Lord...

After lifting up the Lord in verse 24, re-stating His power to overcome in verses 25-26, and recognizing the presence of His will in the crisis, the believers then made their current position very clear in verse 29: *“And now, Lord, behold their threatenings...”* In other words, after refocusing their attention on not just the reality of the current danger but on the reality of God’s past faithfulness to deliver and save, they made their plea.

Leaders should be responsible for putting things into focus in a church, whether on the local, regional, or national level. They should be the ones that are able to clearly identify the real need at the present time. They are responsible for giving a concise and accurate assessment of both the threat and the response. If leadership cannot do this, who will?

Without an unmistakable presentation of the threat by anointed leaders, it becomes very difficult for the body to respond in the correct way. As stated before, some will be tempted to respond in fear, withdrawal, apathy, or denial. But leaders can make their influence known at this crucial time in a way that calms the fear, reverses the withdrawal, overcomes the apathy, and inspires others toward positive action. Often, real solutions are never found because the real problem is never accurately perceived. This is part of a leader’s responsibility – to make an accurate assessment of the real need, and thereby start the process of applying a real solution to the present problem.

Leaders help make an accurate assessment of the real need in a crisis.

Boldness to Speak and Act

This humble request by the Church in verse 29 reveals something that every leader should understand. They did not ask for deliverance from the threat. They simply asked for boldness to keep on doing what they were doing in the midst of the threat! It is human

nature to look for deliverance from tough and challenging times. Relief is an often sought answer to our prayers. But leaders should recognize that sometimes relief from the threat is not the best answer. Sometimes we just need to act despite the danger. In fact, this helps form part of the definition of practical faith. Faith does not always mean an escape from the trial – sometimes it merely means we will know what to do in the middle of the trial! And that is a principle that the apostles knew very well. Their lives were not just days of repeated prayers for deliverance. They persevered in the face of any and all opposition, doing what they knew to be right according to the will of their Lord. Today's leaders should understand this as well.

A leader's faith doesn't always deliver him from the threat, but helps him overcome in the midst of the threat.

These believers in Acts 4 knew that the persecution would continue, and did not ask that it be stopped. But they did ask for boldness to continue speaking the truth while under the threat. They simply knew what they were supposed to be doing, and were not willing that anything deter them from seeing it carried out. Threats would come, but their determined faith would have to see them through.

In today's world, persecution against the Church takes various forms. There are still places where Christians are openly abused by governments and factions that are resolute in their decision to curb the presence or spread of the gospel. In other parts of the world, the threat of persecution is not so obvious. It may be as subtle as friends and family that would discourage us from surrendering our lives to the power of the Lord Jesus. It may be in the form of accusations and ridicule toward the powerful message that we are asked to preach and teach. But in whatever form this threat takes, we must resist it in the same fashion as those in the fourth chapter of the Book of Acts. They resolved to do what they knew was right, even in the midst of strong and threatening opposition.

Acts 4:20 gives us insight regarding this tenacious faith displayed by the apostles and their followers. Peter and John had already directly answered their Jewish accusers in saying that they could not help but speak the things that they had seen and heard. For them, it had already been decided in their hearts. They understood who they were, and what they had been called to do. Nothing would be allowed to turn them aside from this God-given mission. Should today's leaders have a lesser determination?

They asked for boldness to speak the truth and they asked for their ministry to go on supplying the needs to those they encountered. And they asked simply that it all be done according to the "name" or "will" of Jesus Christ. It was a simple yet very powerful

request. It was a short prayer, but one that truly impacted the future of the Church in and outside of Jerusalem.

Shaking the House

The answer to their prayer came swiftly and surely. The very house where they had gathered to pray was shaken by the power of God as they were filled all over again by the Holy Ghost. This was true anointing. Anointing is always tied to genuine ministry. In other words, Christian leaders are anointed for specific ministry to specific needs. The kind of “general anointing” that so many people espouse today is not a Biblical one at all. They had asked to be empowered with a spiritual boldness and anointing for a certain and indisputable responsibility given to them by God. And He answered in a very pronounced fashion.

Real leaders are anointed – they must be anointed if they will really serve the needs of others. But this anointing does not come without a price. It requires a firm resolve that we will dedicate ourselves to the task at hand, and that no form of intimidation or threat will deter us from the prize. In Acts 4, they displayed that kind of resolve – what about today’s leaders?

Lesson Four

DEATH AT THE ALTAR

Acts 5:1-11

Christian leaders know very well that spiritual life begins at the altar. Whether this altar is in a church building, at home, or anywhere else is not really important. An altar in the New Testament context signifies a place of change and commitment. This is where we admit that we cannot manage our own lives without God, and where we honestly confess that we cannot in any fashion save ourselves. The altar today therefore becomes a place where death to sin takes place, but it is also where life in Jesus Christ begins. The Apostle Paul put it this way in Romans 6:11:

"Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord."

The opening passage of the fifth chapter of the Book of Acts, however, reveals that the altar, even for Christians, can become not only a place of eternal life, but of eternal death.

Leaders in the Church have the opportunity to be an integral part of the growth and expansion of the Kingdom of God in the earth. They are called and ordained to play important roles in relevant church ministry, carrying forth the vision that God has shared with His true believers. They are placed carefully into specific responsibilities according to their training and spiritual gifts, and therefore enjoy the privilege of really being part of something that is significant and very fulfilling in nature.

Leaders enjoy the privilege of being part of something significant and fulfilling.

Nonetheless, leaders must be vigilant with regards to the pitfalls that lie before them. The enemy would of course try to hinder the progress of the Church, and therefore will endeavor to compromise our leadership if at all possible.

We read in an earlier lesson that compromise is one of the greatest enemies of true vision. Since this is true, then we know that if leadership is compromised, the overall vision of a local or national church suffers. So, leaders must live with this in mind. There will most certainly be attempts and attacks made by the adversary with the intent of stopping the forward progress being made in the church. And these attacks often will be

launched directly toward the leaders of the assembly. To compromise their efforts is to compromise the body's progress.

Acts 5 opens with a true account of this very danger. Leaders should understand the what, when, how, and why of this sad account of the loss of two Christian members of the new Church in Jerusalem. Ananias and his wife stand as infamous reminders of a very important principle for leaders today.

A Huge Little Word

While different translations and versions of the Bible begin chapter five with various words, the King James Version perhaps says it best: *"But a certain man..."* The word "but" is one of those small, but potentially powerful words. And in opening this chapter of the Book of Acts, it couldn't be much bigger.

To understand the impact of the beginning of the fifth chapter, we really need to carefully observe the close of the fourth chapter. After the miraculous prayer meeting that shook the house in Acts 4:31, many more souls were added to the Church. And the Bible goes on to say:

"And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all." (Acts 4:33)

The Church had grown, not only quantitatively, but in spiritual quality and maturity as well. They were truly beginning to understand their identity in Christ and act accordingly. "Great grace" implies that they were fully aware of what God was providing for them, and they were certain of how to put it to use. The Bible says that no one lacked anything, even in the midst of great difficulty and persecution. Saints were seen to sell their possessions and bring the proceeds to the apostles, laying them at their feet as if to say, "Use this however necessary." To put it very simply, things were going very well indeed in the Spirit. One must surely have thought that there were no limits to the greatness of God working in and through His adopted sons and daughters. But there was something that could quickly compromise this part of the vision for the Church. And a man named Ananias fell victim to it.

It seems that the Lord was moving the Church in one definite direction and that everyone was freely and happily moving with Him. "But" there was one certain individual that chose another direction. His simple and small decision to compromise changed everything for him in just a moment--with terrible and eternal consequences.

Grace of the Lord

Strangely enough, the name, Ananias, can be translated as the “grace of the Lord.” While grace actually speaks of receiving the unmerited favor of God and putting it to use in the manner that God intends, Ananias, despite his given name, chose to do just the opposite.

While the Spirit of the Lord was flowing freely through the vast majority of His believers, there was a certain man that just could not sense the same feeling. There are many names of many people in the Scriptures that stand out for their singular contributions in living and acting by the will and power of God. Men like Gideon, David, Moses, Paul, and Simon Peter shout out to us from the Bible’s pages and declare that God can work mightily in those that choose to agree with God and participate in carrying out His grand design.

But there are also names that bring dishonor to the history of the people of God. Demas’ forsaking the missionary call, Judas’ horrible betrayal, and Diotrephes, a man who loved “the preeminence,” stand as examples of those who sold out, who ran away, or who looked for the wrong kind of reward from their association with the Lord Jesus.

Leaders must be aware of the lingering temptation of hypocrisy.

Ananias, unfortunately, and his wife, Sapphira, will also be remembered as part of the latter group. Faced with an opportunity to join in with the rest and give freely to alleviate the suffering of the brotherhood and forward the revival, Ananias chose a different path. While given the chance to be an important part of the definite progress that the Jerusalem Church was making, he made a fatal decision. And the temptation that ignited this terrible mistake still lingers among us and would act mercilessly against any leader that lives unaware of its threat.

Impressing Others

This was a tough time for Ananias. Everybody that could was bringing the proceeds of sales of their lands and possessions and offering it freely to the apostles for the work of God. But Ananias just simply did not feel like he could do the same thing. It seems obvious that he was being torn between two sides of the issue. He really didn’t want to sacrifice anything, but he also didn’t want to look bad in front of the others. After all, it must have been a very impressive sight to see all of these saints bringing their free will

offerings and placing them at the feet of the senior leaders of the Church! Ananias longed for such notoriety, but lacked the free will to give as the others were doing. So he formulated a simple but dangerous plan: he would sell something (like the others) but (unlike the others) give only a portion of the proceeds and keep the rest. And best of all, he could say before the congregation that he had given all of it so very sacrificially. It seemed like the perfect compromise at the time for him.

The problem was, however, that he was about to inject something vicious into the Church, and God would have none of it. The fatal disease that had overtaken Ananias in all of this was simply *hypocrisy*. To say one thing and do another was not in the spirit of the Church in the fourth chapter of Acts, and it would not be tolerated in chapter five. To try and keep up appearances in front of the congregation was not at all part of God's plan for His children. Instead, He looked for those that walked humbly with Him, gave as directed by the Spirit, and sought only the words "Well done" from their Master, not the applause of others. Proverbs 11:24 sheds light on this very subject:

*Leaders show others what
a God-directed life can
enjoy.*

"There is that scattereth, and yet increaseth; and there is that withholdeth more than is meet, but it tendeth to poverty."

In other words, there are people who freely distribute what they have, and yet they find even more in doing so. And there are others who hoard as much as possible (much more than needed) and yet fall into poverty. For Ananias, he learned this lesson the hard way!

All we need to do to "impress" others is to simply do what God wants, without compromise and without hypocrisy. Leaders show others what a truly inspired and God-directed life can enjoy. But when compromised, this leadership becomes responsible for turning the other members away from the goal and further from the vision. In the early Church, this could not be allowed to happen at such a crucial time as in Acts 5. So, the perpetrator and the act itself were purged from the body in a hideous scene *at the altar of sacrifice*. And their deaths produced the desired result:

"And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things." (Acts 5:11)

The Real Sin

Leaders should note the real issue here with Ananias' false offering. Peter showed this clearly in his probing questions to him. He asked two things that show clearly what

mistake Ananias had made. He pointed out that before the land was sold, it belonged to Ananias and was completely in his power. He also showed that even after it was sold, Ananias had been free to use the money as he wanted. So, both before and after the sale, Ananias was in control of the land that God had blessed him with. But the real crime came in doing one thing and claiming another – and this added up to lying to the Holy Ghost.

Ananias could have kept the land and lived for God. He could have sold the land and given all or part of the proceeds to the apostles freely. But to keep the money while claiming it had all been given was pure hypocrisy, trying to look good in front of the others. Leaders cannot afford to make this same mistake.

Hypocrisy can kill true revival. It will compromise the vision and derail the plan, and therefore it cannot be tolerated in leadership. In choosing, training, and appointing leaders, we must be very careful to instill and cultivate values and principles that guard against hypocrisy. Why else would God so suddenly have brought down Ananias and his wife in front of everyone if He had not known the potential for the havoc and spiritual damage their actions could have incited? The story is not mentioned in the Book of Acts by accident. It stands as a strong warning to the Church of today regarding the dangers of compromise and hypocrisy. God would have been well pleased with Ananias simply doing the will of God and giving accordingly. It might have been little or much, but it should have been exactly what was required of him. “But” a certain man named Ananias chose a different route and removed himself from the company of believers.

Leaders recognize the process of sin: how it begins and how it ends.

Conceived in the Heart

The Apostle James expressed the “process” of sin very well in his epistle. He said:

“But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.” (James 1:14-15)

One might wonder if James, the author of this great epistle, was present when Ananias and his wife presented their version of “the gift.” If so, it would explain why he so clearly describes the process by which we fall into temptation and commit sin and its consequences. And we can recall that Peter, in his brief interrogation of Ananias, used the question, “*Why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart?*” (Acts 5:4)

Before the actual sin is committed, the temptation mixes with our own lusts and desires to plan the act. But until we agree on the action, the sin is not yet conceived. So Peter asked Ananias why he had allowed the plan to go so far without taking a more careful look at the root of its cause as well as the potential results of its completion. Leaders must be aware of this process of sin and recognize both how it begins and how it always ends.

As was previously stated, the deaths of Ananias and his wife had a profound impact on the Church. But what about today: are there still reports of such cases of immediate judgment against sins that would violate the body? Today, it seems rare to hear of such examples and therefore a more hidden and insidious danger lurks around leaders. Solomon described this danger in this way:

"Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil." (Ecclesiastes 8:11)

It seems strange to say, but perhaps it would be easier if more sin was immediately judged so severely and we could regularly see that "crime does not pay." But it is not like that. God withholds His divine judgment and gives men space to repent. He does not seek a robotic kind of Church that simply acts under imminent threat of immediate destruction! He chooses rather to work in a people that give themselves to Him in humble submission and willing obedience through the power of His Spirit. The Lord made a very clear and singular statement in Acts 5, and now expects us to learn, live, and lead without allowing hypocrisy to dilute or even destroy the revival.

Testing the Spirit

It would be unfair to leave this story without some mention of Sapphira's part in all of it. Peter asked the question of her, *"How is it that ye have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord?"* The word "tempt" could just as easily be translated "test" or "challenge." And this bears closer inspection with a view to understanding clearly what they had done.

Leaders know very well what Paul said in Romans 8:14,

"For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God."

There, in one simple verse, lies the key to successfully living a truly Christian life: being led by His Spirit. It is easy to quote the verse, but much more challenging to live. The desire of the carnal man never leaves us in this life. It must be crucified, and Paul said it must be dealt with daily.

Ananias' thoughts of impressing others surely did not originate with God. He had simply let the desire of his flesh overcome the urging of the Spirit. But in this case, it was not just a personal sin, but an infectious one that could bring spiritual sickness to the Jerusalem Church. Leaders bear the same responsibility, knowing that their actions should be carefully considered because of their potential impact on the other members of the body. Real ministry can easily be shipwrecked when directed by men and women who fail to grasp the importance of the transgression so fully described in Acts 5.

The Apostle John admonished us about this struggle of spirit against flesh in this way:

"Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God..." (I John 4:1)

While it seems true that John was warning against men who would claim to be led by the Spirit but in fact be false teachers, it is also applicable to thoughts or temptations that would try and lead us into actions that can deleteriously affect our lives. We should, in fact, "try" them. The word "try" in Greek in this verse is also translated as "prove" in other scriptures. We should be careful, therefore, to prove that what we feel to be the right thing is actually according to God's purpose or not. Some decisions are simply more impacting than others, and with those especially, we must be very diligent in knowing that we are about to act according to and in harmony with the grace of the Lord.

A leader's actions impact the body, and therefore must be weighed carefully.

Sadly, Ananias did not live up to his name that day. But leaders in today's Church can be men and women that excel in ministry, being led by God and empowered by His Spirit. The decision is ours.

Lesson Five

LEADING A LEADER

Acts 9:26-28

"But Barnabas took him..." These must be some of the most powerful words in the Book of Acts. When Saul stood no chance of being believed by the apostles at Jerusalem regarding his professed conversion, one man reached out to him and changed everything. And the result was a man's life-long ministry that impacted the world of his day as well as his leaving nearly one-half of the New Testament writings for us to study and live by. Indeed, it would seem that Paul's impact on the Church was saved by the keen insight of one humble leader named Barnabas.

Do You See What I See?

Paul's reputation was clear at this point of his life. He was the great persecutor of the new movement that was following the teachings and gospel of Jesus Christ. In fact, his very reason for being on the Damascus road that day in Acts 9 when he encountered the Lord was to extend his evil efforts outside of Judea and to quash what the Jewish leaders at Jerusalem saw as a religious rebellion. So despite the testimony that he offered of his "conversion," it seemed no one in the Church in Jerusalem was willing to really hear it.

Paul had indeed been converted once he entered into Damascus, and now baptized and Spirit-filled, he was ready to broadcast the very message that he had been authorized to destroy with lethal force. So enraged were the Jewish elders at Damascus over what Paul now espoused as the doctrine of salvation that they turned on him and threatened the life of the former life-taker himself. A few of the new believers at Damascus were kind enough (and brave enough) to help Paul escape from the city, and he had quietly made his way back to Jerusalem where he tried to join with the other disciples of Jesus there. But the reception was an icy one at best. It says in Acts 9:26, *"...they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple."*

But Barnabas took him and personally brought to him to the apostles. Evidently, he had seen something or felt something extraordinary about this man that everyone else had forsaken.

And herein is one of the most fundamental principles that leaders should recognize: *leaders produce other leaders.*

*Leaders help produce
other leaders.*

Leaders cannot afford to simply see what everyone else sees. They cannot always rely on what the majority may think. But they must learn to see what God sees. And this is very true regarding the development of new leadership. We must learn to recognize the gifts, talents, and spiritual demonstration that promise further maturity and potential in the lives of those with whom we share the fellowship of believers. Barnabas did this and it made all the difference for Paul.

*Leaders learn to see what
God sees.*

It couldn't have been easy for Barnabas in some ways. After all, if Paul did indeed turn out to be a traitor and was simply infiltrating the Church in order to identify its leaders for arrest and imprisonment, the blame would certainly fall on Barnabas for so naively trusting him. But Barnabas simply obeyed what the Holy Ghost was telling him: that here was a man that God could certainly use if given the right kind of guidance and support.

I Need Help

In Acts 11, we read that the expansion of the Church eventually reached the city of Antioch in Syria. This was a significant advance for the Church, and it needed to be administered properly. The apostles at Jerusalem acted swiftly and decidedly by sending Barnabas to oversee the revival in Antioch and to ensure its proper administration there. Obviously, he was a man that was well-loved and deeply trusted among them. He was certainly well received at Antioch for the Bible tells us in verse 24 that *"much people was added to the Lord."*

The church at Antioch went on to become a center of evangelism. It was the launching point for missionary journeys farther into Asia Minor, and it was the place where the believers were first known as "Christians." Certainly it was a success story in the history of the movement. And it had been all carefully handled and led by this great man, Barnabas.

But Barnabas was quick to realize that he needed help in carrying out his enormous responsibilities. He would need to bring others on board and train them, mentor them, and finally release them into their respective parts of the harvest field. Verse 25 of this chapter gives us a clear view with regards to Barnabas and his recognition of the need and the ministry to match it:

"Then departed Barnabas to Tarsus, for to seek Saul."

Barnabas was “a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith,” but he recognized his own need of help when it became a necessity. And he also knew where to turn for the specific help that he needed at the time.

Antioch was a principal city in the Roman Empire in Syria. It stood as a great metropolis in the eyes of many, but to Barnabas, it must have represented something even more potentially impacting. Barnabas recognized the spiritual potential that lay there in the Antioch church for sending out missionaries and for building a great work for the name of the Lord. But he would need spiritually gifted and qualified helpers in the work. So he turned once again to the junior preacher that he had met in Jerusalem, Paul.

A Second Rescue

Paul was at this time back in his own hometown, Tarsus. We read in Acts 9:30 that he had been sent there by the church elders after he had begun to preach Christ so boldly in Jerusalem that they feared for his safety. Or was it that they feared for their own safety? We cannot be sure, but we do know that Paul’s presence in Jerusalem was causing such a stir that he was sent home to his own people to preach. And there he might have stayed in relative obscurity if it had not been for the intervention of Barnabas once more in his life. Once again we see Barnabas recognizing potential in a new leader and we can begin to understand his strong desire to bring that potential to full maturity and usefulness for the Kingdom’s sake.

Leaders match qualified personnel to relevant ministry.

We may not know if Paul would have been happy remaining in Tarsus for the rest of his life and ministry. But we can know that Barnabas was certainly not satisfied in knowing that such a talented evangelist as Paul was living below his God-given potential. And so when he had the chance to choose someone to come and help him in the growth and expansion of the great church in Antioch, he turned toward Tarsus and personally brought back Paul with him. An important principle emerges here: senior leaders should be ready to match available and qualified personnel to the ministry that is relevant for the need.

Paul later would write to the church at Rome about the importance of “marking” those that would cause division in the body. But perhaps the opposite is true as well. Leaders should “mark” those that demonstrate their spiritual qualifications and gifts and be willing to give them the opportunity to step up into greater responsibility and ministry. As there will always be a need for more ministries to meet the needs in and around the Church, there will always be a great need for leaders. Therefore, those in positions of

leadership now should be vigilant, looking for and marking those that show an aptitude and calling for spiritual ministry in the future. This surely is one of the marks of a true leader.

Practical Experience

So Paul worked with Barnabas at Antioch for at least a year, building the assemblies there into vibrant centers of spiritual growth, while at the same time gaining valuable experience under the able tutelage of the humble yet powerful Barnabas. This was pastoral experience that Paul could draw from in the future as he wrote his many epistles to the churches of Asia and Europe. It was an opportunity to gain experience in practical ministry, in seeing the dynamics of church growth, and in learning the principles of God's revival. In short, it turned into an invaluable learning opportunity for the gifted but inexperienced Paul. Only a year later, it would prove to become the turning point of Paul's life.

Leaders "nudge" future leaders toward the realization of their potential.

Everyone deserves a chance to prove himself. Everyone needs an opportunity in which he may demonstrate his willingness to contribute to the overall efforts of the Church in ministry. But not everyone steps forward toward more responsibility without a nudge from others. Evidently, Barnabas knew something about the possibilities that awaited Paul once he was trained and mentored. He just needed a chance to see it happen. Barnabas gave him that chance. And not only did he provide the opportunity for Paul to gain practical experience, he allowed him the opportunity to "position" himself for greater usefulness in ministry.

There is a great difference in seeking a position, and "positioning" oneself for further responsibility. The latter simply refers to the faithful carrying out of present responsibilities in order to be entrusted with greater responsibilities. Jesus said it this way in Mark 4:24-25:

"...and unto you that hear shall more be given. For he that hath, to him shall be given: and he that hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he hath."

Paul, the Missionary

Sometime the next year, the Holy Ghost spoke through certain prophets at Antioch that it was time that Barnabas and Paul be released from their pastoral duties and that they become the first missionaries officially sent forth from the church there. As the old saying goes, "the rest is history." It is noteworthy, however, that something began to

change as they set out for the work that God had called them to. In Acts 13:43 we read that the two are now referred to as “Paul and Barnabas.” In fact, the thirteenth chapter records a lengthy discourse given by Paul at Antioch of Pisidia, but nothing recorded of anything that Barnabas may have spoken. This trend would continue throughout their first missionary journey together. In Acts 14:12 we are told that Paul was the chief speaker of the two. It was Paul that was stoned at Lystra and left for dead, evidently because, once again, he had assumed the role of chief speaker.

A leader’s joy is found in the success of those he mentors.

It would seem that Barnabas had gladly and most willingly relinquished the responsibility of teaching and preaching to the zealous Paul. Barnabas felt no threat whatsoever in “losing” his post as number one. By contrast, he was pleased to see Paul begin to exercise some of the gifts that Barnabas had recognized so long before. This, in fact, is the ultimate joy for leaders—watching those they have trained and mentored beginning to take the lead roles in carrying out the work and conforming to the mandate of the vision. No doubt Barnabas could not have been more pleased with Paul’s progress and was in awe of the anointing that rested upon him. He may have mused from time to time over the disbelief of those in Jerusalem regarding Paul’s ministry when he first appeared in Jerusalem years before. Now the potential was turning into the reality.

The Second Journey and Much More to Learn

Sometime after their return to Antioch, and after they had traveled to Jerusalem for the great council and doctrinal debate of Acts 15, it was time to revisit the places where they had preached and begun new church works. But this time it was Paul that told Barnabas that it was time to go. Here, he is clearly in the lead. But there was indeed more for Paul to learn.

“And Barnabas determined to take with them John, whose surname was Mark. But Paul thought not good to take him with them...” (Acts 15:37-38)

The passage goes on to reveal that there was quite a debate between the two regarding Mark’s place in the team. Paul remembered how, during the first journey, Mark had abandoned them and gone home before the work really got started. But Barnabas was equally adamant, desiring to give Mark a second chance to travel with them and learn from the experience. Finally, the rift between the two grew so big that Paul took Silas with him and Barnabas took Mark.

The work of Barnabas is not recorded any further after this point. Luke, the author of the Book of Acts was intent on capturing the history of Paul's missionary journeys, and so the record we read is mostly of him. But this we know of a certainty: it was the big heart of Barnabas that had been open to the Lord in seeing Paul's future in the ministry. Barnabas spent what time he could with the junior man, watching him grow, correcting as necessary, and seeing him become a true apostle in his own right. There were no regrets on Barnabas' part.

But what about the contention between the two over whether or not to include Mark on their second journey? Is it possible that Paul had missed something? Is it possible that Barnabas had seen something in young Mark that he had previously seen in Paul? Was it Barnabas with the eyes of the Spirit once again that looked at the potential of a younger and upcoming leader when others refused? The answer may lie in an obscure verse in one of Paul's letters to Timothy.

Take Mark

Many years later, imprisoned at Rome and sentenced eventually to death, Paul wrote to Timothy, giving sound and practical instructions for pastoring the great work at Ephesus that Paul loved so dearly. In the closing remarks of the letter, however, is one simple verse that shows that Barnabas had indeed been correct about Mark so long before.

"Only Luke is with me. Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry." (2 Timothy 4:11)

Here, the aged apostle freely admits that Mark had turned into a fine minister of the gospel, someone that he could rely on for true ministry. "For he is profitable to me" is Paul's way of saying, "Barnabas, you were right all along." Just the way Barnabas had seen Paul's possibilities, he had focused on Mark's as well. But Paul had not yet been able to see the way that Barnabas (and Jesus) had looked upon young Mark. Time and experience alone would teach Paul certain lessons. Barnabas had tried, but these lessons Paul had to learn for himself.

Today's church leaders should be investing regularly in the leadership of tomorrow. This investment takes the form of training of course, but also must include mentoring and the chance to gain practical experience under experienced and guiding hands. Working with future leaders is a tremendous opportunity and a great privilege. It is also a heavy responsibility. But seeing new leaders emerge and step into their individual places of responsibility in the great harvest is one of the most rewarding parts of being a

leader. After all, long before Paul had written that Mark was profitable for the ministry, Barnabas had said the same about Paul.

Lesson Six

ONLY ONE WAY OUT

Acts 12:1-11

It did not bode well for Simon Peter. King Herod Agrippa was suddenly intent on shutting down the workings of God's Church in Jerusalem. And his strategy seemed simple enough: kill the main leaders and the rest will be scattered. James, the brother of John, had already met his fate and had been killed shortly before Peter's arrest. It seemed certain that Peter was about to join his Master once and for all. But the same Master had other plans – plans that were so miraculous that it would be nearly impossible for anyone to believe.

There was no doubt on the part of the Jews or the Romans regarding the security with which they guarded Peter the day before his proposed execution. There were many soldiers assigned to the security detail, and to completely ensure that the prisoner had no chance of escape, two soldiers were posted directly with Peter. Each soldier was chained to Peter, one on his left and the other on his right. There was absolutely no way of escape for the apostle.

Prayer was made for Peter by the faithful church members at the home of Mark's mother, Mary. No doubt they prayed earnestly and longed for God to intercede. Perhaps Herod would change his mind. Perhaps the execution would be delayed. Maybe Peter would be granted some kind of political pardon. But one thing seemed certain: there was no possible means of escape. And even if he could escape, wouldn't he be hunted down and killed by the king's henchmen?

Peace in the Darkest Night

One of the first things we see in the story after Peter's imprisonment is that he was asleep between the two soldiers. It is very difficult to imagine what it must have felt like for Peter – only hours from certain death, in a dark and cruel prison, surrounded not just by soldiers there to taunt and ridicule him, but by every kind of criminal in Jerusalem. It must have been very disheartening indeed.

John the Baptist had been in a very similar situation sometime before. Arrested, condemned, and waiting to die in Herod Antipas' prison, he finally began to wonder at his predicament. It was so discouraging that John was compelled to send a message

outside the prison to Jesus, asking, “Are you really the one that should come, or should we be looking for another?”

John had been the man that had turned so many hearts of the Judeans toward Jesus. He had dumbfounded the Jewish leaders and teachers with his powerful and convicting preaching that urged Israel to repentance. He had lived a life of total separation to God for His service, yet found himself locked away and waiting for a cruel death at the hands of an evil king. And surely he must have wondered if his present circumstance was just. If Jesus was truly the One to save Israel, why would He not act and deliver John? In fact, why would Jesus not even visit John in the prison?

The deliverance did indeed finally come—by execution. John had served the Lord very well. He had decreased while Jesus had increased, and it was finally time for his eternal promotion and reward. He would not be delivered from the prison; only through death could he be freed to live with his God forever.

Perhaps Peter thought of this story in Matthew 11. Certainly he thought much about the recent death of his close friend and fellow disciple, James. Peter, Andrew, John, and James had all been fishermen together for many years in Galilee. Though everything had changed for them when Jesus called them to be fishers of men, the group was still very close. Now, James was gone, killed by the same power that held Peter in prison.

Leaders, like everyone else, will sometimes experience times of discouragement.

It is only natural for us to feel disheartened and discouraged during times of severe trials. We should remember, after all, that we hold this spiritual treasure in earthen vessels. And so feelings of discouragement are not necessarily signs of unbelief at all. They are actually just reactions of the human nature. But we do have to come to grips with these feelings and keep them where they belong, not allowing them to take priority and begin to control what we do. And somehow, in the midst of all of this, Peter managed to sleep peacefully.

In the Valley

Let’s face it—it’s much easier walking on the mountain top. We can see a long way and the air is clear and cool. It’s easier to maintain the right perspective and we can see what others only dream about. But it’s in the valley that God restores our souls. What did David really mean by that?

There are places that God will take leaders where only His grace can sustain them. This seems frightening to many, and we might prefer to never have to experience the truly dark times where we long for deliverance from our circumstances. But in order to see God's hand at work in a way that some only imagine, we have to be in a place that demands it. For Peter that night in the prison, there was simply no way of escape. There was only one way out—God's way. And the principle remains so for all leaders that would allow God to truly be the Lord of their lives. He will lead us beside the still waters, and into green pastures. He will restore our souls. But He will also lead us through the valley of the shadow of death.

The "shadow of death" presents leaders an interesting metaphor. The shadow proves death's presence, yet death has not struck its final blow against us. We're only in the shadow thus far. This kind of situation calls us to a simple revelation: our hope rests in God. When we finally are brought to the place where only God can help us, we stand stripped of personal cleverness and human resources, and confess our endless need of a loving Savior to rescue us and comfort us. In actual fact, we live in this state all of the time, but we also live as if it is not really the case. Special trials, therefore, serve as reminders of this ever present reality—we need God and we need Him desperately!

Leaders should be careful to avoid leaning on self-sufficiency rather than the power of God to see them through trials.

Leaders are resourceful people. They have been trained to be so. They possess gifts and talents given by God that propel them forward in the harvest. They enjoy the respect of the others in the body. They gain experience and learn how God works in their lives and ministries. In other words, they become adept at walking and working with the Lord. The danger in all of this comes when leaders begin to feel their self-sufficiency, leaning on the power of "self" more than the power of God.

Never Confused

Paul wrote about a "process" of learning that Christian leaders should consider and understand. In Romans 5:3-5 we read:

"...but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope: and hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us."

Enduring trials and tribulation, even in the toughest of times, means we learn what true patience is really about. The word "patience" is translated from a Greek word that

literally signifies, “living under.” We learn to abide under the protection of God in the difficult times. By doing this, leaders learn to trust God and they gain invaluable experience. Built upon this foundation of true experience stands our hope in God. He is always there, has always looked after us, and will forever continue to do so. And finally, this hope will never disappoint us. Once again, the Greek word here is worth taking note of. The word translated “ashamed” could also be rendered “confused.” Leaders should never be confused on this subject of trials and tribulations. They are simply part of this life on earth, and must be dealt with from a spiritual perspective – not always easy, but very necessary.

And this was how Peter could manage to sleep that night in prison. Despite the harshness of the trial he was enduring, Peter’s confidence never wavered. God was still able. Like the famous men in Daniel 3, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, whether delivered *from the trial* or *in the trial* made no difference. They simply knew that they would be delivered one way or another.

A Light Shines

It was then, in the still of the night, with Peter fast asleep, that the light began to shine in the prison. Once Peter had faced his greatest fear and overcome it by a firm resolve of faith and complete trust in God, the answer came swiftly. An angel picked Peter up and told him to get dressed quickly. The time to act had arrived.

Before the angel’s arrival, there was nothing to do but wait and pray, to reaffirm his faith in Jesus’ power, and to see what path the Lord would choose for Peter’s life at this stage. But no one had expected what was to follow. In a moment, the chains fell off of Peter, yet without disturbing the sleeping guards. Peter gathered his cloak and put on his sandals as the angel began to lead him through the prison. Verse 9 tells us that he went with the angel, but did not know whether it was a vision or it was real. It must have happened so fast and so suddenly that Peter did not have the time or the presence of mind to question what was happening. And for leaders, this serves as an important lesson.

There are certainly times to wait and to pray. There are times to reflect and to consider the next stage of our lives. And there are times when God simply says, “Let’s move together – now!” And these are the times when we must not question, but simply act and obey. When others do not have the spiritual sensitivity to respond, leaders must be ready, willing, and able to reply to the bidding of the Spirit. Leaders do not always understand completely what God is doing as He leads them through seemingly impossible

undertakings, but they are confident that the Spirit of God is in fact leading the way. Their responsibility is simply to follow at those times.

Peter and the angel passed through the first and second gates and quickly arrived at the “iron gate,” the final door that kept Peter captive. This door opened by itself as the two passed through and made their way to the streets of the city. There, the angel departed with no words of explanation regarding the sudden and miraculous deliverance from captivity.

On His Own Again

Peter found himself all alone after the departure of the heavenly messenger. And it was at this moment that the Bible tells us that he “came to himself.” Up until then, Peter had simply reacted and followed the leading of the angel. But now, alone in the dark streets, he realized he was on his own once more. But like us, Peter was never really alone.

There will be special times in the lives of leaders when they simply react as God does great things so quickly and urgently that they must simply obey without questioning or reasoning. After all, God knows the end from the beginning, and He knows the way through. But leaders are usually “thinkers,” people who like to reason things out and who like to know with certainty that a plan or project will enjoy a successful outcome once launched. They are used to goal-setting, planning meetings, and brain-storming sessions where they, along with their fellow leaders, can envision how exactly the God-given vision will be carried out. This is right and good, and serves as part of a properly organized administrative effort that the Church needs. But there are also the Acts 12 moments, where action is needed immediately.

*The Church needs leaders
that can respond
immediately to the Spirit
when necessary.*

This is not to be construed as meaning that leaders should act impulsively. Instead, it speaks of being *led by the Spirit*. Planning and organization both had their places in the Book of Acts. But the apostles were not simply administrators and managers of an “organization” called the Church. They were men of God who acted according to the direction that the Spirit was leading them. Leaders of today must always remember that this Church is a spiritual entity. It depends entirely on the life that the Holy Ghost breathes into it. It thrives where leaders are free to follow after the Spirit and participate with God in His work. It demands careful oversight and administration, but it also requires leaders that can respond immediately to the Spirit when necessary.

Once free from the prison and back on familiar ground, Peter then returned to his normal senses and carried on. He knew what to do, where to go, etc. In other words, he knew the next steps that he had to take. Although God was certainly still the One in control of his life, Peter was no longer in the place where he could only wait and pray. He could now resume working “on his own” while continuing to be led by the Holy Ghost.

It is always a marvelous experience when the miraculous power of God intervenes in a leader’s life, working wonders and guiding the leader in a clearly supernatural manner to minister. But the reality is that this is not the norm. Usually, leaders are found walking steadily with their Lord, doing the business of the Kingdom without fanfare, without drawing attention to themselves, and quietly and humbly working with the Lord. Thankfully, we do not have an Acts 12 experience regularly! It would simply be too much to bear. And so Peter found himself back closer to the norm once again, and he made his way to the house where the other believers were so intently praying for his deliverance.

Without a Doubt, It was Time to Act

Back at Mary’s house, the believers continued their all night prayer for Peter. Even with Peter’s arrival at the door, however, they couldn’t quite believe that it was really him. The Bible says that they were “astonished.” They were astonished that God had done exactly what they had prayed about. And it had happened so quickly. But there was no rebuke about “unbelief.” They believed--they simply could not have imagined how God would act. And furthermore, they had no obligation to know how He would do what He did. Their responsibility was simply to take the matter back to God and see what He would do. Leaders likewise have no responsibility to figure everything out in advance. We simply have to trust God sometimes.

But what if Peter would have doubted in the prison? What if he had stopped the angel and asked for some time to sort it out before he could accompany him? What if Peter would have “come to himself” while still in his chains? He might have concluded that it was all too impossible and given up. But instead, he simply obeyed *without hesitation*.

Knowing the will of God remains the responsibility of every church leader. It is not always an easy task, however. And in those times when we do not understand the path that God is taking for our lives, we must, like Peter in the prison, rest calm and confident in His ability. When the answer comes, we must seize the moment and, like Peter escaping the prison, respond to God’s leading. It may be a slow and methodical process as God leads us more and more into our respective places of spiritual responsibility. Or, it may come as an angel in the night, releasing us from our chains if we simply dare to

believe God, and to believe Him—now. There will always be times to wait and times to act. Leaders are simply people who are able to discern these times and live accordingly.

Lesson Seven

BACK TO LYSTRA

Acts 14:19-21

The start of the work at Lystra in Asia Minor proved to be more than they could have expected. A lame man had been healed simply by obeying the command of Paul to “Stand upright on thy feet.” Not only had he stood, but he had walked and leaped. The miracle so moved the crowd that they called Paul and Barnabas by the names of their gods, and the local priest prepared to make what he thought would be appropriate sacrifices unto the two apostles. They were scarcely able to restrain the locals from making such acts of man worship, reminding the crowd that they were also human, subject to the same wants and desires as anyone. They preached that the power rested in their living God alone. What a beginning of a great work in that region. But it would not come without great resistance.

In fact, it was at Lystra that evil-minded men from Antioch and Iconium arrived with their answer to Paul and Barnabas’ preaching. They took Paul and stoned him to the point that all recognized him as dead. After dragging him out of the city, they left his body there to rot. But God had other plans, and within moments as followers looked on, Paul arose and walked back into the town. The next day, Barnabas and Paul departed Lystra and traveled to Derbe. Some leaders might have concluded that it would be fruitless (not to mention terribly dangerous) to return and try to build the work in Lystra. But that was exactly what Paul and Barnabas did.

“And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch, confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.” Acts 14: 21-22

Troubled On Every Side

God never said that building the kingdom would be easy for church leadership. In fact, the Scriptures declare plainly that there would be much persecution and even suffering in order to win the prize. Merely finishing the race would prove daunting for many. And for those in spiritual leadership, the challenges would be significant indeed. Though very taxing, the task of building with Jesus is not at all impossible, and should never be viewed as such.

It is Paul, once again, that provides the keys to understanding the struggles that Christian leaders must endure in order to see the victory that God has promised. In 2 Corinthians 4: 7-12, we read,

“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us. We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus’ sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh. So then death worketh in us, but life in you.”

Firstly we must always remember that the spiritual treasure that we have been afforded is housed in human flesh – and that means struggles all along the way. There will be temptations, trials, persecutions, and feelings that try to strip us of our self-worth and God-given value, but we are encouraged to persevere. The language that Paul used to describe this battle between the reality of life in the flesh and the reality of life in the Spirit is worth noting. He tells us that leaders will be:

*Leaders are well aware of
the cost of revival, but
they persevere.*

- *Troubled on every side, yet not distressed.* The Greek words used here could just as well be translated as “afflicted, but never anguished” enough to become restrained from doing what must be done.
- *Perplexed, but not in despair.* The language here signifies “in doubt” and “without resources” but never “without a way through.”
- *Cast down, but not destroyed.* Here, Paul might have put it as “thrown down, but never perishing, ruined, or completely lost.”

Added to all of this is the statement that we would be constantly showing both the death and the life of Christ through our mortal bodies; in other words, always dying, often suffering, but always fully alive in Him. It will simply not be easy all of the time. Sometimes, we just have to go back to Lystra.

Acting On What We Claim to Believe

Paul went on to say in verse 13,

“We having the same spirit of faith, according as it is written, I believed, and therefore have I spoken; we also believe, and therefore speak.” Here, he is quoting Psalm 116:

"I love the Lord, because he hath heard my voice and my supplications. Because he hath inclined his ear unto me, therefore will I call upon him as long as I live. The sorrows of death compassed me, and the pains of hell gat hold upon me: I found trouble and sorrow. Then called I upon the name of the Lord; O Lord, I beseech thee, deliver my soul. Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; yea, our God is merciful. The Lord preserveth the simple: I was brought low, and he helped me. Return to thy rest, O my soul; for the Lord hath dealt bountifully with thee. For thou hast delivered my soul from death, mine eyes from tears, and my feet from falling. I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living. I believed, therefore have I spoken: I was greatly afflicted: I said in my haste, All men are liars." Psalm 116:1-11

Paul, like the psalmist, had to, from time to time, be reminded of all that God had done in his life. He had to return to the foundation of his faith and like the "simple" man of Psalm 116:6 become once again someone who was weak and helpless, yet also both sincere and upright; someone who put no confidence in his own sufficiency but in the sufficiency that only Jesus can provide. "I believe, therefore have I spoken" could just as well mean "I believe, thus will I act on what I believe." Sometimes, returning to Lystra is simply part of the package.

And returning to Lystra surely brought thoughts of pain and suffering. The apostle had been violently taken and stoned unmercifully there. To go back possibly meant that Paul would be rejected and tormented all over again. But he had to go back. There were, after all, believers that they had begun to disciple there, and nothing should prevent their spiritual development; not even the threat of death for the Apostle Paul.

Spiritual Eyesight

Paul's beliefs and life were shaped by principles that we should be careful to note. One of those principles is found at the close of 2 Corinthians 4. He said that although death works regularly on the outward man, the inward man should be renewed each and every day. And this was a principle that gave him the ability to truly see the way God sees. He went on in verses 17-18:

"For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more and exceeding weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal."

As surely as God is in control, there is the hidden working of His Spirit in us and through us each day. And the more we are given to Him, the more we will learn to judge life and its troubles by a spiritual balance instead of a carnal perception. Notice the opposition of the two forces in verse 17:

- A “light” affliction yields a “weight” of glory
- An affliction that lasts “but for a moment” produces an “eternal” reward

While it might be easy to say that only men like Paul could gain this kind of insight, the truth remains that all leaders can walk by the Spirit and watch as He works His divine will in their daily lives, despite the difficulties and seeming impossibilities that they are faced with. Perspective plays a large role in the success of what we attempt with the Lord.

How did God look at Lystra? How did He feel about those new converts that awaited the apostle’s return? Did God feel at all intimidated by the threats of the Jews from Iconium? Did God feel that the potential for revival in Lystra was outweighed by the danger of the moment? The answers to these questions can only be found when looking through His eyes. And this is possible for a leader in His Church.

Position – Perspective – Priorities

These three are very closely related in the Christian life. They serve as a formula for success for those wanting to become involved in spiritual ministry. In fact, they follow one another in a definite order, and that succession begins with understanding our “position.”

“**Position**” does not refer in any way to a given post or office in the administrative organization of the church. Instead, it speaks of who we really are in Christ Jesus. It is our understanding of where He has placed us in His kingdom and our relationship with Him. Knowing who we really are (as God knows us) presents us with a different way of looking at things. And knowing ourselves really only comes through knowing God more and more. As we learn more about Him, we learn more about the principles of His Kingdom, including the roles that the individual members of the body should play. This is when we begin to truly know who we are and where we serve. In other words, we begin to understand our position in His body.

“**Perspective**” is the result of understanding our position. By knowing where we are and who we are, we can then see things in their proper context. Our position affords us the opportunity to see unimpeded the work that we are engaged in, and we can begin to make the task more

personal than ever. We can understand why the trials come, and the purpose that they serve in our lives and ministries. We can understand what others fail to grasp as they stumble through the cares of this life. We can exercise hope in times of despair, or like

A leader’s priorities come as a result of having the proper perspective on eternal life.

Paul said once again in 2 Corinthians 4:9, we may be “struck down, but never killed.” (TCNT) We can even consider returning to our personal Lystra.

Finally, perspective gives us a more accurate glimpse at what our “**priorities**” should be. To see clearly and correctly is necessary to envision the next steps in our lives. To plan a future on anything less than that invites heartache, regret, and even disaster. But having the proper perspective allows us to see as He does and order our daily lives based upon His will, not on our own. And this makes such a difference in a leader’s life and ministry.

The Phillips New Testament translates 2 Corinthians 4:10, *“Every day we experience something of the death of Jesus so that we may also know the power of the life of Jesus in these bodies of ours.”*

In other words, we really can begin to understand the trials and tests of life as we walk more and more closely with God. In fact, some trials that we try to escape are actually part of God’s will that He wants to see carried out in us. We often resist what we do not like, even though it may actually have come from the Lord! But having proper priorities will shape our will to that of the Lord’s.

This is not to say that we should passively accept everything that comes our way – there are times of spiritual warfare, for example, where we must resist the adversary and wrestle for what is right. But some suffering is just part of our calling. And Christian leaders would do well to recognize that nothing really valuable in God’s kingdom comes without a price. Paul was made strong in the midst of his weaknesses and inabilities. When he suffered, he learned and grew and excelled (see 2 Corinthians 12: 9-10.)

A Jewel it Lystra

The sixteenth chapter of Acts begins with an astonishing fact. Upon Paul’s second return to Lystra (this time accompanied by Silas), he found a young man, full of zeal and faith. His name was Timothy, the same Timothy that would go on to pastor the work in Ephesus some time later. In fact, it is believed that once Timothy answered the call to ministry under Paul, he was never separated from the apostle until Paul left him in Ephesus to set the church in order and oversee the growth of the work based on sound apostolic doctrine.

What if Paul had never returned to Lystra? What would have become of the city’s inhabitants, left without the gospel? What would have become of young Timothy and his potential ministry in the Lord? And what will happen if Church leaders of today shrink from their responsibilities and refuse to return to their Lystra?

Paul went back and found Timothy – a true prize in the place where Paul nearly died. It had cost Paul something for sure, but the reward was worth every bit of the pain and suffering. Real leaders know this. Real leaders go where God leads them in the harvest. And sometimes, that means going back to Lystra.

Lesson Eight

RAVENING WOLVES

Acts 15:22-24

The Church was making its steady expansion. Persecution had caused some believers to flee Jerusalem and carry with them their new faith that they gladly shared in their new locations. And the missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas had carried the gospel into Asia Minor, where Gentiles were now being received into the body. All in all, it was happening as Jesus had ordained and Peter had prophesied.

But there were also inherent problems that sprang up—problems that are automatically part of the church growth process. And these intrinsic problems must be both recognized and dealt with by church leadership. Failure to act decisively in this area only brings a festering to the wound that these troubles inflict.

*When ministry outpaces
 sound leadership, troubles
 begin in the Church.*

Expansion of ministry calls for multiplication of leaders. That in itself is a very good and natural dynamic. But when ministry outpaces the development of sound leadership, the troubles really begin. And if they are not dealt with, the Church suffers as it is led by men not really qualified for the responsibility. Senior leadership stands ultimately responsible for ensuring that this does not come to pass. The very first council of apostles and elders at Jerusalem gives insight to this very subject in the fifteenth chapter of the Book of Acts.

Changing the Doctrine

Paul and Barnabas had been home in Antioch for quite some time. They had finished their first missionary journey together and had celebrated the success of the long and grueling tour. The church at Antioch had meanwhile thrived as well, growing steadily and becoming quite a presence in the region of Syria. It was the place where the believers were first called “Christians,” meaning “Christ-like.” Surely there was quite a good spirit that pervaded that large assembly of believers.

At the beginning of Acts 15, however, we read that certain men from Judea (and no doubt from Jerusalem) arrived in Antioch and began to sow the seeds of a new doctrinal

requirement: circumcision. While nothing strange to the Jewish Christians, it was completely new to the Gentile believers in the Antioch church. Their ultimate goal was the introduction of at least a portion of the Mosaic Law as a requisite part of the faith of the new Gentile church members.

Needless to say, this caused quite a disturbance in the church at Antioch. While Paul and Barnabas were strictly against the idea, and probably enjoyed the backing of the elders in the church as well, it was decided that this doctrinal matter should be taken to Jerusalem to be heard by the apostles and elders there. At this time, there were at least Peter, John, and James there in the great city in Judea who would hear the case and make their decision.

Upon their arrival in Jerusalem, the council opened its deliberations on the matter. And sure enough, when given the opportunity to express their views, certain church members who were formerly part of the Jewish sect of the Pharisees began to insist that circumcision become an essential part of the doctrine of salvation. It seems that there was a great amount of discussion on the subject, perhaps even what might be considered as “very heated debate.” But in the end, wiser heads prevailed.

Peter was the first of the apostles to rise and declare how God had sent him to minister the gospel message at the home of Cornelius in Acts 10. He testified about how God had poured out His Spirit on these Gentiles in Caesarea, and how there was really no difference between the Jew and the Gentile when it comes to salvation and the manner by which they are saved. Paul and Barnabas were also given their chance to speak and undoubtedly explained how God had received Gentile believers into His Body during their missionary journey into Asia Minor and elsewhere. Finally, James, who seems to have been the bishop of the Church at Jerusalem, gave his summation. There would be no such change of the apostolic doctrine. There would be no such burden placed upon the Gentile believers. The Church would continue to be one single body, with all members as equals, no matter their background.

The decision was well received and the Jerusalem Church determined to send a delegation of chosen men to Antioch with Barnabas and Paul to clearly explain their conclusion. All of this was carefully included in a letter from the elders at Jerusalem to the believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. Included in this letter is something that today’s leaders must recognize and include in their ministry.

Unrecognized Leadership

The letter began with the assessment that apparently the men who had arrived in Antioch from Judea were from the church in Jerusalem, but who had never received any

instruction regarding this new doctrine that they so desperately wanted to impose on the Gentiles. In other words, they were self-proclaimed teachers, and would have installed themselves as leaders at Antioch if not confronted. They had come from the mother church, but had arrived with their own version of the gospel message. And none of what they did had been sanctioned by the mother body.

*Real leaders watch out for
 “self-anointed” leaders
 and false teachers.*

Unfortunately, today this tendency still exists. There will always be self-anointed “leaders” that want to be heard and want to be followed as they proclaim their own versions of the way of salvation. Real leadership must stay on the lookout for such as these. Acts 15:24 contains the opening remarks of the letter sent to Antioch by the apostles and elders at Jerusalem:

“Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, ‘Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law:’ to whom we gave no such commandment.”

“Troubled you” and “subverting your souls” are very strong terms indeed! But they had to be strong at a time like this when people’s souls were at stake. The leaders in Jerusalem were not afraid and did not hesitate to act in this crisis. They decisively judged the matter and pointed out clearly that these men from Judea were not at all acting in any capacity with the authority of the Jerusalem Church.

Many years later, the Apostle John would write an epistle that addressed the very same issue. Though years had passed, the trend continued, and still needed to be resolutely addressed by senior leadership. He wrote in 1 John 2:18-19,

“Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.”

Sadly, there were many men in John’s day who were proclaiming that they held the keys to the Kingdom. But they were not numbered among the true brethren. They went out from the Church, but never continued in their submission to the doctrine and vision of that Church. At some point in their lives, they made the grievous decision that they knew more than the elders. Some of these like-minded men of today have been heard saying, “Jesus is my only pastor.” Invariably they fall into gross error and often into terrible sin. If these would have continued “with us” they would have proven their

commitment to staying submitted to truth and spiritual leadership. One of the oldest principles for leaders remains true: *leaders are always submitted to other leaders.*

There were self-professing leaders in Acts 15, in the final days of John's ministry, and there are still such people in today's church. And like the apostles, we must be vigilant to recognize who is with us in the God-given vision and who is not. If we fail in this, the sheep will be scattered and many will be devoured.

Ravening Wolves

Jesus had warned of the same tendency long before all of this in Matthew 7:15 when He declared,

"Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves."

*Leaders jealously guard
pure doctrine.*

"False prophet" may seem to be an enormous word that should only be ascribed to those that stand in public and prophesy, but in reality they are those that simply teach false doctrines as if these teachings were from the Lord. The epistles are full of warnings from each of the apostles concerning these men.

The other interesting aspect of Jesus' admonition was the use of the word "ravening." It is the Greek word *harpax* which means "rapacious" or "predatory." It stems from a Greek noun which speaks of pillaging, robbing, and extortion. Put simply, it is a serious word for a serious offense.

This kind of leadership that would introduce its own doctrine into the Church is predatory in nature. It seeks to subvert the true faith by introduction of its own mandates. It plunders the treasure of the truth, and robs the saints of their reward. And it must not be allowed to inject its venom into the flock. The apostolic doctrine must be closely and jealously guarded by today's church leaders. Safeguards must be in place to ensure this.

Knowing Them That Are His

Paul wrote that the foundation of God is a sure one and that this foundation has a seal stating that "The Lord knoweth them that are his." Why would we think any differently? Why would we begin to believe that while God knows who belongs to Him, we would not be able to identify who is really part of the team and who is not? Why is it that in many church organizations this definitive identification of who is in the vision is lacking? There is one main reason for this: the vision that is being cast is not a clear one.

One of the main advantages of a clearly cast vision is that it reveals who is really following it. In other words, the more clearly the vision is communicated, the more clearly the church membership can participate in it. And by participating with God in the carrying out of His plan, members and leaders prove they are really “with us.” Faithful members, in other words, begin to live according to the vision.

Without this kind of clear communication of a God-given vision, anyone can claim to be led by the Spirit, but in truth may be led by their flesh. The vision, therefore, helps define who is in submission to and walking in harmony with the Lord as He works in and through His Church. Put another way, senior church leaders should know “them that are His.”

Those that are being called into leadership must be given every opportunity to display their cooperation with existing leadership. They also must demonstrate their spiritual commitment to the vision, and will have already begun to prove their faithfulness to the task. If senior leaders fail in identifying who is really with them, it is inevitable that some will go out from us, without being sent by us. Since the doctrine that we hold so precious is a universal one, it must be guarded in a universal manner. This is to say that those entrusted with its keeping and its declaration must be “authorized.” This is not to imply that some kind of spiritual dictatorship makes every decision in the Church. Senior leaders, however, remain responsible for what is preached and taught at every level of leadership below theirs. This is universally applied, and thereby keeps the doctrine pure and unadulterated. In other words, there must be a system of accountability built in to the church’s administrative framework that holds leaders answerable for their actions and their teachings. We must never compromise in this area.

More and More Leaders

As said in the beginning of this lesson, when ministry expands the call for more and more leaders goes out. Therefore, regular training and development of potential leaders remains an on-going priority of the Church and its administration. Without this, we will suffer like the early Church did.

But even with this kind of development program for future leaders, there will always be some members and/or leaders that simply go out from us but who are not submitted to the vision. And in this case, decisive action will once be again become necessary as it was in Acts 15. All of our efforts, ministries, and responsibilities in leadership must be carefully contained within the boundaries of the vision that we have received from the Lord.

Hebrews 13:17 reminds us to *“Obey them that have rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account...”* In today’s great Church, we need leaders that watch over souls. We need good shepherds, not ravening wolves.

Lesson Nine

GOOD ENOUGH FOR THE DUNGEON

Acts 16:23-25

The story of Paul and Silas in the prison at Philippi is one of the best known in the Book of Acts. Their miraculous deliverance from the dungeon serves as an inspiration to all Christians, especially those who sometimes find themselves in a spiritual prison of their own. But just why were they there in the first place? And what really caused them to respond to their terrible predicament by singing praises unto God? In this lesson we will explore their attitude and see how leaders in the Church today can learn from their brothers, Paul and Silas.

Come and Help Us

The arrival at Philippi by Paul and his companion, Silas, was remarkable in and of itself. It followed what is known as the famous “Macedonian call.” When we trace the journey of Paul and Silas in the beginning of Acts 16, we can see that God had led them specifically to a place where they could answer this call. But this leading by the Spirit was not as smooth as we might at first think. There were necessary “detours.”

In verse 6, as they moved out of the region called Galatia, they at first wanted to go toward the west into what was known then as Asia. But the Holy Ghost changed that idea. A little later they tried to turn northeastward, but again, the Spirit of the Lord told them, “No.” So, they kept doing what leaders should always do when they are still waiting for specific direction—they kept moving forward. And in doing so they came to the northwest sea coast of Asia Minor to a town called Troas. And it was there that Paul received the night vision in which the two were told to come across the sea to Macedonia and help.

So we can learn from this that leaders should keep pressing forward and remain sensitive to the Spirit’s leading. Though we will make our own decisions in our respective ministries, these decisions should always be subjected to the will of God and corrected as necessary. Paul and Silas tried to go to the left and were forbidden. They tried to go to the right, and again were forbidden. So they continued on their journey until they reached the absolute end of their capability—the sea.

Leaders should remain sensitive to the Spirit as they continually move forward in the work.

Perhaps they wondered that night before they fell asleep about their location. Why were they led all this way just to be forced to stop at the sea? But they had followed what they believed to be the Holy Ghost's instructions and had corrected their course more than once in obedience to God and His plan—whatever it might be. And so the answer came clearly to them that night. A Macedonian man appeared in the vision and begged them to cross over the sea and to help those on the other side. Leaders may be called upon to go as far as they can from time to time before receiving the clear instructions that they were originally searching for. One of the keys in spiritual leadership, therefore, is to never stop.

"And after he had seen the vision, immediately we endeavoured to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us for to preach the gospel unto them." (Acts 16:10)

Strange Advertising for Free

The revival began in Macedonia in Philippi with a woman named Lydia. The church met probably in her home and her entire household was soon converted to Christianity. But then we read something very curious, and it was because of this thing that Paul and Silas were soon to be jailed.

There was a young woman, probably a bondmaid owned by someone, who made her masters much money by "divining." The word for "divination" in the Greek is the word from which the English derives its word, "python," the large snake of Africa that winds its body around that of its victim and suffocates it before swallowing it. This mythological serpent was believed to have been responsible for guarding the oracle at Delphi, where the gods would communicate with mankind. From that belief sprang a profession of fortune-telling, and this young girl was enslaved by her owners because of her seeming ability to reveal the future to those that would pay.

Not long after Paul and Silas had opened the work in Lydia's home and the revival had begun, the young woman with the spirit of divination began to follow them as they walked through the city and she declared that the two men were servants of the Supreme God. She even announced that they had come to Philippi to show people the way to salvation. On the surface, this all sounds pretty good—free advertising for the revival campaign! But Paul would have none of it.

After several days of listening to her cries, Paul wheeled on her and commanded the spirit to leave her. And instantly, she was set free from the spirit that had controlled her life. This was good news for her, but bad news for those that owned her. They soon realized that their means of money-making through her demonic profession were now finished, and they reacted sternly and quickly against the two preachers. Swiftly they

were brought before the judge, immediately condemned, horribly beaten, and then thrown into prison where they were chained to the dungeon's walls.

No Compromising

So why did Paul rebuke the spirit? Why did he take action against a girl that was simply announcing the truth of their visit to the city? Why do something that would ultimately lead to their imprisonment?

The answer lies in the compromise that the adversary was willing to make to halt the revival shortly after it had begun. If the girl were allowed to continue with her prophetic announcements regarding the greatness of Paul and his God, everyone would know that somehow the god of the girl was connected to the God of Paul and Silas. And this would have compromised everything they were sent to accomplish in Macedonia.

It requires a keen insight for leaders to judge these kinds of things. But, interestingly enough, this is exactly the purpose of the gift of the Spirit that we know as "discerning of spirits." The passage in 1 Corinthians 12:10 lists it as one of the major gifts that accompany the abiding presence of the Holy Ghost in a believer's life. The Twentieth Century New Testament calls the gift, "the gift of distinguishing between true and false inspiration." And Paul clearly exercised this gift that day in Philippi when he commanded the spirit to leave the girl in the name of the true God, Jesus Christ.

By its very nature, the Church is an inspirational and supernatural entity. Leaders, therefore, must be diligent in discriminating between true and false inspiration. Not everything that people consider supernatural is tied to the one true and living God. If leaders fail in this responsibility, what shall prevent the flock from following after that which would later prove to be false? The young girl had been sent by the enemy of Paul and Silas to quench the newly born revival spirit. It sounded good on the outside, but inside was the hidden compromise, and so Paul acted swiftly.

*Leaders must discern
between true and false
inspiration.*

Good Men in Jail

It was for no other reason than being very good at what they did that Paul and Silas were beaten and locked away. The reward that day for discerning what was right and what was wrong was a dark and dank dungeon. It is only our imagination that allows us to see what kind of conditions accompanied their prison sentence. But it surely must have been beyond description. This jail was no easy thing to endure. Most prisoners

would probably die there if left for very long in the unspeakable agony of their bonds. And all of this was simply the result of discerning correctly the will of God! To all of the other prisoners, this was a place of no hope whatsoever. Maybe one could endure long enough to survive his release. But most of them had probably lost the last shred of hope when they were locked away in this hole.

Jesus, of course, had forewarned all of this with His disciples in John 15:20, *“If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you.”* But it’s one thing to know and another thing to live. In Acts 16, Paul and Silas were “privileged” to experience it firsthand.

Many leaders wonder why they suffer persecution. Is it because they have done something wrong and are being punished? We know, however, that the righteous followers of Jesus Christ will indeed suffer for His name’s sake. Is it God trying to teach them a lesson, and this lesson requires suffering? Sometimes this most certainly is the case. Suffering does get our attention like little else can! But other times, it is not that at all. And it undoubtedly was not the case for Paul and Silas that night in prison. They were not there to learn anything. They were there because they were “worthy” to be there.

How Much Does Revival Cost?

God had ordained a revival in Macedonia, and He had foreseen its birth in the city of Philippi. He had led Paul and Silas specifically to a place where they could receive His full instructions to cross the sea and begin the preaching of the gospel there. The young woman’s attempts to compromise the truth were also foreseen by the Lord and He had prepared Paul with the necessary gifts for discerning the true from the false. In other words, it had all gone according to plan—including the prison!

So who would be judged worthy to be thrown into this dungeon? What apostle or church elder would be strong enough and sure enough to not question and complain? Who could God trust with this very important and heavy part of the mission? Who could endure the many stripes of the whipping post and still rejoice at the opportunity to work for God? Who could be chained to the prison’s stone walls and still have a song ready on their lips? Out of all the church members in all of the assemblies at that time, it was Paul and his new colleague Silas that were considered “good” enough for this assignment. It wasn’t a lesson at all, teaching them through suffering that they should do better the next time. It wasn’t the chastening of the Lord spoken about in Hebrews 12. It was part of the plan. It was part of the birth of God’s Church in an area of Europe that would develop into a very strong body of believers.

It was the Macedonian Church's faith that Paul boasted about in 2 Corinthians 8. Long after the prison experience of Acts 16, the Church in Macedonia would grow into a group of believers that knew their God and knew their places in the Kingdom. It was this same Macedonian Church that *"gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God."* (2 Corinthians 8:5) And this is why it was so important that God chose the right men for the mission at Philippi. He needed someone who could endure to the end and comprehend the prize at stake. Put simply, He needed men like Paul and Silas.

*Good leaders are worthy
to suffer for the expansion
of the Kingdom.*

How much does revival cost? We may never be able to know, but at the same time, we must as leaders be willing to pay that price. Who is worthy enough to really suffer for the expansion of God's Kingdom in the earth? Who is willing to go into new fields of harvest and slowly dig out, cultivate, and reap? This is where real leadership shows real spiritual strength. This where real leaders rise to the occasion and show what they are really made of. The jail was truly a place of no hope for nearly everyone there. But for two of the prisoners, it was simply the next step in their journey toward revival.

Singing in the Night

Suddenly, at the midnight hour, a hymn began in the dungeon. It was just one solitary voice at first, but then the second came in harmony, and the duet lifted their praise unto God in an extraordinary way in extraordinary circumstances. Verse 25 tells us that *"the prisoners heard them."* Who would sing in such a situation? Why waste one's breath and energy at a time like this? But the prisoners heard them. Only God knows how many of those prisoners were eventually added to the Church. But if they were, they surely remembered the first holy touch of Paul and Silas' choir that night.

*Whether singing or
complaining, leaders are
heard every day.*

Leaders are heard every day. We hear their singing, or we hear their complaints, but we hear them. How does our singing affect the other prisoners here in this life? At midnight in the prison, who will sing for the others if it is not God's anointed?

Paul and Silas could sing for two reasons: they were worthy to suffer, and they were ready to die if necessary. Later, Paul would write in Romans 8:18,

"For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."

And he wrote this by experience *after* the jail incident. Hebrews 11:38 tells us that there have been certain saints throughout history that have proven their faith in such a way that the world is not even worthy of their presence. These are the people that have another world in view, another prize that most never see. They remain committed to realizing the dream that God has cast before them, and they allow nothing to deter them from seeing it come to reality. This describes Paul and Silas that night. If God was ready for them to die for His name, they were ready. If He chose more suffering, so be it. They were ready.

Last Words

Many years later, while in another jail at Rome, Paul penned a letter to his dear friends at Philippi, the very place where this story began. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians is a sweet one. There are no rebukes about misbehavior or hidden sin in the Church there. It is an epistle that urges the saints onward in their spiritual journey, and contains many passages of love and consolation on Paul's part. In fact, Paul starts off the letter in verse 6 reminding the saints at Philippi that "...he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ." Paul and Silas must have loved to relate the story of how their imprisonment and subsequent miraculous release was the beginning of the revival in Macedonia. It must have been with a certain "spiritual pride" that they could share the story with others.

It was also in this letter that Paul wrote the famous words,

"That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable to his death; if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead." (3:10-11)

It had been at Philippi where he had lived this experience and enjoyed the privilege of suffering for the name of the Lord while helping to birth the Church there. And this is why Paul started the song that night. And that is why Silas joined in. And that is why the other prisoners heard something that they would never forget. And that is why leaders of today must, like Paul wrote to his beloved brothers and sisters at Philippi, "...press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." It really is worth it after all.

Lesson Ten

UNMOVED

Acts 20:22-24

Paul could sense a change. Somehow in his spirit he knew that the closing chapters of his life as an apostle were now in view, and somewhere in the not too distant future a major event was coming.

Acts 20 gives us a look at Paul's journey back toward Jerusalem after his third missionary tour. It was on this third journey that he had discovered the disciples of John the Baptist at Ephesus and the revival there had begun. Ephesus proved to be the special place that Paul had envisioned. Chapter sixteen of First Corinthians tells us that Paul had known that there would be a special kind of revival there, although it would be accompanied by the presence of many adversaries. But Paul knew well that where there were adversaries, the promise of revival usually followed.

And so he labored long and hard in the great city, and by the end of the first two years, *"...all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks."* Later we are told that Paul had invested three years of his life building the Church at Ephesus and training future leaders there. Nowhere else would he spend this much time in one place. It was indeed a special city with a special promise of great growth.

And so Acts 20 began with a decision to return to Jerusalem for the Jewish Feast of Pentecost. With certain urgency, Paul seemed pressed to get back to Judea in time for the celebrations there. He was in such a hurry to get to Jerusalem that he determined not to stop by Ephesus on his return through that area, knowing that once he was there he would no doubt be constrained to spend time with the church he loved so much. Instead, he called for the elders and leaders from the Ephesian work to meet with him at another coastal town, Miletus. And one of the most moving speeches recorded in the Book of Acts is recorded in the twentieth chapter as Paul shared what he knew would be his last words with them.

Bound in the Spirit

We cannot be sure of what Paul sensed in the Spirit, but we do know that he knew about the consequences of going to Jerusalem. In this, we find a contradiction of "feelings." He knew beyond a doubt that he should go to Jerusalem, but he also felt

keenly aware of a pressing danger and an uncertainty in what would happen once he arrived. This antithesis is worth studying by leaders; especially the decisive stance that Paul took with regards to what was the more important of the two.

He was, in his own words, “bound in the spirit to go.” But he was also warned by the Spirit about going! We should carefully note, however, that the Holy Ghost did not tell him *not* to go. He was simply warned about the journey and its final result. And so he remained unmoved in his decision. Both the urgency to go and the warning about going came from the same source! Leaders should understand that feeling the threat and/or the danger is not necessarily the Spirit of God telling them not to undertake something. It may be merely an alert, warning them to be on guard and to “expect the unexpected.”

Paul stated in verse 23 that he had been warned “in every city” concerning the bonds and afflictions that awaited him at Jerusalem. So it had been confirmed by much more than the mouths of two or three witnesses! But while bonds awaited him, he felt bound nonetheless to make the journey. And the Lord’s “bonds” on Paul’s life were stronger than anything that could threaten him once at Jerusalem. If the Holy Ghost knew that danger was in store, then the Holy Ghost also had prepared the plan for navigating Paul’s way through the danger. Leaders do not have to know all of the details regarding what awaits them in their lives, but they do indeed need to be “bound” in the Spirit to carry forward the work that has been given them.

*Senior leaders are bound
in the Spirit to carry out
their God-given
responsibilities.*

Two Sides of a Prophecy

As Paul continued to make his way toward Jerusalem, the warnings continued to come. In Acts 21:4, certain believers in Tyre told him plainly that he should not go up to Jerusalem. The verse even tells us that they spoke to Paul through the Spirit, but we should see the real issue here. They reacted to what God had shown them for sure. But their interpretation was different from that of the apostle’s. For the brothers at Tyre, a warning of danger in Jerusalem was a sign *not to go*. For Paul, it was a *confirmation* of what he had already known. He must go, but he should go with the warning and be ready for the Spirit to reveal every necessary action that he would be required to take.

Then again, in verses 10-12, we are told that Agabus, a prophet from Judea arrived in Caesarea and again warned Paul of the potential threat in Jerusalem. And again, those

around Paul took this to mean that he should not go. This time, Paul was more adamant than before.

We read in verse 13,

“What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.”

While his friends took one side of the prophetic warnings, Paul took the other and was more determined than ever to complete his journey.

While they looked at the warnings from a human perspective, Paul considered them from a spiritual one. He had an urgent mission to complete, and while he could not yet understand the details of all that the mission entailed, he was bound to accomplish it, no matter what the cost. Finally, the brethren at Caesarea resigned themselves to the will of God being done and released Paul on the next leg of the trip.

Leaders are careful to take a spiritual perspective when confronted with genuine threats to their ministries.

“The will of the Lord be done” of Acts 21:14 is one of the most breathed prayers throughout history, but it has not always been truly believed or practiced. In other words, it is not always easy to turn the statement into reality. But leaders have an obligation to find the will of God and to be bound to it, not allowing circumstances nor the feelings and opinions of others to change their minds. Paul was already “bound,” so what could befall him at Jerusalem that God could not oversee?

A Haunting Memory

Many years before, Paul, then known as Saul, had been witness to something that he could never shake from his memory. As a younger man, Paul had been one of the great persecutors of the newly born Christian Church in Jerusalem. He had contributed to the arrest and imprisonment (and even death) of many of the new believers as the Sanhedrin sought to extinguish the fire of God’s revival in the city. No doubt Paul had seen many horrific things during that time, but one single scene in Acts 7 would remain with him forever.

A man named Stephen had been chosen as one of the first deacons of the Church in Acts 6, and had grown in the Spirit to such an extent that Acts 6:8 tells us,

“And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.”

He was not one of the apostles of the Lord, yet he acted in harmony with the Spirit and became an undeniable witness to the power of the Holy Ghost working in him. And so

the Jewish elders determined to falsely accuse him as a blasphemer and then murder him by stoning him to death.

The plan was sadly carried out to its tragic conclusion. The preaching of Stephen in Acts 7 is one of the longest recorded sermons in the Bible, and the final words of Stephen as recorded by Luke in the Book of Acts ring with conviction even today. As the accusers began their physical attack against Stephen, he looked toward heaven and proclaimed that he saw a vision of Jesus “standing on the right hand of God,” or in other words, he saw the power and authority of God in Jesus Christ.

This was too much for the Jewish leaders, and they seized Stephen, dragged him outside the city, and stoned him cruelly. All the while, Stephen’s gaze remained fixed on his Lord, asking Jesus to receive his spirit as he was about to die. His last words were a prayer that his killers not be held accountable for the sin that they were committing. These words were identical in nature to the prayer that Jesus had uttered for His executioners. Stephen was not at all resisting his death. To the contrary, he had accepted it before the first stone had been cast in his direction. Simply put, Stephen was “bound in the Spirit” to carry out his part of the Church’s early development. If this cruel end to his life on earth was part of God’s will for him, then why should he try to overthrow it? The bonds of God’s Spirit proved greater than the pain of the stones.

But Luke was very careful in recording one other crucial part of the story of Stephen’s martyrdom. Acts 8:1 begins with these words, “*And Saul was consenting unto his death.*” Paul was there, and he witnessed every part of the process, from the conviction of Stephen’s preaching to his prayer for mercy against his attackers at the end. And this scene must have remained firmly fixed in Paul’s memory for the rest of his life. In fact, in Acts 22:20, Paul testified of his presence there and how he saw the martyr’s murder while consenting to his death sentence.

It seems obvious therefore that from the beginning of the Christian movement in Jerusalem, Paul had seen the commitment of many brothers and sisters who literally gave their lives for the blessing of life eternal with their Lord and Savior. Now, when warned of imminent danger awaiting him in Jerusalem, would Paul have a lesser commitment than that?

The Final Crown

Leaders see what others miss. They fix their gaze on Jesus, grasping His divine will and they never let go. They understand that sometimes His will means hardship, conflict, and even danger, but they remain true to the course that

Leaders fix their gaze on Jesus, grasping His will for their lives, and they never let go.

God has designed for them to follow. They are simply “bound” to do His bidding and to see the prize at the end of life’s adventure. Paul knew this very well. He had seen it in Stephen’s commitment, and now in Acts 20, it was his chance to display the same loyalty and dedication to the Almighty.

In 2 Timothy 4:6-8 we can read about this commitment that Paul had learned to live:

“For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.”

Paul would not in fact be murdered at Jerusalem. But there he would find his opportunity to carry out his long-felt desire to visit Rome and preach the gospel there. He was arrested and tried in Judea, then transported to Rome where he was ultimately martyred for the Lord.

The warnings had been true all along. There were indeed bonds and afflictions waiting for Paul at Jerusalem. But none of the warnings would be allowed to “move” Paul away from his God-appointed destiny. He looked forward with everything in him to the appearing of the Lord and the crown of righteousness that was reserved for him. The same crown awaits today’s leaders – but will they love Him until the end?