

## The Weekly Word

Jan 10-16, 2011

The story of the early church continues as we read this week about the adventures of Peter and Paul. Happy reading!

Grace and Peace, Bill

To hear the Bible read click this link... <http://www.biblegateway.com/resources/audio/>.

### Monday, January 10: Acts 11- Setting the nail

I have done enough building to know you cannot pound in a nail with only one whack of the hammer. Most nails, especially the larger ones used with 2x4s, require multiple hits. And then once you get them flush, most carpenters will add one final blow to 'set the nail.'

Reading this chapter, I felt like the Holy Spirit was 'setting the nail,' adding one final hit to make sure the Church (and I) understood the radical change through which God was bringing them. The fact that Luke, inspired by the Holy Spirit, retells Peter's adventure with Gentiles at Cornelius' house, again in this chapter, causes me to sit up and take notice. It is like hearing the Holy Spirit say, "This is important! Don't miss what is going on here."

And the church leaders get it, *When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life" (18).*

The dismantling of 'human-created barriers' between peoples for the sake of the gospel is major. God wants the world to know about Jesus and God doesn't want any human pettiness to get in the way.

Even as I am typing the previous sentence, I can feel the elbow of the Holy Spirit. "Bill, I am not only talking to Christians back in the first century, I am talking to you..." At that point I began to ponder barriers I erect that separate me from others.

I don't feel compelled to list specifics the Holy Spirit brought to mind, however, some surprised me. One, I will mention, is the conversational awkwardness I feel with people I do not know very well. I am wondering if I cultivate that personality trait, rather than seek to grow out of it. And more to the Holy Spirit's point, is it hindering my gospel witness? Is it separating me from others with whom God would like me to share Jesus? This is a new thought for me and one I need to wrestle with in prayer...

*Lord, for the sake of Jesus and the gospel I willingly, albeit with honest trepidation, lay down anything that might hamper me being used by You in advancing the gospel. I lay down my introvertedness and tentativeness in new conversations. I lay down any fears... that I might be a tool in Your hands, O God. May my life be in total service to You. In Jesus' name and through the power of the Holy Spirit, I pray. Amen.*

### Tuesday, January 11: Acts 12- Angels...

Three times today angels are mentioned. The chapter opens with an angel helping Peter escape from prison. Upon his escape Peter flees to the home of Mary, where the church gathered. As Peter knocks on the door, the servant Rhoda announces to the group it is Peter, but the gathered community doesn't believe her, replying instead, "*It must be his angel*" (15). Lastly it is an angel who strikes Herod down for not giving praise and glory to God (23).

The 'no-big-deal' approach to angels - another way to say it might be the 'not-surprised-by-angelic-presence' - of the early Christians caught me off guard. Truth is for me, angels and

angelic presence, is more of a faith-belief (I see it in scripture and therefore believe) as opposed to a life reality. I have never personally experienced or seen an angel in a manner in which I knew it was an angel. I will not say, however, that I have never experienced angelic presence or angelic protection. Possibly I have, I just didn't know it was an angel.

My struggle and my ponderings today are bouncing around the activity of angels. Again, in Luke's account, angelic activity is so matter of fact. I am wondering why that isn't so for me or for the church I have experienced all my life? Truthfully, I have no satisfactory answer to my wonderings. Angelic activity is a given in scripture and therefore in my life. Why I am not aware of them or more aware of them I don't know. It is this last thought that drives me to my knees in prayer.

*Lord, why? Why am I so oblivious to angelic activity, at least compared to the women and men of the early church? Lord, is there something in my life—a lack of faith aspect—that is blocking me from seeing angelic reality? Is it Your protection and gift that I don't need to know because knowing might puff me up in some way. Lord, I am left to wonder.*

*Lord, I believe in angels and their evil counter-parts, fallen angels/ demons. Lord, I have witnessed the work of the latter in people's lives. Lord, should it serve the kingdom advancement for me to become more cognizant of angelic presence and work, please open my eyes, heart and faith to their reality, much like you did for Elisha's servant in 2Kings 6:15-17. But Lord, if kingdom advancement will not be aided by me knowing when and how angels are working, then, Lord, I will gladly continue serving You as I have so far in my life. All for Your glory, Lord. All for Your glory.*

*In Jesus' name. Amen.*

### **Wednesday, January 12: Acts 13- Stepping out...**

Saul (Paul) and Barnabas are with a bunch of leaders fasting and worshiping God when God, the Holy Spirit, called them to be apostolic missionaries. This is a new adventure. This is something never done before by the church, and what I love is Barnabas and Saul's response, "Let's go!"

Now those words aren't actually in the Bible but that is what they do. The text says that the group prayed for Barnabas and Saul, then comes verse 4: *The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus.*

I just love that! God called and they responded immediately, "Let's go!" I am convinced that they have no idea into what God is leading them. However, they know and trust God. He said, "Go!" and so they went! What wonderful examples of faithfulness.

Not many of us will be called by God to be apostolic missionaries but God will call each of us to do things that stretch us. That's where this text is leading me to meditate.

What, God, are You calling me to do... ??? As I contemplate this more I find another question filtering through my thoughts, "What is the growing edge of my faith (?) and how can I step out in that arena of my life???"

*Lord, lead me and call me to deeper faith and more committed living for You. And, Lord, even as You call, spur me on to the faith of Barnabas and Paul who stepped out right away after You called them. Help me to grow that kind of faith ... In Jesus' name and for the sake of gospel advance, I pray. Amen.*

### **Thursday, January 13: Acts 14- A plan for gospel advance**

Two separate phrases jumped out at me and provided the spark for my devotional musings and prayer.

The first came in the very first verse. It was the two-word phrase “as usual”: *Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue*. It caused me to realize that this duo had a plan or routine for spreading the gospel in their travels. From that realization, I jumped to my life and had a conversation with myself, which I believe was guided by the Spirit.

It started when I posed the question to myself, “Do I have a plan for spreading the gospel?”

“No, I don’t,” came my internal reply.

Defensiveness kicked in and I thought, “But I’m not an apostolic-missionary.”

To which I sensed a reply, “But we are all to be witnesses to Jesus and His resurrection...”

I was convicted by my own dialogue. I could be doing more to be effective in my living for Jesus. Maybe I should develop my own “as usual”...

After this I returned to reading the text and my second ‘a-ha’ came in verse 22, *strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. Paul and Barnabas said, "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God"*.

It was Barnabas and Paul’s words that made me sit up and take notice. *We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God*. My first reaction was, “I don’t like that.” Next I thought through my 26<sup>+</sup> years of preaching, I don’t think I ever said that or an equivalent. Then I wondered, “Why?” And one of the places I went in my wonderings was to Christianity in America. Are we too soft? Have we lost the missionary/witnessing edge that brings us into conflict with others? Have we settled for a faith that is timid so we don’t have to endure hardships? That thought just kept turning over and over in my head. I couldn’t let go of it and neither could I answer it. I was left stewing in the juices of that thought... wondering what changes are You birthing in my life, O Lord?

*Lord, what changes are You birthing in my life? Lord, how can I take today’s gleanings and apply them to my life? Lead me and teach me, O Lord, I pray. Amen.*

### **Friday, January 14: Acts 15- Problems lead to expansion.**

The early church was not perfect. They had problems just like we have problems. What I found interesting is that in the solving of problems, the church moves forward. It happened in chapter 6 when the unequal distribution of food to Greek and Hebrew speaking widows was handled. It happened in chapter 10 when God bridged the Gentile divide with a vision to Peter, preaching in Cornelius’ house and then Peter’s defense to the brothers. It happened when God scattered the church in chapter 8 due to the persecution of the church. It happens again in today’s reading a dispute about whether converts to Jesus need to follow the Jewish law leads to growth.

Often I dream of a ripple free life, no problems, no disagreements, no issues... sounds like utopia... and someday in the presence of Almighty God we will have that. But this side of eternity, we will never experience a problem free life. And yet, in God’s economy this side of eternity, problems when handled well actually lead to growth. As I noted above, we see it in the church and the church has continued to experience this truth through out its history. It is even true in secular living. Problems handled well lead to advancement. Diseases led to vaccines and antibiotics in medicine. Energy needs led to advances in energy production... and so on. Over the years, in my personal life, handling my issues have pushed me toward maturity. Most of my growth has occurred in response to problems and pain.

The Spirit whispers, “What problems are you experiencing???” Handling those issues well will propel you to new and better and healthier ways of living... think about it!

*Lord, may I have Your grace to see solutions to my problems and other problems that are beyond mere human ingenuity and determination. And, Lord, may I have Your wisdom to implement what You show me rather than fall back on "my best wisdom." Finally, Lord, may You grant me courage and strength to do what You have shown, growing in the process even as Your grace expands in and throughout the world. Amen.*

This devotional above came as a surprise. I began writing with a completely different thought in mind... As a result you get a two-for-one today here is where my initial thoughts were originally going...

Simplicity of the gospel:

I was attracted to the simplicity of Paul's summary of the gospel message as articulated in verses 8-11: *God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.*

Ponder some of what it teaches:

- God made no distinction...
- God purified their hearts by faith...
- Why do we make following Jesus harder with all manner of human made rules?...
- It is through believing in Jesus that we are saved. That's it! Faith in Jesus is a lot but it is all that is necessary for salvation!

If you have time ponder these things...

### **Saturday, January 15: Acts 16- Dedication to the cause...**

This chapter is filled with amazing incidents... dreams directing decisions and earthquakes freeing prisoners. What amazing days those must have been. And yet what attracted my attention and thought this morning was the depth of dedication of those who carried the message of Jesus. Paul is like a Bible superhero. It is not easy for me to relate to him. His dedication to Jesus seems to be on a different level than mine. The people who spurred me on toward deeper faith and dedication, as I read today, were the other lesser known people who pop up in today's reading.

Timothy, a young man of good repute, was invited by Paul to travel as Paul's aide on one condition... surgery. Understanding the prevailing culture of the day and Timothy's mixed heritage, Paul knew if Timothy remained uncircumcised that many doors to the gospel would be closed. Timothy agreed. Now I have been on mission trips which required various vaccinations, but I have never been asked to have elective surgery! The surgery in question isn't life threatening but it is painful for a week or so and Timothy said, "Yes"... dedication to the cause!

Let me present it another way. I have met many Fulani in Africa and most have various facial markings, small yet noticeable patterned-cuts on their cheeks and face that distinguish their tribe. Would I have my face marked for the sake of the gospel if a Fulani missionary asked me to travel with and help him? (FYI, this is a totally hypothetical question, used only to make the point). I don't know!?

Then there is the example of Silas, another traveling companion and aide to Paul. Silas accompanied Paul on the evangelistic mission to Philippi. The trip began well but turned unexpectedly mid-trip resulting in imprisonment and a Roman flogging. We have no idea what Silas' role was on the trip. For all we know, Silas was Paul's porter, carrying bags or running

errands. The text is silent regarding Silas' role. What we do know is Paul's exploits landed Silas in prison where he was beaten severely... dedication to the cause! It is clear Silas was not traveling grudgingly, nor was he at odds with Paul for getting him in all this trouble. Instead, in the middle of the night of their imprisonment while still nursing wounds from their beatings, Paul and Silas are singing hymns and praying. That's the level of dedication this young man showed!

I was reduced to prayer after pondering this and all I could honestly muster was this simple prayer...

*Lord, groom in me dedication for You that I see in Timothy and Silas. For the sake of kingdom advancement, I pray. Amen.*

### **Sunday, January 16, Sunday Worship**

*If any of my thoughts or the Bible readings spark questions send an email reply and I will do my best to answer all questions from people on the list... I will answer personal questions privately; general questions will be answered in a subsequent email installment.*

*If you are reading along with me from the PCOG website you can send questions or request being placed on the weekly email list by emailing Lisa at [office@pcogonline.org](mailto:office@pcogonline.org).*

Click here for a link to my sermons on the web. Sermons are generally posted within 2 days.