

# **Power to Live By**

## *Studies from the Book of Acts*

### ***PART I***

### ***JERUSALEM AND SAMARIA***

## **LESSON 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Book of Acts is fast-moving and definitely one of the most exciting books in the Bible. It is the second book in a two-part series written by a physician and missionary named Luke. The first of the series, the book of Luke, records the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Acts then gives an historical account of the early church as it spread across the Roman Empire in the first century A.D.

Luke traveled with the apostle Paul and probably wrote Luke and Acts during Paul's imprisonment in Rome between 63 and 70 A.D. Luke's writings are addressed to a Roman aristocrat named Theophilus, who most likely helped pay for publication costs. The Lucan series encouraged the faith of believers in Christ while it displaced ill-founded reports about Christianity to the unbelieving world.

Luke did not attempt to give an exhaustive historical account of the early church in the book of Acts. However, his careful compilations form the

chief source book regarding first century Christianity and provide firm historical foundations for the Christian faith.

## **THE RISEN LORD**

### **Acts 1**

Acts begins with the forty days during which Jesus appeared to His disciples<sup>1</sup> after His resurrection. During this time, Jesus explained Messianic prophecies<sup>2</sup> about Himself found throughout the Old Testament Scriptures. That Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah<sup>3</sup> of Israel was such good news--it would have to be proclaimed! However, Jesus instructed the believers to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit<sup>4</sup> came upon them to empower them as witnesses to the truth about the resurrected Christ.

After this, Jesus ascended into heaven before their eyes, and angels appeared to declare that the Lord would return in the same way He left! The disciples were filled with awe and joy as they returned to Jerusalem to pray and wait for the coming of the promised Holy Spirit.<sup>5</sup>

## **BUILDING ON THE BASICS**

### **When the Task is Too Big**

Imagine, if you can, what the disciples experienced as they walked with Jesus during His earthly ministry. They witnessed crippled people straightening their backs and blind men suddenly receiving sight. They saw the sores on ten lepers healed simultaneously and watched as Jesus fed five thousand people from five loaves and two fish. A man named Lazarus walked out of his grave at the command of Jesus, and the only son of a widow sat up in his coffin. Jesus walked on the water of the Sea of Galilee before their very eyes and calmed a ferocious storm with the words, "Quiet, be still!" The list of miracles could go on, but in recent days, they had witnessed the most incredible of all. For forty days they had walked and

talked with Jesus after His *resurrection from the dead*. During that time, He had opened the Scriptures to explain prophecies written hundreds of years before that were fulfilled through His life. There was no doubt in their minds: He was the Messiah, Savior and King of creation.

If you had been one of those disciples, you might have thought that everyone would want to know the wonderful truth about the Christ. But Jesus knew that while many *would* want to know, countless others would not, and persecution would come. For this reason, the 120 disciples were instructed to wait until they were given God's power to accomplish the humanly impossible task of spreading the truth about Jesus Christ. The triumphant spread of Christianity throughout the world in the face of bitter persecution would be nothing short of supernatural.

We all face tasks that overwhelm us from time to time, and many of us seem to have difficult challenges before us most of the time. Words and phrases such as, "It's over my head," "unattainable," "out of the question," "too much..." bombard our minds evoking negative emotions which drain our energy and hasten defeat.

One of the main themes of the book of Acts is that God can give us supernatural power to face the seemingly impossible challenges of life. It is appropriate to begin our study on *Power to Live By* with some observations about facing the impossible task.

***Major Prophecies Concerning Jesus and Their Fulfillment  
Arranged Chronologically***

<b>Description of Prophecy</b>	<b>Prophecy</b>	<b>Fulfillment</b>
Would be the "Offspring of a Woman"	Gen 3:15	Gal 4:4
Promised Offspring of Abraham	Gen 18:18	Acts 3:25
Promised Offspring of Isaac	Gen 17:19	Mt 1:2
Promised Offspring of Jacob	Num 24:17	Lk 3:34
Will descend from the tribe of Judah	Gen 49:10	Lk 3:33
The Heir to the throne of David	Isa 9:7	Mt 1:1
Place of birth	Mic 5:2	Mt 2:1
Time of birth	Dan 9:25	Lk 2:1-2
Born of a virgin	Isa 7:14	Mt 1:18
Slaughter of Infants	Jer 31:15	Mt 2:16
Escape into Egypt	Hos 11:1	Mt 2:14

Ministry in Galilee	Isa 9:1-2	Mt 4:12-16
As a Prophet	Dt. 18:15	Jn 6:14
His rejection by Jews	Isa 53:3	Jn 1:11
Some of his characteristics	Is 11:2	Lk 2:52
His triumphal entry	Zec 9:9	Jn 12:13-14
Betrayed by a friend	Ps 41:9	Mk 14:10
Sold for thirty pieces of silver	Zec 11:12	Mt 26:15
Money to be returned for a potter's field	Zec 11:13	Mt 27:6-7
False witnesses accuse him	Ps 27:12	Mt 26:60-61
Silent when accused	Is 53:7	Mt 26:62-63
Struck and spit on	Is 50:6	Mk 14:65
Hated without cause	Ps 69:4	Jn 15:23-25
Suffered vicariously	Isa 53:4-5	Mt 8:16-17
Crucified with sinners	Isa 53:12	Mt 27:38
Hands and feet pierced	Ps 22:16	Jn 20:27
Mocked and insulted	Ps 22:6-8	Mt 27:39-40
Given gall and vinegar	Ps 69:21	Jn 19:29
Hears prophetic words repeated in mockery	Ps 22:8	Mt 27:43
Prays for His enemies	Ps 109:4	Lk 23:34
His side to be pierced	Zec 12:10	Jn 19:34
Soldiers cast lots for his clothes	Ps 22:18	Mk 15:24
To be buried with the rich	Isa 53:9	Mt 27:57-60
His resurrection	Ps 16:10	Mt 28:9
His Ascension	Ps 68:18	Lk 24:50-51

## LESSON 2

### PENTECOST--THE CHURCH IS BORN

#### Acts 2:1-41

The day of Pentecost<sup>1</sup> was a busy one in Jerusalem. Tens of thousands of devout Jews and Gentile converts<sup>2</sup> from all over the Mediterranean world and Middle East filled the streets of the city to celebrate this Jewish holiday.

It was on this day, fifty days after the crucifixion, that the disciples, numbering one hundred twenty (1:15), were gathered together in a house in Jerusalem. Suddenly the place was filled with the reverberation of a mighty wind, and what appeared to be tongues of fire separated and rested on each one there. Simultaneously, they were all filled with the Holy Spirit<sup>3,4</sup> and began to speak in languages unknown to them.<sup>5</sup>

The sound attracted a curious crowd as the believers moved to the street, continuing to praise God in other tongues. People from various parts of the world heard their native languages and were filled with wonderment about what was happening.

The twelve apostles rose to give explanation to the people. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, Peter became the apostles' spokesman. He explained that the tongues phenomena was evidence that the Spirit of God was in their midst bearing witness of the truth about Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup>

Peter proceeded to confront the crowd of thousands with facts about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The events of which Peter spoke had happened in the presence of many who were living in Judea during their occurrence, and no one disputed his words.

By referring to Old Testament prophecy regarding the resurrection of the Messiah (Psalm 16:8-11; Acts 2:25-31), Peter was able to show that Jesus of Nazareth and the Jewish Messiah were one and the same Person.

Pierced by the convicting power of the Holy Spirit, people in the crowd asked what their response should be to these truths. Peter instructed them to repent,<sup>7</sup> receive God's forgiveness and be baptized<sup>8</sup> in the name of Jesus Christ. The repentance of which Peter spoke required a revised perspective about Jesus; He was not just a carpenter or a religious impostor but the divine Lord and Messiah. After this change of heart, the act of baptism in the name of Jesus Christ symbolized one's identification with the message of Jesus and His people.

The result of Peter's preaching and the work of the Holy Spirit was no doubt incredible to the initial band of disciples: three thousand new believers were baptized that day.

## **BUILDING ON THE BASICS**

### **Power to Live By**

Anyone who seriously studies the life of Jesus finds a model to emulate. He was kind, patient and compassionate, but firm about the truth. He had access to the infinite wisdom of God and was able to at once see the spiritual world as well as the physical. He was a whole person, at peace with God and Himself and able to unselfishly serve the needs of others.

All of us want to be whole as Jesus was...we yearn to function as God created us to function...at peace within and significant to the lives of others. Yet we often find it impossible to overcome fear, self-doubt, anxiety, indecisiveness and selfishness. As hard as we may try, we find it impossible to be like Jesus.

Peter was such a man. The fearless Peter we find in Acts 2 is far different than the one who 50 days earlier had lacked the courage to confess his association with Jesus. He denied even knowing the Man he had been close to for the past three years (Luke 22:54-62).

What made the difference in Peter? How had he overcome his fear, inconsistency, self-doubt, anxiety? The Scriptures make it clear that the

source of Peter's strength came from the risen Christ, living His life through Peter in the power of His indwelling Holy Spirit.

If we learn nothing else from our study of Acts than the truth that the Holy Spirit allows Jesus to live His life through us, this would be enough. Let us look at what the Bible has to say about the incredible *power to live by* that God makes available to each of us.

## LESSON 3

### HEALING OF A LAME MAN

#### Acts 3:1-4:4

The first Christians were all Jews who continued to worship regularly at the temple, gathering in a section called Solomon's Colonnade. One day, as Peter and John were on their way to the temple, they walked by a lame man who begged them for money. The forty-year old man (4:22) had been lame from birth, and every day he was placed by the temple gate to beg. Peter explained he had no money, but by the authority of Jesus Christ commanded the man to walk.

The lame man rose to his feet and started walking, jumping and praising God. He clung to the apostles as the crowds gathered. Peter seized the opportunity to tell the people about Jesus Christ. Once again, the apostle turned to the Old Testament promises and prophecies to show that Jesus of Nazareth was their fulfillment.

While ignorance may have caused the Jews to crucify Jesus, Peter left his audience with no excuse for refusing to acknowledge Jesus as Lord now. He encouraged the people to repent, turn to God, and experience forgiveness and refreshment from the Lord.

While they were speaking to the people, the priests, captain of the temple guard and Sadducees<sup>1</sup> came up. They were greatly annoyed by the apostles' teaching and seized Peter and John. The apostles were imprisoned to await trial before the Sanhedrin<sup>2</sup> the next day.

Meanwhile, many had believed Peter's words, and the number of men alone who believed in Jesus grew to five thousand.

## **BUILDING ON THE BASICS**

### **Experiencing the Healing We Need**

The lame man in our story had a disability obvious to all. Often our greater areas of crippledness are not outwardly visible, however. Socially, emotionally and spiritually, we can experience painful problems.

While God can and does sometimes perform physical miracles of healing, the most important healing He performs in our lives is in the spiritual arena. He desires to use our every experience--both good and bad-- to orchestrate the healing of damaged emotions, to correct misconceptions about God and to free us to enjoy relationships with others. Let's take a look at what the Bible says about how we can experience God's healing in our lives as we trust Him.

## **LESSON 4**

### **INITIAL PERSECUTION**

#### **Acts 4:5-31**

In our last lesson, we saw Peter heal a lame beggar over forty years old who had been crippled all his life. When crowds of amazed people gathered around the apostles in the temple, Peter explained that the phenomenal



healing, done in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, proved the resurrection and Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Greatly disturbed by the apostles' teaching, some Sadducees<sup>1</sup> and the temple guard captain arrested Peter and John. After a night in jail, the apostles were brought to trial before the Sanhedrin.<sup>2</sup>

When Peter presented their defense to the Sanhedrin, he was speaking to the most intellectual, wealthy and powerful men in Judea. The Sanhedrin was also the same court that had condemned Jesus to death. With the possibility of the same sentence, Peter, a simple Galilean fisherman, spoke with astounding boldness. In essence, he turned the trial back on his accusers as he stated exactly what they did not want to hear: the lame man who stood before them was healed in the name of Jesus Christ whom they had crucified and whom God had raised from the dead.<sup>3</sup> Peter quoted Old Testament prophecy that predicted the Jewish rejection of their Messiah, and boldly declared that only faith in Jesus could save them.

Peter and John were sent from the room as the Sanhedrin discussed the issue. They were amazed at the courage and eloquence of the apostles. They were simple, uneducated men whom they recognized to have been Jesus' disciples. While the miraculous healing of the lame man was undeniable, the Sanhedrin was determined to stop the spread of teaching about the resurrection of Jesus. The healing had given Peter favor with the people, however, and a strong sentence on the apostles could lead to riots and trouble with the Roman authorities. The Sanhedrin had no choice but to severely threaten the apostles and let them go.

Summoning Peter and John back into the room, they warned them never to speak in the name of Jesus again. The apostles' response was simple: we will obey God and continue to tell what we have seen (4:19-20).

Peter and John returned to report the day's happenings to the other believers. With one accord, they lifted their hearts in prayer, acknowledging the sovereign power of God and His ultimate victory over man's resistance to His plans. Remembering the suffering and triumph of Jesus Christ, they prayed for the courage needed to witness boldly about Him. They also asked God to continue the signs and miracles that confirmed the truth of their witness.

As they prayed, the place was shaken as the Holy Spirit once again filled<sup>4</sup> and enabled the believers to speak boldly about their faith, even in the face of possible death.

## **BUILDING ON THE BASICS**

### **Power Over Negative Emotions**

No doubt Peter and John and the believers in Acts 4 could have panicked over their situation. Peter's earlier denial of the Lord showed that he could be shaken by fear, yet courage and boldness triumphed over his circumstances in the courtroom.

Throughout the book of Acts, we will see incredible power over potentially defeating emotions. In this wonderful book there are numerous examples of people overcoming incredible odds because they were able to control rather than be controlled by their feelings.

While even negative emotions can be helpful and are not in and of themselves bad, examples abound of paralysis and defeat that result from uncontrolled emotions. When the child inside each of us screams with fear, hurt or anger, how can we stand secure? Let's make some observations about how ordinary people did it in the book of Acts.

## **LESSON 5**

### **THE FIRST CHURCH COMMUNITY**

#### **Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-5:16**

There was awe and great joy among the first believers in Christ. As devout Jews, they continued to keep Jewish traditions, meeting together in the temple in a large area called Solomon's Colonnade. Empowered by God's

Spirit<sup>1</sup>, the apostles spoke boldly of the resurrection and Lordship of Jesus and performed miraculous signs of healing and deliverance.<sup>2</sup> Thousands had accepted Jesus as their Messiah (cf. 4:4), and the number of believers was growing daily.

The oneness among the believers was evidenced by the sharing of possessions to meet each other's needs. Some even sold property and gave the proceeds to the church. Luke records one instance, however, when a couple named Ananias and Sapphira lied about their giving. They determined that they would say they were giving the entire amount received for the sale of some property when in fact they were only giving a portion of their profit to the church. When Peter confronted them about their deceit, Ananias and Sapphira fell dead at the apostle's feet.<sup>3</sup>

As a result of this incident, a reverent fear of God gripped the church community as well as the general public. Counterfeit or halfhearted believers began to keep their distance from the committed believers in the temple (cf. 5:13). Even so, the teaching and healing ministries of the apostles continued, and the church grew steadily.

## **BUILDING ON THE BASICS**

### **Power Over Hypocrisy**

How many of us have heard someone say, "I don't believe in God because of all the hypocrites in the church." Many people are turned away from Christian faith because there is a lack of integrity in the lives of the believers they know. The duplicity in the lives of professed Christians is poison to the cause of Christ.

God knows the power of hypocrisy and throughout history has often publicly exposed the person who pretends to be holy while practicing ungodliness. God could not allow hypocrisy to begin to perpetrate itself in the young body of believers in the early church.

Hypocrisy develops subtly, and any one of us can be pulled into its grip. In this lesson, we will look at some of the roots of hypocrisy and where power is found to live the Christian life authentically.

# LESSON 6

## PERSECUTION CONTINUES

### Acts 5:17-42

As a result of the apostles' miracle-working power and the growth of the Christian movement, the high priest and Sadducees<sup>1</sup> were filled with jealousy. They had the twelve apostles arrested to face trial before the Sanhedrin.<sup>2</sup>

Their plans were interrupted, however, when an angel of the Lord<sup>3</sup> released the apostles from jail in the middle of the night. The angel instructed them to resume teaching in the temple, so the twelve men did so at daybreak.

In the meantime, the Sanhedrin assembled, only to discover the need to locate their prisoners. Angry as they may have been, the court could not use force in this second arrest because of the apostles' popularity with the people. Finally, after gathering the church leaders again, the Sanhedrin trial began.

As the trial ensued, there was no mention of the unexplained escape from prison the night before. Instead the court went directly to the business of charging the apostles with (1) disobeying their earlier orders not to speak about Jesus, and for (2) blaming the Jewish leaders for Jesus' death.

With incredible boldness, Peter and the apostles answered the charges. They first declared that God's authority in their lives came before the Sanhedrin's. With that said, they went on to proclaim Jesus of Nazareth, whom the Jewish leaders had crucified, to be the risen Christ and Savior of Israel. The response was predictable: the Sanhedrin was enraged and ready to kill the apostles. However, Gamaliel,<sup>4</sup> a respected Pharisee and teacher of the

law, prevented the Sanhedrin from harming the apostles. After having the apostles sent from the room, Gamaliel advised that the court be cautious in their treatment of the church leaders. He reasoned that if the Christian movement *was not* of God, it would dwindle and die out as had other fanatical movements. But if it *was* of God, they would be powerless to stop its growth.

Persuaded by the speech of Gamaliel, the court strictly ordered the apostles not to speak of Jesus again, had them flogged and released them. The apostles left rejoicing to have suffered for Christ. Without hesitation, they continued to teach about Jesus in private homes and in the temple.

## **BUILDING ON THE BASICS**

### **Dealing With Jealousy**

Jealousy is listed among the greatest evils in the Bible. It is closely associated with envy, anger, greed and the desire to monopolize or control. It was jealousy that caused the Jewish leaders to crucify Jesus, and it was jealousy that brought persecution to the early church leaders.

Jealousy is often the real motive behind cruel actions that claim to be dealing with another's wrongdoing. For example, the high priest's jealous actions toward the apostles were disguised as pious dealing with the "criminal" actions of the apostles. The jealous person often becomes suspicious and imagines criticisms about the one of whom he is jealous. He then believes his imaginations and seeks to carry out punishment. The true problem is jealousy, which manifests itself in the desire to tear down the other person. While jealousy may not always surface so obviously, it may reveal itself quietly with a hidden delight over someone else's bad fortune.

When we are the recipient of jealousy, we often do not recognize this evil motive behind another's cruel actions. We may find that person distant and generally difficult to deal with, but we are not sure why. Their suspicion and hidden agendas seem to intend to hurt us, but the reasons behind such actions do not make sense. Knowing our own faults and weaknesses, we may never conceive of being the source of another person's jealousy. However, that person has their eye on a strength we possess, and wants to

neutralize that strength. Because it is carefully disguised, jealousy is very difficult to confront and deal with honestly.

Devious, deceitful and very destructive, jealousy is indeed a monstrous emotion. For this reason, the Bible clearly warns us not to permit jealousy in our lives. It also gives some principles that can help us deal with jealousy when it comes our way from another. Let's take a look at what the Bible has to say about dealing with jealousy.

## **LESSON 7**

### **STEPHEN, THE FIRST MARTYR**

#### **Acts 6:1-8:3**

At the time of the early church, Jerusalem was made up of two types of Jews. The Grecian, or Hellenistic, Jews spoke Greek and were originally from countries outside of Palestine. The Hebraic, or Palestinian, Jews spoke Hebrew or Aramaic, were native Palestinians and observed all the customs of Judaism.

We do not know how much time had gone by since the close of Acts chapter 5,<sup>1</sup> but the church had grown vastly. At this time, all the believers in Christ were Jewish, either Hebraic or Hellenistic. The Hellenistic Jews complained that their widows<sup>2</sup> were being neglected in the daily distribution of relief money. Overloaded with responsibility, the twelve apostles allowed the multitude of believers to elect seven godly men to assume administrative responsibilities. The Seven, as they were called (Acts 21:8), were named by the people and commissioned into service by the apostles. They all had Greek names and were probably Hellenistic believers.

One of the Seven, Stephen, became a powerful teacher, particularly among the Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem. With signs and miracles, God confirmed Stephen's words about the Christian faith. However, when a certain group of non-believing Hellenistics called Freedmen<sup>3</sup> failed in their attempts to oppose Stephen, they caused an uprising of the people. Falsely accused, Stephen was

seized and brought to trial before the Sanhedrin.<sup>4</sup> Stephen was charged with speaking against the temple, changing the law of Moses and blaspheming against God.

With "the face of an angel" (Acts 6:15), Stephen answered the court with the longest sermon recorded in the book of Acts. As he carefully traced the history of the Jewish faith from Abraham to Jesus, Stephen showed how the Jewish people had always rebelled against God and the leaders God had given them. Stephen's main point is found in verse 51, "You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!" Stephen then charged the Sanhedrin with the rejection and slaying of Jesus Christ.

The furious court gnashed their teeth and covered their ears to avoid hearing any more of what they considered blasphemy. Rushing on him, the angry group dragged Stephen from the city to stone him. In the midst of the chaos, Stephen remained serene as he gazed heavenward at a vision of the risen Lord standing at the right hand of God. After praying that the Lord would receive his spirit and forgive the sins of his executors, Stephen died.

On the sidelines during the commotion was a young man named Saul, who held the witnesses' clothing and gave approval to the stoning of Stephen. Although vehemently opposed to Christianity at this point, Saul would soon take up where Stephen left off in proclaiming the gospel to Hellenistic Jews and Gentiles.

## **BUILDING ON THE BASICS**

### **Victory When You Cannot Win**

There are times when it seems one cannot win, and it was such a time for Stephen. Humiliated by his wisdom, Stephen's opposition was intent on his destruction, and the Sanhedrin was looking for a way to scatter the Christian movement and banish it from Jerusalem.

It is a common experience to face a no-win situation. It could have to do with a difficult job situation or lack of a job; financial disaster; marital, family or dating relationship problems that seem unresolvable; or health problems that are beyond our control. The common denominator in the no-win situation is that there is no way to avoid pain and loss; there is no acceptable solution, perhaps not even a preferable choice.

But the Bible gives us principles that can help win even in a no-win situation. In fact, for the believer, no situation is truly "no-win." Let's look at the principles and promises from the Word of God that assure ultimate victory, even in no-win situations.

## LESSON 8

### THE JOURNEYS OF PHILIP

#### Acts 8

Immediately after Stephen's death, great persecution of the church began. The apostles stayed in Jerusalem where the church went underground. Most of the other believers scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, sharing their faith as they went. Consequently, the church experienced growth in numbers and expansion in territory.

Philip, one of the Seven in the Jerusalem church, journeyed to Samaria where he became a powerful preacher of the gospel.<sup>1</sup> He was enabled by the Holy Spirit to perform miracles of healing and deliverance<sup>2</sup> in the name of Jesus Christ, and many Samaritans believed and followed Philip.

Previously, a man named Simon had dazzled the Samaritans with his sorcery and led many to believe he was a chief representative of God. When his followers became believers in Christ through Philip's ministry, Simon also claimed to accept Christ and began to follow Philip. He was amazed and intrigued by the miracles Philip was able to perform through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Upon hearing of the awakening in Samaria, Peter and John came from Jerusalem. When the apostles laid hands<sup>3</sup> on the new Samaritan<sup>4</sup> believers, they received the gift of the Holy Spirit<sup>5</sup> which the Jews had received at



Pentecost. When Simon saw this, he tried to bribe the apostles to give him the power to impart the Holy Spirit. Simon's request clearly revealed the selfish motives of his heart, and Peter strongly rebuked him, exhorting Simon to repent and ask God's forgiveness.

After Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, an angel of the Lord<sup>6</sup> led Philip south about 50 miles on the road to Gaza. There the Spirit led him to the chariot of an Ethiopian eunuch, an official of the Queen of Ethiopia.<sup>7</sup> The eunuch was either a Jewish proselyte or a God-fearing Gentile<sup>8</sup> who had been to Jerusalem to worship at the temple. As Philip joined him, he was reading in the book of Isaiah (53:7,8), and welcomed Philip's help in understanding the prophecy. Philip explained that the prophet spoke of Jesus of Nazareth, a Person whom the Ethiopian no doubt had heard much about in Jerusalem. The Ethiopian eagerly accepted Jesus Christ, asked to be baptized, then went on his way rejoicing.

Immediately, the Spirit led Philip away to preach the good news in Azotus and various towns all the way to Caesarea. It was there the evangelist eventually made his home (cf. Acts 21:8).<sup>9</sup>

## **BUILDING ON THE BASICS**

### **Benefiting from Hardship**

Hardship can come in many forms. However, hardship in any form always involves change and loss which tend to depress the human spirit. For this reason, hardship often creates fear of the future and the additional pain it may hold. After a tragedy, it is especially hard to risk involvement with situations or relationships that could produce similar grief.

The tragedy of Stephen's death gave the early believers reason to fear the future, especially with regard to being associated with and living for Christ. The seriousness of the situation was intensified by the fact that they had to move their families in order to survive the persecution. Yet the early Christians remained positive and courageous, sharing their faith wherever they went. The hardship they encountered with its changes and losses did not defeat them.

Wherein lies the power to "get up on the horse and ride again" when we have suffered the severe fall? Let's take a look at the biblical principles and

perspectives that give power to resist the undertow of hardship and move forward in its benefits.

## **LESSON 9**

### **SAUL'S CONVERSION**

#### **Acts 9:1-31**

While the church grew and spread throughout Judea and Samaria, a zealous young Pharisee named Saul continued to pose a deadly threat to the believers. He went to great lengths to capture, imprison and even put to death (cf. Acts 22:4; 26:10) the followers of Christ. But, in an incredible encounter with the risen Lord, Saul was converted to the faith he had bitterly opposed. As he neared Damascus with plans to capture Christians there for trial in Jerusalem, he was halted and blinded by heavenly light and the voice of God. Falling on his face, Saul asked who spoke. The answer: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

From this moment on, the zeal of this young Pharisee would be channeled into obedience and service to Jesus Christ. The Lord led a disciple named Ananias to minister to Saul as a new believer, restoring his sight and baptizing him. After several days with the believers in Damascus, Saul, also known as Paul (Acts 13:9),<sup>1</sup> began to preach Christ in the synagogues where people were astonished at his conversion.

At this point, as he later states in Galatians 1:17-18, Paul spent three years in Arabia, perhaps reorienting his faith to match his Damascus Road experience. When he returned to preach in Damascus again, he was more powerful than ever, and the Jews plotted to kill him. To save his life, some of the disciples let him down over the city wall in a basket during the night. From there, Saul went to Jerusalem.

Initially, the believers in Jerusalem were afraid of Saul, but a man named Barnabas testified on his behalf and helped Saul to be accepted. For fifteen days (cf. Galatians 1:18), Saul witnessed primarily to the Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem (whom he had previously helped to plot Stephen's death). Because of his effectiveness, Saul's life became the target of yet another deadly conspiracy. Fellow believers helped him escape to Caesarea, from which he sailed for his hometown of Tarsus. It is believed Paul spent about ten years there before Barnabas invited him to help with the ministry at Antioch.

## **BUILDING ON THE BASICS**

### **Facing Big Mistakes**

Sometimes it is hard to face ourselves and God with the big mistakes of the past. We tend to avoid even thinking about times when our actions were shameful, and we fear God is more upset about them than we are. Consequently, we "stuff" our guilt and shame, continually trying to hide the failures from ourselves and God.

As Saul sat for three days in blinded silence, he was faced with the fact that he had brought about the death of innocent believers in Jesus Christ, the living Lord. His Damascus Road experience dramatically revealed the fact that he had been fighting against God and His faithful servants. Surely, he could still see the faces of Stephen and other Christians martyrs who died for their faith.

But the Lord had chosen the apostle Paul<sup>1</sup> to impact the world for Christ unlike anyone else who has ever lived. He led the evangelistic ministry to the Gentile peoples. His letters to various churches, which make up much of the New Testament, have disciplined believers around the world over the last two-thousand years...all because Paul moved beyond the shame to know forgiveness and freedom from his sin.

While we do not want to remember big mistakes, God wants to face them with us and move us beyond the shame and guilt we prefer to bury. Rather than living in guilt and feeling we could never be used of God, the Lord wants to use our negative experience to make us stronger servants of Him

and others. In this lesson, we will take a look at the power that can emerge from practicing biblical principles in dealing with big, as well as small, mistakes.

## **LESSON 10**

### **PETER GOES TO GENTILES**

#### **Acts 9:32-11:18**

After the believers scattered, Peter traveled about Palestine visiting the various churches. In Lydda, God enabled Peter to heal a man paralyzed for eight years. In Joppa, his prayers brought a much-loved believer named Dorcas back to life. As the word spread about these miracles, many placed their faith in Jesus, and Peter stayed in Joppa for an extended time.

Luke's narrative moves thirty miles north to the Caesarean home of a Roman centurion named Cornelius. Commander of a hundred men in the Italian band of the Roman army, Cornelius was a generous and God-fearing Gentile.<sup>1-2</sup> During prayer one afternoon, Cornelius had a vision of an angel<sup>3</sup> of God who instructed him to send for a man named Simon Peter in Joppa.

As Cornelius' men began the journey to fetch Peter, the Lord began to prepare Peter to accept his mission to the Gentile home of Cornelius. He gave Peter a vision of a sheet descending from heaven, full of animals considered unclean to the Jew (Leviticus 11). Along with this vision, the voice of the Lord instructed Peter not to call unclean that which God had cleansed. The sheet descended and Peter heard the Lord's command three times; then the vision ended. As Peter pondered the meaning of the vision, the Holy Spirit instructed him to go with Cornelius' men who were now at the door.

The next day, Peter arrived in Caesarea to find Cornelius waiting with relatives and friends. As the godly centurion told Peter about the angel's appearance to him, Peter understood the meaning of his own vision: faith in Christ would cleanse Jew and Gentile alike from sin.

Peter began to tell his audience about Jesus Christ when the Holy Spirit filled those who were accepting the message. As they began to speak in tongues and praise God, no doubt was left in the Jewish believers present that these Gentiles had received salvation<sup>4</sup> through faith in Jesus. With this, the new believers were baptized.<sup>5</sup>

When the word spread that Peter had shared Christ with uncircumcised<sup>6</sup> Gentiles, he was highly criticized. The church until this time was made up only of believing Jews who still considered Gentiles unclean. But when Peter told the whole story to the other apostles and Christians in Jerusalem, they had no further questions. Praising God, they rejoiced that He would grant salvation through faith in Jesus to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews.

## **BUILDING ON THE BASICS**

### **The Power of a Teachable Spirit**

Sometimes we are blinded to new truth because we are cemented into old ways of thinking. Because we are finite and God is infinite, we can only hope to understand part of His infinite mind as He unfolds truth to us over time. We need to be humble and teachable at all times in order to continue to grow in our understanding about ourselves and God.

Peter was open to God's new revelation, even though it went against a lifetime of learning. As a result, this leader of the early church opened the doors of evangelism to the Gentile world.

The Christian life is not meant to be stagnant, rather a dynamic, abundant learning experience. If we are open to God's truth, there is no end to the Christian growth process. In this lesson, we will look at the powerful results of developing and maintaining a teachable spirit before God.

# LESSON 11

## HERODIAN PERSECUTION

### Acts 11:19-12:25

The persecution that broke out after the martyrdom of Stephen scattered believers as far as Phoenicia (where Tyre and Sidon are located), Antioch and Cyprus. Wherever they went, they told others about Christ, and the church grew rapidly. In Antioch, some believers from Cyprus and Cyrene began to share the gospel message with Greek Gentiles, and a great number accepted Christ.

When news of the conversion of many Gentiles in Antioch reached the church leaders in Jerusalem, they sent one of their best men, Barnabas, to investigate the new church. Finding a great movement of God there, Barnabas brought Paul from Tarsus to help in the ministry. Together, Barnabas and Paul taught the large congregation for a year as it continually grew in numbers.

With the prophecy<sup>1</sup> that there would be famine in the Roman Empire, the believers at Antioch collected money for the believers in Jerusalem and sent their gift by way of Barnabas and Paul.

Meanwhile in Jerusalem, King Herod<sup>2</sup> had begun to oppress the Christians. He arrested some and beheaded the apostle John's brother, James. When he saw the delight of the Jews at his actions, Herod also arrested and imprisoned Peter to be tried publicly after the Passover.

However, during the night before Peter's trial, an angel of the Lord<sup>3</sup> arrived to release Peter. Somehow the four guards on duty were made oblivious to what was happening as Peter's chains fell off and the angel guided him through the prison gates to the street. Peter thought he was seeing a vision until the angel left him in the street, at which time the apostle realized that the Lord had brought about his escape. Peter went straight to Mary's home<sup>4</sup> where many believers had gathered to pray. They were, of course, astonished to see Peter and hear his story. He stayed a short time, then left for a secure place of hiding. The next day, Herod searched unsuccessfully for Peter and had the guards who had been in charge put to death.

The king had decided to settle for awhile in Jerusalem when the people of Phoenicia sought public audience with him. They needed his support and flattered him by acclaiming his divinity. He accepted the compliment, so an angel of the Lord struck him to the ground where he was eaten by worms.<sup>5</sup>

In the meantime, the church continued to grow in numbers as the believers shared their faith in Christ everywhere they went.<sup>6</sup>

## **BUILDING ON THE BASICS**

### **When the Doors Shut**

As chief leader of the early Christians, Peter found himself locked in prison, chained between two guards and awaiting public trial before Jews who yearned for his death. There was nothing humanly possible that could be done to save Peter. Even so, God was not ready for Peter's death and supernaturally intervened. All at once, Peter was free, Jesus Christ was again glorified by the miracle, and the believers were encouraged to keep praying about their needs!

We all face times in our lives when we see doors of freedom or opportunity shut before us. Even though we cannot see beyond the closed door, the Bible promises that God will *always* lead the way forward for those who trust Him. As we contemplate the miraculous deliverance of Peter, let's observe some biblical principles related to trusting God when the doors shut.

*the Book of Acts*, p. 99.



## ***PART II***

### ***ANTIOCH TO ROME***

In His last words, Jesus told his disciples that the Holy Spirit would enable them to be witnesses for Him in Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). In the first twelve chapter of the book of Acts, Luke's primary focus is on the ministry of Peter to the Jews in Judea and Samaria. He concludes this part of his account with the phenomenon of the new Gentile church in Antioch.

In chapters 13-28 of Acts, Luke turns his focus to the spread of Christianity to "the ends of the earth." In this portion of his record, Luke concentrates on the ministry of Paul and the expansion of the church to the Gentiles. The author carefully records the travels of Paul as he preached about Jesus Christ in the cities of Phrygia, Galatia and Europe, and finally in Rome, the most powerful city of the first century world.

## **LESSON 12**

### **PAUL & BARNABAS IN ASIA**

#### **Acts 13**

Antioch was the third greatest city in the Roman Empire, ranking after Rome and Alexandria. When Christians from the island of Cyprus began telling the Greeks in Antioch about Jesus Christ, a spiritual awakening occurred (Acts 11:20-26). As a result, a large, predominantly Gentile, church formed.

It was from this important Roman city and this congregation that Paul embarked on three missionary journeys across the Roman Empire. The first occurred after Paul had been teaching in the Antiochene church for more than a year. At that time, the Holy Spirit directed the church leaders to send Barnabas and Paul to spread the gospel in unreached territories. As they began the first trip, Barnabas' cousin, John Mark, went with them as a helper.

Setting out from the Antiochene harbor of Seleucia, Barnabas and Paul traveled to:

Cyprus (Salamis and Paphos) Acts 13:4-12

Pamphylia (Perga) Acts 13:13

Pisidia (Antioch) Acts 13:14

Iconium, Lystra and Derbe (of Lycaonia) 14:1-7; 20-21

Attalia (port of Pamphylia) Acts 14:25

In Cyprus, Paul and Barnabas began proclaiming Christ in Salamis. They traveled nearly 100 miles across the island to Paphos, the headquarters for the Roman rule on Cyprus. There, Sergius Paulus, the chief Roman official, wanted to hear the apostles' message from God, so he sent for them. But the proconsul's attendant, a Jewish sorcerer named Elymas, tried to discourage Sergius from believing the apostles' words. Paul told Elymas that his heart was evil and he would be stricken blind for a time. Immediately Elymas could not see. The miracle firmly established Sergius' faith in Christ.

Paul, Barnabas and John Mark traveled on to Perga, the capital of the coastal province of Pamphylia in Asia Minor. From there, John Mark went home to Jerusalem while Paul and Barnabas went north to Antioch in the province of Pisidia. Speaking in a synagogue on the Sabbath, Paul outlined the recent events concerning the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and declared forgiveness of sins for all who would place their faith in Him.

The response to Paul and Barnabas' message was positive; the people invited them to speak again the following Sabbath. On that day, almost all the people in Pisidian Antioch came out to hear the apostles speak. When the Jews saw the crowds, they became jealous of the apostles and began to speak against their message. Paul and Barnabas met the opposition boldly, declaring that Jew and Gentile alike who put faith in Jesus Christ would receive eternal life.

Many Gentiles became believers, and a Christian movement spread throughout the region. However, the Jewish opposition managed to turn

politically powerful men and women against Paul and Barnabas, and they were banned from the district. Paul and Barnabas moved on to Iconium in central Galatia, leaving behind many joyful new believers in Jesus Christ.

## **BUILDING ON THE BASICS**

### **Dealing With Life's Uncertainties**

Paul and Barnabas were a great team. Paul was a gifted teacher and evangelist, and Barnabas, a gifted encourager. Together they embarked on a mission trip only God could make successful. The two men went on foot into cities they knew nothing about, to people they had never met, with a story only the Holy Spirit could confirm in individual hearts. Apart from God's supernatural working, Paul and Barnabas would appear to the Jews and Gentiles with whom they spoke as fanatical fools. Not only this, but they also needed protection from illness, accident, robbery, and persecution as they traveled about Asia Minor preaching Christ.

It is hard to imagine how the apostles handled the numerous uncertainties they faced. However, we are challenged with just as many unknowns daily in the fast-paced culture in which we live. Adding the continual changes of a high-tech age to the already constant changes of life can be overwhelming. Often, we may find it impossible to do more than narrowly survive the pressure to keep up.

Just as Paul and Barnabas depended on the supernatural provision and protection of God as they worked the first missionary journey, so can we as we face the overload of pressures we encounter today. God's supernatural provisions are not just for those in special service, but for each of us as we face the anxieties and unknowns of life where we are. Let's make some observations about power to deal with the uncertainties we face, whatever they might be.

included Gentiles, they became jealous.

# LESSON 13

## MORE PAUL AND BARNABAS

### Acts 14

After leaving Pisidian Antioch, Paul and Barnabas moved on to Iconium, where Paul spoke so effectively that a great many people, both Jew and Gentile, accepted Jesus Christ. However, unbelieving Jews began to slander Paul and Barnabas, and the whole city took sides either for or against the apostles. Paul and Barnabas discovered a plot to stone them and fled to the Galatian cities of Lystra and Derbe.

In Lystra, Paul healed a man lame from birth, and the people decided Paul and Barnabas were the Greek gods Hermes and Zeus paying a visit to their city. The local priest of Zeus and a crowd brought bulls to sacrifice to the apostles, who were shocked at the people's response. Even though Paul and Barnabas tried to help them understand about the one true God, the crowd remained confused.

About this time, Jewish opposition from Antioch and Iconium came to further upset the apostles' mission. They turned the crowd against Paul and Barnabas and convinced the people to stone Paul. Thinking they had killed him, they dragged Paul out of the city. When believers in Christ gathered around him, Paul got up and went back into Lystra. He and Barnabas left for Derbe the next day.

In Derbe, many people believed in Jesus Christ as Paul and Barnabas faithfully proclaimed the good news. The apostles then retraced their steps through Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch, encouraging the new Christians and appointing leadership in their churches. Afterwards, Paul and Barnabas sailed back to Antioch in Syria, where they reported to their commissioning church how God had worked mightily among the Gentiles.

## **BUILDING ON THE BASICS**

### **In Times of Rejection**

Paul was a man who had been successful before his conversion. He described himself as a "Hebrew of Hebrews" (Philippians 3:6): and was a Pharisee<sup>1</sup> of high standing among the Jewish people. As he followed the Lord's will for him to reach Gentile people with the gospel, however, Paul would be viciously rejected by fellow Jews. While many Jews believed the message of Christ, many others would turn against Paul, finally costing him imprisonment in Rome (Acts 21:27-26:32).

We may experience rejection for our faith in Christ or for our belief in biblical principles that do not make sense to the non-believing world. Or we may be rejected by family and associates for any number of reasons. Rejection is always painful, and it is very important that we respond to that pain correctly.

Obviously, Paul responded correctly, because the rejection he experienced did not hinder his course. Let's look at some of the New Testament writings of Paul as well as other Scriptures to find healthy ways to respond to rejection.

## **LESSON 14**

### **JERUSALEM COUNCIL**

#### **Acts 15**

On the heels of Paul and Barnabas' exciting journey, a serious problem arose in the church at Antioch. Pharisee<sup>1</sup> believers from Judea came to Antioch and began to teach the Christians that Gentiles had to convert to Judaism and be circumcised<sup>2</sup> before they could be saved by faith in Jesus Christ. Paul and Barnabas had seen many Gentiles become Christians without first becoming circumcised Jews, and the church at Antioch was full of such

believers. Consequently, Paul and Barnabas disagreed sharply with the visiting teachers. To resolve the issue, the church sent them to Jerusalem to get the counsel of the apostles and elders there.

As the council met in Jerusalem over the dispute, Peter spoke first. He recalled his experience with Gentile converts who had received the Holy Spirit without first converting to Judaism (Acts 10,11). Peter stated his conviction: salvation<sup>3</sup> for Jew and Gentile alike is a free God-given gift received by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul and Barnabas followed the testimony of Peter as they told the apostles and elders about all God had done among the Gentiles in Cyprus and Asia Minor. Paul and Barnabas also attested to the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Gentiles who had received Jesus Christ but never been circumcised.

With this, James, the half-brother of the Lord and leader in the Jerusalem church, proposed a solution to the Jew and Gentile dilemma.<sup>4</sup> James suggested that they not make it difficult for the Gentiles whom God was obviously adding to the family of believers. He proposed that a letter be written to the Antiochenes (1) confirming the fact that salvation came by faith in Christ apart from Jewish laws and (2) stating certain guidelines needed to be followed in order for Jews and Gentiles to fellowship comfortably together. While Gentile believers were not required to be circumcised and observe all the Mosaic laws, they were asked to abstain from practices that particularly repulsed the Jew. These included sexual immorality, eating meat that had been offered to idols, and eating meat prepared with its blood.

All agreed to James' plan, and the letter was written. The apostles, elders and entire church at Jerusalem chose two of their leaders, Judas and Silas, to accompany Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch. There, the Jerusalem letter brought clarity and great encouragement to the Gentile Christians.

## **BUILDING ON THE BASICS**

### **Resolving Disagreement**

The church was only 20 years old when the first major doctrinal disagreement arose. The Jerusalem Council's resolution to the conflict made clear for Jew and Gentile that salvation is an unearned gift from God. Faith in Jesus Christ, not "works" or one's ability to follow a list of rules, was established as the basis for being made right with God. The decisions of the council allowed Gentile believers to grow in grace and Jewish believers to be respected for their moral convictions. The outcome: Jew and Gentile could fellowship together freely; the "dividing wall" between Jew and Gentile was brought down (cf. Ephesians 2:11-18). Godly men practiced godly principles and brought resolution to a difficult conflict.

Life is full of disagreements between individuals, groups and nations. How we handle disagreement can have long-term effects that we may not foresee at the moment of conflict. Wrongly handled disagreements have caused, among other things, scarred or broken marriage and family relationships, dissolved friendships, church splits, civil wars and world wars. The underlying problem lies in the fact that we are *not* prone to handle disagreements wisely. In order to avoid the pitfalls of unconstructive actions, it is essential that we know and practice godly principles in dealing with conflict of opinion. Let's take a look at some biblical concepts that apply to resolving disagreement.

*Grace* (15:11) refers to God's unmerited favor, or:

**God's  
Riches  
At  
Christ's  
Expense (Ephesians 2:8-9).**

# LESSON 15

## JOURNEY OF PAUL AND SILAS

### Acts 15:36-16:40

Paul and Barnabas decided to take a second missionary journey to see how the churches in Asia Minor were faring. A sharp disagreement arose, however, when Barnabas wanted to take his cousin, John Mark. Paul felt this was unwise because Mark had deserted<sup>1</sup> them on their first journey (13:13). Unable to resolve their difference, Barnabas took Mark and left for Cyprus, while Paul and Silas went by land to the Galatian cities previously evangelized.

In Lystra, Paul and Silas were impressed with an outstanding young disciple named Timothy who was invited to join them in their travels. On their visits to the various churches, Paul and Silas always shared the letter written by the Jerusalem Council to Gentile believers (cf. Acts 15:23-29). The letter provided the Galatian believers with guidelines and a sense of belonging to the larger body of Christians everywhere. The visits from Paul, Silas and Timothy were a great encouragement to the churches, causing their faith and numbers to grow.

After completing their work with established congregations, Paul and his men were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to travel north to Mysia or south to Asia. Then, Paul had a vision in the night of a man from Macedonia pleading for help. Through this vision, the Holy Spirit directed them to the continent of Europe. Immediately, they sailed from Troas to Neapolis and traveled by land to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of Macedonia.



In Philippi, there was no synagogue, which indicated less than ten male Jews in the city. On the Sabbath, Paul and his men went to the river where a group of God-fearing women met to pray. There, Lydia, a business-woman from nearby Thyatira, became the first European believer. She led her entire household to faith in Jesus Christ and provided a place for Paul and his men to stay.

Paul and Silas continued to witness about Christ in Philippi, and many other people believed. A troublesome problem arose, however, when a slave girl, possessed by a demon who allowed her to make money for her masters through fortunetelling, began to follow Paul and Silas. For days, she cried out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." Annoyed by this negative source of publicity, Paul cast the demon<sup>2</sup> out of the girl, which infuriated her owners. They seized Paul and Silas, dragged them to the Roman authorities and accused them of promoting treasonous actions among the Philippians. The entire marketplace crowd began to attack the missionaries.

After being beaten and bound in stocks in prison, Paul and Silas found comfort in the night by singing hymns and praising God. All at once, an earthquake opened the prison gates and released the prisoners' bands. The prison keeper was about to commit suicide<sup>3</sup> when Paul stopped him, calling out that the prisoners were still there. The man, obviously convicted by the testimony of the missionaries and the events of the night, begged Paul and Silas to tell him how he could be saved. That night, the prison keeper took Paul and Silas to his home, where he and all his household believed and were baptized.

When the magistrates sent word the next day to release Paul and Silas, Paul declared that he and Silas were Roman citizens. The authorities were shocked, because it was not lawful for a Roman citizen to be beaten and imprisoned without trial as Paul and Silas had been. Chagrined and apologetic, the magistrates came to personally escort Paul and Silas out of the jail.

After paying an encouraging visit to Lydia and the believers, the missionaries left the city of Philippi.

## **BUILDING ON THE BASICS**

### **Maintaining Faith in Hard Times**

Paul and Silas had been faithfully serving the Lord when they were dragged before the authorities, falsely accused, publicly stripped and severely beaten. In a bruised and bloody condition, they were fastened in stocks on the cold floor of a prison cell. At this point, one would not expect them to be praising God.

But they were! In the midst of a terrible turn of events, praising God elevated Paul and Silas to a positive frame of mind, turned their own circumstances to good, brought about the salvation of the prison keeper and his family, and encouraged the new believers in Philippi!

There is indeed power in praising the Lord in the midst of the most difficult of circumstances. Regardless of what we feel emotionally, praising God can bring the decided victory of faith. In this lesson, we will take a closer look at how to maintain faith during hard times and the power that comes from praising God.

## **LESSON 16**

### **ATHENS AND CORINTH**

#### **Acts 17:1-18:17**

Leaving Luke in Philippi, Paul, Silas and Timothy traveled along the Egnatian Way about 100 miles to Thessalonica, the capital city of Macedonia. It had a population of over 200,000, which included a colony of Jews and a synagogue.

Paul preached for three sabbaths in the synagogue of Thessalonica, reasoning from the Scriptures that the Messiah, or Christ, was prophesied to suffer and die, then be resurrected from the dead.<sup>1</sup> It was rumored that one named Jesus had risen from the dead at Jerusalem, and Paul explained that this Jesus was the promised Messiah.<sup>2</sup> As a result, some Jews, a large number of God-fearing Gentiles and many prominent women put their faith in Jesus Christ.

However, the Jews of the city became jealous. They gathered some "bad characters" from the marketplace and staged a riot before the city and its officials. Unable to find Paul and Silas, the Jews dragged Jason and some other believers before the authorities, who made them post bond and let them go. That night, under cover of darkness, Paul and Silas left for Berea.

In Berea, many Jews and God-fearing Gentiles believed Paul's message as they searched the Scriptures daily to discern the truth about Christ. A number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men also became Christians. However, the Jews from Thessalonica came to Berea to create mob violence against Paul and Silas. Believers escorted Paul to Athens while Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea.

In Athens, Paul noticed the city was full of gold, silver and stone idols to every conceivable pagan god. The Athenians even had a structure *To An Unknown God* in case they had omitted one. In the synagogue and marketplace, Paul began reasoning daily from the Scriptures about Christ with anyone who would talk with him. Finally, some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers took Paul to the meeting of the Areopagus where Greek officials met to govern the religious and moral innovations of the culture. There, Paul declared that he knew about the Unknown God they worshipped. Paul described the Creator and sustainer of all things who would one day judge all people. He bid the Athenians to repent of sin, turn to God and believe in the resurrected Christ.

With mention of the resurrection of Jesus, Paul lost credibility with most of his audience at the Areopagus. Some sneered at Paul, but others asked Paul to tell them more. As a result, a few Athenians, including a member of the Areopagus, became followers of Jesus Christ.

From Athens, Paul went on to Corinth<sup>3</sup> where he met a couple named Aquila and Priscilla who, like Paul, were tentmakers by profession. They were Jews who had moved to Corinth when Claudius ordered all Jews to

leave Rome. Paul worked with them on weekdays and spoke in the synagogue each sabbath.

When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, however, Paul began full-time preaching and teaching. The Jews began to oppose and abuse Paul, so he began ministering only to Gentiles, working out of the home of Titius Justus. The synagogue ruler, Crispus, and his whole household believed in the Lord Jesus, as well as many other Corinthians.

The Lord spoke to Paul in a vision one night, instructing him to continue speaking in Corinth without fear because there were many who would believe there. Accordingly, Paul stayed one and a half years in the city. Once during this time, the Jews took Paul to court before the proconsul Gallio who refused to judge a case regarding Jewish law. The Greeks then took hold of Sosthenes,<sup>4</sup> the synagogue leader, and beat him, but Gallio<sup>5</sup> simply ignored the commotion.

## **BUILDING ON THE BASICS**

### **Facing the Enemies of Faith I**

Sorcery and occult practices were common in the time of the early church, even among Jews (Acts 8:11; 13:6; 19:17-19). This was especially true in cities such as Philippi, Corinth and Ephesus where idolatry was very much a part of everyday life. This idolatry allowed Satan to get evil footholds in those cultures. For this reason, demon possession and other occult practices were commonplace in the first century. Magical practices intrigued the masses more than faith in the one true God. The problems produced by this intrigue made exorcism a significant part of the miracles of Jesus Christ and of the ministry of the apostles in the early church..

The Bible from beginning to end reiterates the fact that idolatry brings ruin to a society. The worship of created things--whatever they might be, leads to increased temptation, encouragement to sin and fascination with occult practices. In such an environment, the "spiritual warfare" waged against the believer is heightened.

What is spiritual warfare, and how can we, as the apostle Paul and early Christians, be victorious in the battle waged against our faith? While the

subject is uncomfortable for some, it is one which we need to be knowledgeable about as we seek to have *Power to Live By*. As we continue our study, let's make some observations about how to be victorious as we face the enemies of our faith.

1. *Spiritual warfare* might simply be defined as the never-ending battle over our relationship with God. The Bible identifies three main forces that come against our faith: the *world*, or worldly perspectives, our own sinful nature or *flesh*, and *Satan*. We will look at these one at a time, the first two this lesson and the latter in Lesson 17.

## LESSON 17

### MINISTRY IN EPHEBUS

#### Acts 18:18-19:41

Paul had spent a year and a half in Corinth when he left the city. He took Priscilla and Aquila<sup>1</sup> with him as far as Ephesus, where the couple took up residence. Paul spoke once in the Ephesian synagogue, then set sail for Caesarea in Judea. He paid a visit to the church at Jerusalem, then returned to Antioch. The apostle's second missionary journey was officially completed.

Here in the text, Luke introduces Apollos, an Alexandrian (Egyptian) Jew who became a great spokesman for the cause of Christ. A well-educated man thoroughly familiar with the Scriptures, Apollos came to Ephesus and began to speak boldly in the synagogue about Jesus and the baptism of John the Baptist (18:25, 19:4).<sup>2</sup> Priscilla and Aquila drew Apollos apart to explain salvation through Christ<sup>3</sup> to him. With a new and complete understanding of the gospel, Apollos went to Corinth in the province of Achaia and began proclaiming the gospel there.

After a time in Antioch, Paul embarked on his third missionary journey. He first visited the churches in Galatia and Phrygia, encouraging the believers. Afterward, he came to Ephesus, where he worked for over two years.<sup>4</sup>

Ephesus was a large and beautiful city of about 250,000 people. It was the center of commerce in Asia Minor and prided itself as the temple keeper of the Roman fertility goddess Diana, (in Greek, *Artemis*). The huge temple of Artemis outside the city was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It took 220 years to build and was made of the purest marble. It had 127 columns 60 feet high standing on an area 425 feet long and 220 feet wide. A many-breasted black figure said to have fallen out of heaven was on a pedestal in the middle. The temple was the center of heathen worship for the province of Asia. The spiritual climate thus created produced occult activity as well, with sorcery common even among the Jews of the area.

When Paul first arrived in Ephesus, he began teaching in the synagogue. However, Jewish opposition forced him to abandon the synagogue and begin daily discussions in a lecture hall. It is believed that Paul made tents during the morning and evening hours, then taught between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m., when workers were on midday break.

As Paul ministered in this pagan city, God empowered him to perform great miracles of healing and deliverance from demonic spirits.<sup>5</sup> Such incredible wonders took place that the message of Christ became known all over the province of Asia. Great numbers of people became Christians, turning completely from Artemis worship and sorcery practices. At one point, Christians made a bonfire of their occult scrolls of magical writings corporately valued at 50,000 drachmas (the equivalent of 140 years of wages for the average working man of that day).

Paul's ministry was so powerful that Ephesus quickly became the center of Christianity in the Western world. With the conversion of so many people to the Way, however, business had fallen off for tradesmen whose products related to the worship of Artemis. As a result, a silversmith named Demetrius called together business associates, declaring that Paul's teaching was damaging the civic standing and pride of Ephesus--worship of Artemis. He stirred up his cohorts who in turn aroused the entire city to become a violent mob. They grabbed two of Paul's disciples and rushed by the thousands into the city theatre shouting "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" Paul wanted to speak to the crowd, but both Christian and non-Christian friends forbade him from entering the theatre.

Finally, the city clerk, an Ephesian executive officer responsible to Rome for the conduct at such meetings, silenced the crowd. He reminded them that the Christians had committed no crime, but they were acting unlawfully in

their riot and were answerable to Rome. With this, the official sent the people away.

Soon after this, Paul bid farewell to the Ephesian believers and went to encourage the new churches in Macedonia.

## **BUILDING ON THE BASICS**

### **Facing the Enemies of Faith II**

In the last lesson, we observed the fact that sorcery and occult practices were common in the time of the early church, especially in cities where Paul traveled on his missionary journeys. Philippi, Athens, Corinth and Ephesus prided themselves in their worship of idols and/or dealings in demonology and the occult.

We might see these as trends of an ancient society, unrelated to today. However, the Bible declares that worship of created things, whatever they might be, allows Satan to obtain easy access into any culture. The result is heightened spiritual warfare against faith in Christ.

We defined spiritual warfare as the battle against our relationship with God. There are three main sources of spiritual warfare: the *world*, or worldly perspectives, our own *sinful nature*, and, finally, the unseen forces of *Satan*. We observed the first two sources of battle in Lesson 16, and will now look at biblical statements about the third source of conflict.

Some people are uncomfortable with the topic of Satan, finding it frightening, or perhaps incredible. However, the Bible has much to say about this grand adversary of God and man and presents great truths about the complete victory we have in this arena of spiritual warfare. It is important to be knowledgeable and secure in what the Word of God has to say about facing this enemy of our faith.

As we continue our study of *Power to Live By*, let's make some observations about what the Bible has to say about facing "the enemy."

*e NIV Study Bible*, p. 1682.



# LESSON 18

## PAUL GIVES FAREWELLS

### Acts 20:1-21:16

Even before the riot against him in Ephesus, Paul had decided to visit the churches in Macedonia (Europe) and then depart for Jerusalem (Acts 19:21). So when things settled down in Ephesus, Paul gathered the believers and said goodbye. He traveled to cities in Macedonia and Achaia, then stayed in Greece for three months.<sup>1</sup> After this, Paul was informed of a Jewish plot against him which caused the apostle to travel back through Macedonia rather than sail directly to Syria.

Paul had encouraged a collection be taken in the various Gentile churches to help the needy in Jerusalem. As Paul traveled, he was accompanied by a delegation of godly men from these cities; three from Macedonia, two from Galatia, and two from Asia Minor. Paul's traveling companions also included the author of *Acts*, Dr. Luke, who meticulously recorded the stops and starts along the way to Jerusalem. Paul's goal was to reach that city by Pentecost, and he carefully budgeted the fifty-day time period he had to accomplish the trip.

The apostle stayed a week in Troas, and, the night before his departure, Paul carried on an all-night discussion with the believers. The meeting was in a third-floor room, and around midnight, a young man named Eutychus, who was sitting in a window, fell asleep and plunged to the courtyard below. Eutychus was pronounced dead, but to everyone's relief and amazement, God enabled Paul to bring the boy back to life.<sup>2</sup>

The next day, Paul and company left for Miletus, where the apostle gathered the elders from the church at Ephesus. Sharing what he thought would be his last words<sup>3</sup> to these men, Paul charged them to act as faithful "shepherds"

over the "flock" as they carried out their responsibilities as leaders in the Ephesian church. He reminded them that God had purchased the body of believers with the blood of His own Son (20:28), and the care of His church was a great privilege and responsibility. Paul warned the elders that "wolves" (false teachers) would come to "ravage the flock," leading many astray with wrong doctrines. Paul encouraged the elders to persevere in serving the needs of others with hard work and sacrifice as he had done in their midst.

At last, they all knelt to pray together, then wept, embraced and kissed each other good-bye. After tearing himself away from these dearly loved co-workers, Paul and the others set sail for Phoenicia. Paul spent a week with the believers at Tyre where the Holy Spirit warned that terrible trials lay ahead for him in Jerusalem. The people begged the apostle not to go, but Paul explained that he was compelled by the Spirit (20:22) to continue his journey to Judea. All the believers--men, women and children--accompanied Paul to his ship and knelt on the beach to pray with him before he left for Caesarea.

In Caesarea, Paul and the others stayed with the evangelist, Philip, (cf. Acts 8:40). He had lived in Caesarea for 25 years. During their stay, a prophet named Agabus (cf. Acts 11:27-29, fifteen years earlier), came from Judea to tell Paul what lay ahead for him in Jerusalem. The apostle would be arrested by the Jews and given over to the Gentiles. Everyone pleaded with Paul not to go on, but Paul replied that he was ready to suffer and even die for the name of the Lord Jesus. With this, Paul and the others left for Jerusalem, where they stayed at the home of a Cypriot named Mnason, one of the first believers in Christ.

## **BUILDING ON THE BASICS**

### **The Power of Wholehearted Devotion**

Some hold that the Holy Spirit was warning Paul through other believers not to go to Jerusalem. Whether or not this was the case, Paul believed that the Holy Spirit *was* leading him to go, (cf. Acts 20:22), and to do less would have violated his conscience and total commitment to Jesus Christ. Paul moved ahead in spite of the unknown grief which he knew awaited him

because he was wholeheartedly devoted to the Lord. Only one question guided his decisions: "What does the Lord want me to do?"

While Paul's surrender to Jesus Christ cost him greatly, it also brought him enormous blessing. Surrender to God's way and will can indeed be painful at times, but the Bible promises rewards that far surpass the suffering. What are the benefits of wholehearted devotion to the Lord? Moreover, what strength does such devotion provide? Let's look at the *Power to Live By* that comes from wholehearted devotion.

## LESSON 19

### PAUL IN JERUSALEM

#### Acts 21:17-23:11

After arriving in Jerusalem for the Passover, Paul and his companions went to see James and the elders of the Jerusalem church. They all praised God as Paul reported in detail all God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. Then the elders explained the problem at hand. Many thousands of zealous Jews had become believers in Judea. They were told that Paul was encouraging Jews all over the world to abandon their laws and traditions,<sup>1</sup> and there was great hostility against him.

To save Paul, the elders of the Jerusalem church devised a plan by which Paul was to show his commitment to Jewish laws. Paul carried out the plan, but Jewish enemies from Asia Minor spotted Paul with the Greek believer, Trophimus of Ephesus (21:29), and accused him of taking a Gentile into the temple area. They aroused the whole city against the apostle so that the Roman commander, Claudius Lysias, had to stop the people from trying to kill Paul. He arrested the apostle and literally had to carry him to the Roman military enclosure in order to protect him from the angry mob.

The Roman officer was unsure who Paul was or what he had done to cause such violence. Lysias thought perhaps Paul was the Egyptian Jew who had recently led a 4,000-man revolt against Roman colonial rule. But Paul began to speak in Greek, explaining to the commander that he was a Jew from the

well-known city of Tarsus. Paul went on to ask Lysias for permission to speak to the people, and the officer agreed.

Paul approached the crowd speaking in Aramaic, which identified him with the conservative Palestinian Jews. The people quietly listened as Paul told about himself. Born in Tarsus, Paul explained that he was a Pharisee<sup>2</sup> thoroughly schooled under the most respected Jewish rabbi, Gamaliel. He was zealous for God and, as the Sanhedrin leadership knew, had once rounded up Christians for imprisonment, punishment and sometimes death. Then Paul told of his encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus and about his dramatic conversion to the Christian faith.

The crowd listened intently until Paul explained that the Lord had personally commissioned him to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. With this, the people broke into a rage. The commander, who could not understand the Aramaic Paul had been speaking, seized Paul and ordered that he be scourged<sup>3</sup> and questioned to find out what he was doing to anger the crowd. But Paul announced that he was a Roman citizen,<sup>4</sup> and the stunned Lysias immediately retracted his order. By Roman law, a citizen of Rome could not be humiliated by such a punishment. Lysias released Paul and called for a meeting of the Sanhedrin the next day to determine what the Jewish people had against the apostle.

When Paul stood before the Sanhedrin the following day, he declared himself a Pharisee who had hope in life after death. The court suddenly erupted in a bitter dispute between Pharisees and Sadducees over differences in beliefs about life after death, angels and spirits. Some Pharisees actually began to come to Paul's defense. The environment was hostile. To protect the apostle, the commander took him back to the military enclosure.

Amidst the turmoil, hostility and rejection, the Lord appeared to Paul in the night to encourage him. He promised that as the apostle had testified in Jerusalem, so would he testify in Rome.

## **BUILDING ON THE BASICS**

### **Dealing With Injustice**

One of the most difficult issues in life is dealing with injustice. There is a natural desire in the human heart to see justice win out. Consequently we have strong feelings toward what we see as injustice toward ourselves and others who are innocent. Injustice breeds hostility.

Paul was innocent in the face of numerous attacks against him during his missionary journeys. However, the rejection in Jerusalem by his Jewish brothers from all over the world no doubt hurt him the most. Yet Paul's physical and emotional pain did not seem to affect his faith or his response to his enemies.

What prevented Paul from being consumed by bitterness and retaliation in reaction to the many injustices he faced? What biblical perspectives helped Paul and can help us as we see and experience injustice? Let's make some observations as we continue our study on *Power to Live By*.

## **LESSON 20**

### **IMPRISONMENT IN CAESAREA**

#### **Acts 23:12-24:27**

Some Jews, probably Zealots,<sup>1</sup> determined to take an oath not to eat or drink until they killed Paul. The young son of Paul's sister, however, heard of their plot and secretly informed Paul and the Roman commander, Claudias Lysias. The commander immediately ordered 470 men to accompany Paul by night to Caesarea where he was to stand trial before Governor Felix.

When the governor received Paul and the letter of explanation from Commander Lysias, he placed Paul under guard in Herod's Palace<sup>2</sup> and determined to judge the case as soon as Paul's accusers came from Jerusalem. Just five days later, the high priest Ananais, some elders and an articulate lawyer named Tertullus arrived in Caesarea to present charges against Paul.

Tertullus began with hypocritical flattery of Felix for his fine leadership.<sup>3</sup> The counsel then proceeded to accuse Paul of being a ringleader of the "Nazarene" sect who caused riots among Jews all over the world. He also claimed Paul tried to desecrate the temple.

When Governor Felix asked Paul's response to the charges, the apostle began by declaring that he had done nothing to start a riot in Jerusalem. He stated that he had gone to Jerusalem to worship and to deliver gifts for the poor, and that he had been ceremonially clean when he entered the temple area. Paul declared that none of the accusations against him could be honestly proven.

Taking into account the letter from Commander Lysias (23:26-30), Felix could see Paul was innocent. However, Felix put off deciding the case, saying he must speak again with Lysias before making a final judgment. The governor kept Paul under guard for two years, during which time he and his Jewish wife, Drusilla,<sup>4</sup> spoke with Paul often. Although Paul's talk of life after death and judgment made Felix apprehensive, the governor continued to speak with Paul, hoping for a bribe from the apostle for his release. When Felix was replaced by Festus,<sup>5</sup> Felix left Paul in prison as a favor to the Jews.

## **BUILDING ON THE BASICS**

### **Waiting on God**

Paul had been unjustly charged and imprisoned indefinitely. Jesus had promised Paul that he would testify in Rome (Acts 23:11). Yet the apostle remained in prison, guarded by an unscrupulous governor,<sup>3-5</sup> and only a few miles from Jews committed to murdering him.

At some time, most of us find ourselves in situations that feel dangerous and like a prison. It is easy to be overrun by our own impatience, doubts, fears

and, worst of all, hopelessness. We may spend our energies striving to make something happen, worrying about the future or getting angry at God, ourselves and others because of our fears and discomfort.

It is at these times that the Bible instructs us to wait on God--expect, look for and hope in His deliverance, in His perfect way and time. While dashed hopes and discouragement might have threatened Paul's faith, the apostle remained confident and found constructive ways to use the waiting time. As we continue our study of *Power to Live By*, we will look at the strength that comes when we wait upon God.

## LESSON 21

### TRIALS BEFORE FESTUS & AGRIPPA

#### Acts 25-26

Paul had been imprisoned for two years in Caesarea when Felix was recalled and Festus was appointed to take his place as governor. Even though Paul had not been found guilty of any crime, Felix left him in prison as a favor to the Jews. During a visit to Jerusalem, Festus was approached by the Jews regarding Paul. They urgently pressed the new governor to deliver Paul to Jerusalem as a favor to them, all the while planning an ambush to seize and kill Paul while he was en route from Caesarea.

But Festus insisted that the Jews should follow him to Caesarea to press charges. They did so, but once again had no proof of their accusations. Festus, wanting to grant a favor to the Jews, asked Paul if he would be willing to stand trial in Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> Paul saw no point in standing trial before Festus again in Jerusalem, and, as a Roman citizen, appealed to Caesar and the highest court in the land.<sup>2</sup> With this, Festus declared that Paul *would go* to Rome, but the governor was privately perplexed as to what to put in his letter to Caesar explaining criminal charges.

A few days later, King Agrippa (Herod Agrippa II) and his sister Bernice<sup>3</sup> came to pay a complimentary visit to the new Roman governor. Festus

discussed his confusion about Paul's case with Agrippa, and the king asked to hear Paul himself.

The next day, the king and his sister pompously entered an auditorium, filled with high-ranking officials, to hear Paul state his case. The apostle told of his thorough Jewish upbringing and training and of his zealous persecution of the followers of Jesus. He carefully explained his encounter with the risen Lord Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus, then explained prophecy that proved Jesus to be the Messiah. Paul told of the Lord's calling on his own life: to testify to Jew and Gentile alike about the risen Savior, who offered forgiveness of sin to all who believed.

When Paul spoke of the resurrection, Festus interrupted, saying the apostle's great learning and intelligence had made him insane. But Paul turned to Agrippa, who had lived in the area all his life and knew about the events of which Paul spoke. He pressed the king on his belief of what the prophets had said. The king avoided the question, asking Paul if he presumed to make him a Christian in so short a time. Paul boldly stated that he wished everyone in the room could know Jesus Christ as he did.

The king left the room, and the assembly was over. Privately, Agrippa and Festus agreed that Paul was in no way a criminal deserving imprisonment, much less death. However, because of his appeal, Paul was guaranteed an audience with Caesar.

## **BUILDING ON THE BASICS**

### **Loving the Unlovable**

How do you and I respond to haughty, unprincipled leaders? As Paul stood before Agrippa and Festus and an auditorium of powerful people, he responded to them with a sincere desire for them to know freedom in Christ.

One of the greatest evidences of the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the apostle Paul was his ability to reach out to Jew and Gentile alike, regardless of the hypocrisy and ungodliness they practiced. He did not approve of godlessness and taught believers to expose evil. At the same time, he took every opportunity to share the message of Christ, which has the power to free the godless from wicked ways.



Paul did not fight his enemies, but sought opportunities to reach out to even the least likely to respond. Result: the care, humility and peace which the apostle displayed in the midst of unjust humiliation and imprisonment won an audience with pagan authorities. From Caesarea to Rome, the officials in charge of Paul showed obvious partiality toward the apostle (Acts 23:19-24; 24:24-26; 27:3; 27:42-43; 28:4). Whether they agreed with him or not, he sincerely earned their respect.

The apostle, as he allowed Christ to "walk in his shoes,"<sup>4</sup> was able to love those who would naturally have been repulsive to him. Paul stood firmly for righteousness, but the respect he showed toward the individual allowed him to lead people entrenched in evil into a transforming relationship with the Lord.

As we draw near the close of our study of *Power to Live By*, we will look at the impact we can have for Christ as we allow the Holy Spirit to enable us to love the unlovable.

## LESSON 22

### STORM, SHIPWRECK & ROME

#### Acts 27-28

Paul had appealed to Caesar, and even though Festus had no crime against the apostle about which to inform the emperor, the apostle had to be sent to Rome. The sail began for Paul and the other prisoners, all of whom were placed under the guard of a centurion named Julius for the first part of their journey to the capital city. Luke and Aristarchus,<sup>1</sup> a Thessalonian believer, were allowed to accompany Paul.

When the ship docked at Sidon, Julius allowed Paul to leave the ship to visit believers in the city. Then they sailed to Myra where Julius transferred Paul to a ship going directly to Rome.

It was fall<sup>2</sup> now, and travel on the Mediterranean was becoming more treacherous. Paul's ship landed on the Island of Crete at the harbor of Fair Havens. At this point, Paul warned the commanding centurion of disaster ahead and advised him not to leave the island. Disregarding Paul's advice,

the centurion determined to sail around Crete to the protected harbor of Phoenix to winter there. As soon as they left Fair Havens, however, a typhoon-like wind forced the ship away from Crete and far out into the Mediterranean. For days, the ship was out of control and continually battered by the raging storm. They were forced to throw the ship's tackle and cargo overboard. At last, they gave up all hope for survival.

Then Paul stood before everyone and spoke. To persuade them to listen, he began by reminding them of what it had cost them not to take his earlier advice. Then Paul encouraged the men, telling them that an angel had appeared to him the night before, informing him that no one would die because it was God's will that he stand trial before Caesar. While the ship would run aground on an island and be destroyed, God would spare Paul and everyone on board.

In the two weeks that they had been fighting the storm, the men had been too anxious to eat. But Paul told them they needed energy for the upcoming events, so everyone ate all they could, then tossed the remaining grain overboard to further lighten the vessel.

Before long, the ship raced into a sandbar off the island of Malta and was destroyed by the pounding waves. In such a situation, the prisoners would ordinarily be killed by their Roman guards, who stood to lose their own lives should their prisoners escape. Because the centurion wanted to spare Paul, however, he trusted the prisoners not to try to escape. Everyone either swam or floated on pieces of ship to land.

Amidst the rain and cold, the islanders of Malta helped the shipwrecked group build a fire. Paul was bitten by a viper while gathering kindling, and the islanders waited for him to become sick and die. They perceived that he was a criminal who was receiving just reward from the goddess, Justice. When nothing happened to Paul, they decided *he* was a god.

The chief official on the island, Publius, entertained everyone from the ship at his estate for three days. During this time, God enabled Paul to heal Publius' father of fever and dysentery. The news spread, and before long everyone who was sick on the island came to Paul and were healed! During their three-month stay on Malta, the islanders honored Paul and those with him and completely stocked the Alexandrian ship which took them to Rome once the weather permitted.

Shortly after leaving Malta, they landed at Puteoli, the chief port of Rome some 75 miles from the capital city. The centurion let Paul spend a week with the believers there. Then, as they journeyed by land to Rome, Paul was greatly encouraged, because the Roman Christians who heard he was coming traveled as far as the town of Forum of Appius (43 miles) and Three Taverns (33 miles) to greet the apostle.

In Rome, Paul was allowed to live in a house by himself with a Roman soldier guarding him. At first, he invited the Jews of the city to come and hear the message of Jesus Christ. Typically, some believed and others refused to believe Paul's words about the Messiah. In the two years that followed, Paul welcomed everyone who came to see him, continually teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ.

## **BUILDING ON THE BASICS**

### **Living on Higher Ground I**

The ending drama in the Book of Acts can be seen as a picture of life. There are continual dangers, threats and unexpected challenges. The hopelessness of the men, who did not know God as the storm raged and the ship wrecked, can be compared to the hopelessness felt by those who do not have a personal relationship with Christ. In contrast, Paul's close walk with the Lord allowed him to have an entirely different experience. He had security, hope and peace while the storm raged. Not only this, but his faith brought hope, guidance and blessing to those around him.

As we walk closely with the Lord through life's ups and downs, our experience will be very different from the one without a relationship with Him. We can maintain hope and give hope to those around us. Let's take a closer look at the perspectives that can lift us to higher ground during the storms and shipwrecks of life.

## ***Power to Live By***

### **Overview Study**

### **Living on Higher Ground II**

If anything stands out from the book of Acts, it is the fact that it is possible to rise above difficulty and use hardships as stepping stones to greater good.

The early Christians survived arduous testing. Their world was unstable, with fickle, unscrupulous Roman rulers, widespread immorality and pagan worship, and religious leaders who would resort to murder to accomplish their purposes. On a human plane alone, the church could not have survived the odds against it. But on a higher plane, through the power of the Holy Spirit, each trial only caused the first believers to grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ and increase their resolve to spread the gospel. As they stayed the course of faith and godly living, in spite of the odds against them, hundreds of thousands came to know Christ in their world, and they changed the course of history.

We also live in perilous times. There are those who seek to stamp out any trace of Christian faith and principles in our world today. But the words of Jesus are to us as much as they were to those who saw the nail prints in His hands: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-10).

As we close our study of *Power to Live By*, we will review the basic principles that empowered the first believers to persevere in faith and spread the good news throughout the world. It is indeed God's desire that we, too, experience the adventure of living on higher ground with Him, knowing triumph in daily life and Christian witness. Let's take a final look at the basic biblical principles which allow us to stay the course of faith and impact our world with the life-changing love of Jesus Christ.