

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

NOTES 15

ACTS 4:23–31

FORMER ADVENTIST FELLOWSHIP BIBLE STUDY

The Pharisees released Peter and John because they could find no legal reason to detain them. They were malignantly angry at their confidence and authority; the Light that was in them through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit was threatening the darkness that hid the Pharisees' dishonesty and treachery. The apostles returned to their companions and "reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them."

The whole assembly of believers spontaneously burst into praise to God, saying, "O Lord, it is You who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them." They addressed God as their Creator, acknowledging that He was sovereign in power and authority over all creation, including themselves and the events of their lives. This acknowledgment was not a new insight; the Old Testament is full of God's people honoring Him for the foundational reason that He is Lord of all existence.

Exodus 20:11 says, "For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy." Adventists use this declaration to coerce people into honoring the seventh day, but this statement is about God's sovereignty over creation and His ceasing from creation on the seventh day. The command to Israel to keep holy the seventh day was not about the day—it was about honoring God's rest, His "ceasing" after He completed creation. What God declared "holy" was the seventh day—the day which, uniquely in the creation account—had no beginning and no end. God's "ceasing"—His rest—is what He declared holy.

It is not the seventh day which we are to honor now that Jesus has come and has fulfilled the shadows of the law; it is the sovereign Lord who created everything with His word and by His hand. Even the fourth commandment was not instruction to do the "work" of resting in order to honor the Sabbath. Rather, it was a command for Israel to rest, literally, one day in seven, so that their success could never be construed to be the result of their own cleverness and hard work. One in seven they would remain in their tents while the surrounding nations worked ceaselessly to appease their gods. Israel, resting every seventh day regardless of the season or the work demands, would prosper beyond explanation because they rested in the work of God on their behalf.

Nehemiah 9:6 says, "You are the LORD, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you."

In this verse Nehemiah again addresses God as the Lord who alone made all of heaven and earth and everything in them. This is not ritual praise; this declaration from Nehemiah's lips is worship of the sovereign God whom Nehemiah acknowledges as unfathomable and all-powerful, the One on whom he depends for his very existence. Men of God throughout history have known and acknowledged God as being One whom they could not control, manipulate, or change. They never pictured God as one who limited himself so as to protect human freedom. They never saw God as a benign philanthropist who would never punish one of his creations. The Old Testament people of God always honored Him as beyond their ability to understand, but as One whom they could trust. He was completely sovereign and faithful.

Psalms 146:5-7 reads, "Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free."

Along with acknowledging God as the Cause and Creator of all things, this passage also honors God for His faithfulness, His justice, and His provision for the needy. It also echoes one of the foundational themes of all Scripture: God as the One who sets prisoners and captives free. Because He is Lord of all, the Creator who brought each of us and all of creation into existence, He is also the only One with the power and authority to overrule evil and all our limitations and blindness. He sees every act of injustice; He executes justice. No perpetrator will go undisciplined—either through God's bringing him or her to repentance and eternal life or through eternal punishment for those who do not repent. Moreover, no victim will go unrestored. The God of justice will right every wrong and give to each person what their acts deserve in the final judgment.

This justice, however, is revealed in more detail in the cross of Jesus. He took the punishment for all human sin, and He bore the lashes and the pain of every act of evil perpetrated on an undeserving victim. In Him justice is done. For those who

see and repent before the Lord Jesus and receive His blood pouring into eternity on our behalf, there will be forgiveness and restoration. Justice is done in the body of Christ.

For those who look at Jesus, however, and refuse to repent, justice will be completed in their own punishment. Those who do not believe in the only begotten Son of God are judged already, and “the wrath of God abides on them” (John 3:18).

Also in their prayer, these early believers acknowledged that God spoke through David. They understood that David’s words were prophetic words from Yaweh. They quote from Psalm 2, recognizing that in David’s words God has explained that even evil men know God is a “force” opposed to their agendas.

Psalm 2:1-3 says this: “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying, ‘Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.’”

Evil has always attempted to diminish the power and authority of God. Only sinful, natural people who have not been born again of the Spirit would try to escape the power of God. It is impossible to move outside the authority of the Lord or to avoid His limits and provision. Yet men who do not honor Him in their hearts try to conceal from themselves and from others the ultimate glory and authority of God. Only those who do not know Him would try to make him “friendlier”, limited for the sake of our freedom, too “nice” to punish the wicked, patiently waiting for us to vindicate His character.

Those who know and honor God have always known they stand in submission, reverence, and worship of His power and authority and eternal love that does not look like human “logic”. Our only appropriate response to God is worship and gratitude that He has provided for us to be reconciled to Him—the eternal, sovereign God has given His own Son in order to provide reconciliation for us rebels.

In Acts 1:16 Peter asserted that the Holy Spirit had spoken through David. As the apostles prepared to draw lots to choose Judas’s successor, Peter said, “Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus.” Peter’s reference was to Psalms 69:25 and 109:8. Peter was demonstrating that both before and after Christ, Jews understood many psalms to be messianic.

The significant point about the opening passages of this prayer recorded in Acts 4:24-25, however, is that these first Christians worshiped God by acknowledging what Scripture said about Him. Often we think of worship as thanking Him for His acts of kindness and mercy—and indeed, these kinds of thanks are part of worship. What this and other passages from Acts show us, though, is that true worship is not primarily reflecting our own experience back to God. Rather, true worship is acknowledging to God that we know and accept what He has revealed about Himself.

As Adventists many of us learned to think of worship as doing religious rituals, praying, reading religious writings including Scripture, and singing hymns. We thought of wor-

ship primarily as doing these things as demonstrations that we honored God and as ways to learn about Him.

Biblical worship, however, is grounded in honoring God by praising Him for who He is. When we realize our true position before Him, we have no proper response except to acknowledge His sovereign authority over us, His transcendent power that saved us from our hopeless state of death. We also acknowledge His inexplicable love that sent Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, to us as a human, to become a propitiation for His own decree that sin deserves death. He became sin; He took our death.

The early Christians praised God for His sovereignty over them and over the Pharisees who, in spite of their power and authority, could not stop the apostles from preaching and performing God’s acts in their midst. Even the religious leaders had to defer to the unmatched authority and grace of God who establishes all things.

AGAINST HIS CHRIST

The believers continue their prayer by quoting Psalm 2:1-2, saying: “Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples devise futile things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against His Christ.”

Psalm 1:1-2 says it this way: “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying, ‘Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.’”

Originally this psalm was a coronation psalm written for David kings taking the throne according to God’s covenant with David that his descendants would eternally reign from his throne. After the apostasy of Israel and God’s discipline of them, this psalm took on Messianic meaning to the Jews.

In Acts, the believers quote this psalm and apply it to the rulers of the Jews and the Roman rulers opposing the Lord Jesus and attempting to escape His claim and influence. In verse three they articulate exactly what happened: “there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel.”

They saw the Jews and the Romans fulfilling this psalm’s prophecy about the gentiles and rulers’ rage against God and His Anointed One.

This interpretation of Psalm 2:1-2 is born out throughout the book of Acts. The apostles were clear in their preaching to the Jews that they had killed the Author of life—an unthinkable act that the Jews would have denied they would do. They were anticipating the Messiah—they would not have imagined that they would kill their promised hero—but they expected a Messiah in their own image instead of trusting God and allowing Him to reveal Him to them in His way and time.

Acts 3:14-15 says this: “But you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you,

and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses.” And here in Acts 4:29-30 the believers continue in prayer: “And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

The gospels tell the story of the “kings of the earth” and the “rulers” fearing and attempting to escape the miraculous power of Jesus. Matthew 14:1-2 records Herod’s reaction to hearing about Jesus’ miracles: “At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus, and he said to his servants, ‘This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him.’”

Herod was terrified when he heard of Jesus’ miracles. Undoubtedly his guilt over having Herod beheaded at the request of Herodias’s daughter tormented him. He knew John was a prophet—a godly man who told him the truth and declared it was not lawful for him to have his brother’s wife. John’s execution, which he authorized to save face in front of his dinner guests, no doubt haunted him. When he saw Jesus’ miracles, he knew those things were the work of God, and he feared that John the Baptist had risen from the dead. He had been too self-serving to preserve John’s life when it was in his power to do so, and now, he was terrified to face the power of God.

Luke 23:7-11 records Pilate’s sending Jesus to Herod for questioning. Convinced Jesus was innocent but pressured by the Jews, Pilate tried to punt by deferring to Herod. Luke says this:

“And when he learned that he belonged to Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him over to Herod, who was himself in Jerusalem at that time. When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him. So he questioned him at some length, but he made no answer. The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him. Then, arraying him in splendid clothing, he sent him back to Pilate.”

Herod and his men treated Jesus with contempt, as a sideshow. The Jews angrily and persistently tried to take him out by accusing Him falsely. Jesus did not perform for them nor defend Himself. As he stood among them fulfilling prophecy, the minutes ticked by and men cemented their destinies as they hardened their hearts against Him. Gentile and Jewish rulers alike rejected and tormented God’s anointed.

In Matthew 20:18-29 Jesus told His disciples what was about to happen when they would shortly arrive in Judea: “See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day.” Jesus foretold exactly what the Psalm said: that the Jewish religious leaders would condemn Him, and they would deliver Him over to Gentiles for execution. The disci-

ples did not know what to make of Jesus’ words, but they soon discovered His meaning.

Matthew 27:1-2 records the chief priests’ and the elders’ treachery: “When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. And they bound him and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate the governor.”

Moreover, Jesus Himself said to His disciples, after His resurrection and just before His ascension, that everything written about Him “in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44). Immediately “he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45). It was Jesus who first explained to the disciples that the promises and shadows of the Old Testament were all pointing toward Him. The apostles didn’t just conveniently interpret the Old Testament in such a way as to explain their point of view. They had been taught the Lord Jesus Himself following His resurrection from the dead. In this incident in the book of Acts, the early Christians were merely proclaiming what God the Son had made clear to them just weeks before.

The religious leaders of the day turned over to gentiles one of their fellow Jews. Their national solidarity stopped at the Person of the Lord Jesus. The Jews wanted no connection with Him, and they wanted Him gone. They betrayed their own Messiah, indebting themselves to their Roman oppressors and forfeiting the deliverance He came to bring them—right on schedule and just as God had promised. They didn’t even see the reality that was in front of them.

Both Jewish and Roman rulers tried to escape the conviction that Jesus created in them. He came doing the signs of the Messiah, and they all knew He was neither guilty of a crime nor a magician. They knew His miracles were of God.

In order to avoid admitting their own sin and guilt, they rationalized and argued that Jesus would change the status quo, and they needed to preserve their own positions. The gentile leaders deeply knew that if they allowed Jesus’ compelling truth to pierce their hearts, their lives as Roman rulers would change. The Jewish leaders new their power over the Jews was threatened as religious leaders.

Instead of admitting their own sin and need, they demonized the One who came to rescue them and tried to destroy His authority over them—authority which they dimly perceived but which was powerfully present. They killed the Author of life in their attempt to preserve their puny power.

OF EVIL AND PREDESTINATION

The statement in verse 28 that God predestined the betrayal and treachery toward Jesus causes consternation in many people. The Bible, however, gives us insight into the interaction between the work of the wicked and the sovereign will of God. First of all, it is clear that God is sovereign over everything and all power and authority, even over evil.

Acts 2:22-24 says this, “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.”

Peter here proclaims that Jesus was delivered up, crucified, and killed by lawless men “according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.” The events of His death were not a surprise to God, nor did He passively stand by and allow evil to play itself out, limiting His own involvement in order to protect satanic and human free will. Jesus’ death was God’s own plan, and He knew that wicked men who refused to acknowledge Jesus; identity would crucify Him.

It was also His plan to break the bonds of death. He knew Jesus could not be contained by death, and He intended to release mankind from the unavoidable maw of death by His own Son’s death and inevitable resurrection. No creature could know this turn of events in advance; God knew, and He ordained the whole thing.

Acts 17:26-27 further explains God’s sovereign control of human events: “And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us...”

God Himself made the nations and caused them to fill the earth. He Himself determined when each nation would arise and where it would be. He even determined in advance the “boundaries of their dwelling place”. According to this text in Acts, this active foreknowledge of God was for a specific purpose: that all people should seek God. He is near, and He can be found. God’s foreknowledge and placement of each nation and each person is entirely about His glory and the salvation of mankind. We are not told the “how” or the “why” of this amazing reality, but God has revealed to us that this fact is true.

God tells us what He knows we need to know. He wants us to acknowledge His sovereignty, and He wants us to know He is bigger than we are. He wants us to bow before Him in reverence and worship and to acknowledge Him as God. He reveals more of Himself to those who acknowledge that He is above and beyond them—and to those who want to know Him. To those who desire truth, God reveals His Son as the Way of salvation.

The book of Job also talks about God’s sovereignty over the world in Job 12:23-24 and again in Job 14:4-6: “He makes nations great, and he destroys them; he enlarges nations, and leads them away. He takes away understanding from the chiefs of the people of the earth and makes them wander in a trackless waste.”

These passages are not saying God removes a true knowledge of and trust in Him from people. Rather, it is saying that the rise and fall of human systems are all part of His sovereign

will. The hardening of people is something He knows and uses for His purposes and glory.

For example, the Jews knew that God had promised them the Messiah. They knew the prophecies and the Psalms, and the religious leaders had large portions of the Old Testament memorized. Yet even with this special revelation from God, they morphed their interpretations of the promises to fit their own expectations. When Jesus finally came, the religious leaders looked right at Him with open eyes. They saw His signs and miracles that marked Him as the Promised One from God. They knew only God could raise the dead. They deeply feared that He really would rise from the grave—they saw, they understood, and they refused to believe. They tried to destroy Him.

God had been the One who made Israel a nation and delivered them from bondage. He had driven out the Canaanites so they could inhabit the land. He had made them prosper when they honored His covenant. He promised David that his descendant would always sit on the throne. He made Solomon wise and wealthy, and He made Israel flourish and expand under his rule.

Yet it was God who allowed Assyria and then Babylon to drive His people into captivity when they apostatized—and it was He who later brought Judah back into the land with the help of the pagan king Cyrus. It was God who helped Judah rebuild the temple and rebuild Jerusalem. Even though Israel was never again the wealthy, successful nation it had been under David and Solomon, they nevertheless existed—even though they came under the rule of Rome—and it was God who both protected their national existence and allowed Rome’s rule over them.

When the leaders of the Jews finally had the full fulfillment of God’s promises of a redeemer and rejected Him with their eyes wide open, God allowed Israel to be utterly destroyed and dispersed. When Titus destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70, the Jews were driven into exile among all the nations of the world.

God allowed them, in their own hardness of heart, to reject and crucify His own Son—and as a consequence of this ultimate hardness of heart on the part of the Jews, God ordained their severe discipline and the destruction of their nation. He did this, however, for His own glory and for those who were not His people to become His people when they received His Son.

In other words, God knows His own plans, and He uses the choices of humans for accomplishing His ultimate purposes and for the ultimate saving of many lives. He brings about the nations and their citizens at exactly the times and within the boundaries He determines, and this sovereign rule is for our good and His glory.

God does not cause people to resist Him, but He uses resistant people for His ultimate purposes. He knew in advance that rulers and gentiles would betray and kill the Lord Jesus, and He foretold this fact through the prophet David—even when David may not have had any idea exactly how his words would be fulfilled. God knew, however, and the Lord Jesus explained to His apostles how He fulfilled all the prophecies

about Him before He returned to the Father. The apostles were not arbitrarily assigning meanings to vague Old Testament utterances. God the Son specifically instructed His followers of the meaning of the Scriptures before He left them.

PREACHING UNDER PERSECUTION

Paul understood the sovereign will of God that overarches the wicked ways of men. He wrote in Philippians 1:12-18: “I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

“Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.”

While Paul was in prison, his witness advanced the gospel among the imperial guards and prison officials. Moreover, a rash or people sprang up to preach in his absence. Some preached out of good will, but others took advantage of Paul’s absence and began pushing themselves forward, trying to gain status, followers, and income while hoping to stir up jealousy in Paul.

Paul’s reaction, however, reflected the bigger picture from an eternal perspective. “What then?” he asked. “Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.”

Persecution has always increased the spread of the gospel. Perhaps because believers see more clearly the stark contrast between evil and the gift of God, perhaps because they must protect the treasure entrusted to them by the deposit of the Holy Spirit in them—perhaps for multiple reasons, the gospel spreads when believers are under attack.

Paul was able to say that even if people preached from false motives, if they preached Christ, the Holy Spirit would use that preaching to bring people to conviction. God is not limited by our attitudes. We cannot outwit or thwart His plans and His power.

Paul asked in Ephesians 6:18-20 that the believers pray on his behalf that he would have boldness to proclaim “the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains.” He saw every circumstance of his life as an opportunity to tell the gospel of God. Persecution only honed his and the other apostles’ urgency to tell people that the One True God had provided a Way for them to be saved.

In this chapter of Acts—chapter 4:13-16—the rebellious and unbelieving priests and Pharisees saw and understood that the

uneducated Peter and John had the boldness, authority, and Scriptural understanding that marked them as having been with Jesus, the One whom they had been unable to destroy. The passage says,

“Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus. But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. But when they had commanded them to leave the council, they conferred with one another, saying, “What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it.”

They could not deny nor explain away the miracle God had done through them. They knew the apostles’ courage and authority was from God. They were unable to stop or silence them, and in vain they attempted to command them to stop preaching in Jesus’ name. Their persecution and imprisonment only served to underscore the supernatural nature of their ministry. Despite the Jewish officials’ best efforts, they could not succeed in having Peter and John imprisoned. Angels released them; the people believed they were from God; the Jews were powerless against the clear mark of God’s authority on them. Their persecution of Peter and John only served to publicize the apostles’ message.

In Acts 14:1-3 is the account of Paul and Barnabas at Iconium: “Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands.”

In spite of the treachery of the unbelieving Jews, God confirmed the gospel by granting Paul and Barnabas the gifts of performing signs and wonders. The apostles persisted, remaining in the hostile environment, speaking boldly of Jesus and confirming His gospel by miracles. The wicked plots of the unbelievers could not silence nor neutralize the power of the gospel. Moreover, these believers did not pray against their opponents but for the apostles’ own faithfulness and boldness to speak truth.

Persecution cannot stop the gospel, and only God can overcome the cruelty and evil of men opposed to God’s truth. The apostles have left us a legacy of examples of persevering under persecution. Since believers are not preaching their own agenda but the message of God, God empowers and protects it and equips the believers. He guards their hearts and gives them a desire to speak boldly and faithfully even when they suffer. God grants His people the knowledge of the true issues at stake. It is the Holy Spirit who makes us care more for the truth of God than for our own physical safety.

Once we have been born again and given eternal life, nothing done to us physically can threaten our eternal security. God gives us His peace and presence to confirm that we are His

and in His will, and He gives us the desire to proclaim Him no matter what opposition we face.

JESUS' HAND WORKS THROUGH BELIEVERS

The believers end their prayer with an appeal to the Lord to extend His hand “to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus.”

In this prayer they are acknowledging that it is the Lord who is at work in miracles such as the healing of the lame man that precipitated the events in chapter 4. At the same time, the authority and power of God is connected with the apostles' speaking His word “with all confidence” (v. 29). The gospel is the truth, and God confirms His truth in whatever ways are necessary to convict men and women of who Jesus is.

Mark 16:16-18 is part of a disputed ending to the book of Mark. Some of the oldest and most reliable ancient manuscripts do not contain verses 9-20, and some early church fathers appear not to know them. On the other hand, some old and later manuscripts have them, and other church fathers refer to them. Because of its disputed authenticity, we have to read these verses with a certain awareness that they may not be part of Mark's original manuscript. Nevertheless, they reflect the teaching found in other places throughout the gospels and the book of Acts.

These three verses say this: “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents with their hands; and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.”

These words of Jesus indicate that He was sending His apostles into the world to bear His truth which would be confirmed by His power executed through them.

Jesus prepared His disciples for their unique work of witnessing and confirming the gospel with sign from God. Luke 9 records Jesus sending out His 12 disciples, and Luke 10 records His sending out a larger group of 72, to heal the sick and preach the news of the kingdom. When the 72 returned from this missionary trip, they were filled with joy that “even the demons are subject to us in your name!”

Jesus corrected their focus, however, by saying, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

In this insightful response Jesus addressed two things that the body of Christ often seems to forget. First, He declared from His own eternal knowledge that Satan is a defeated foe. His disciples were not to think that they defeated Him; they were acting in Jesus' power. He was fallen because the Lord

Jesus was the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world, and He was already sending His followers into the into the domain of darkness, Satan's territory, as Christ's followers. Satan lost his claim on those who belong to Christ, and even before Jesus died, this reality was demonstrated by Jesus' followers by His command and empowerment.

Second, Jesus cautioned them that their power over evil by claiming His name was not the important thing. While significant, the real point of rejoicing is that their names were written in heaven. In other words, they had been transferred out of the domain of darkness into the kingdom of the beloved Son (Co 1:13), and that put them in a different kingdom. They were no longer under Satan's rule but under God's as believers in the Son. Being in the Son's kingdom gave them the power and authority of their new King, and this miracle of their new identity and citizenship was the point of their true rejoicing.

They did not need to marvel at their power over evil; in fact, they intrinsically had none. As Christ's witnesses, however, their joy should be that they now belonged to God through Him and were eternally members of God's kingdom. The power was simply a consequence of their new citizenship and identity.

In Mark 9:38-41 John, upset that someone they didn't know had been casting out demons in Jesus' name, complained to Jesus. He responded, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. For the one who is not against us is for us. For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.”

The point was not the miracles themselves. The point was that those who honored the Lord Jesus would do His work, and that would be for the good of the body and also for the confirmation of the gospel of Jesus. Miracles, though, are not “the thing” and do not necessarily prove that a person belongs to the Lord Jesus. Jesus told his disciples that, at the judgment, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”

Miracles are not the gospel, nor are miracles the “thing” that we should seek. What matters is that Jesus knows us. “Knowing” is an intimate term, and Jesus is referring to the miracle of the new birth as explained in John 3. Unless we are born of the Spirit, we cannot see nor enter the kingdom of heaven. Even if we do miracles and cast out demons, if we are not born again, we are not God's. He may glorify Himself to people as a result of unbelievers doing “good”, but unless a person is born again, he cannot be saved.

This reality is what underlay Jesus' words to the 72, that they were not to rejoice that they had power over evil, but they were to rejoice that their names were written in heaven.

The gifts of healing and other miracles were God's gifts to those who took the gospel into a dark and unbelieving world. They confirmed the gospel. Just as we read in Acts 3:4-8 where Jesus healed the man who had been born lame, the apostles had not money. But they gave this suffering man what they had: the power of the Lord Jesus in whose name they commanded him to walk. The result was that the man praised God and became a believer in Jesus.

In Acts 3:11-15 we find Peter and John addressing the astonished crowds who saw the lame man healed. They immediately put perspective on the entire event and declared that they had not done the miracle by their own power. They proclaimed that the God of their fathers had glorified Jesus, whom they had put to death, raised Him from the dead, and they were merely His witnesses. In other words, the same power that raised Jesus from death had brought life to this man's dead limbs. It wasn't that Peter and John had power; the reality was that they had Jesus, and Jesus had them. Jesus worked His power through them for the purpose of confirming His gospel and His truth.

John 4:46-53 records the story of Jesus healing the official's son at Capernaum. When the man heard that Jesus was in town, he asked Him to come heal his son. Jesus responded, "UNless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." The official, however, said, "Sir, come down before my child dies." And Jesus said, "Go, your son will live."

Jesus pointed out that the natural man is wowed by miracles. Human nature loves a mystery, and when a person can't explain something, they tend to believe in whomever demonstrated the power that appears to defy natural law. Belief in the Lord Jesus—belief in God's promises—is not based on nor attached to miracles. God is God and salvation is salvation with or without miracles, and Jesus wanted people to believe Him because they trusted God, not because they trusted miracles.

When Jesus saw that the official's concern was actually his son's life and that he was not asking for a miracle in order to decide if he would believe but because he already DID believe, Jesus healed his son.

Today many Christians seek the signs. They believe their lives should be demonstrating miracles of healing, prophetic words, and unexplainable power and tongues. These were never promised to all believers. Jesus promised His Spirit to all believers, and God distributes the gifts of the Spirit as He wills. Miracles are not the mark of the Spirit; changed lives are. Miracles can be counterfeited, but the new birth cannot.

When we seek Jesus and receive His word as His revelation to us, we will experience the power of the Holy Spirit in exactly the ways He wants us to for the work He gives us to do. We are never instructed to seek "more of the Spirit" or "more of Christ". We are instructed to stay anchored on the gospel and the transformation of identity that gives us in Christ. As we submit to Him and present ourselves to Him for His service, we receive what He knows we need for the work He prepares in advance for us to do (Eph. 2:10).

FILLED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT

When the believers finished praying, having asked God for boldness to preach the gospel, "the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness."

God gave these persecuted, brand-new Christians clear evidence that He heard and answered their prayer. They had not prayed against their enemies but for their own ability to preach. The whole place shook, as Mt. Sinai had when God gave the law, and each person was filled with the Holy Spirit. This filling does not mean they had not been filled before; it was an empowerment of God for the request they had made: to be able to preach with authority. It was confirmation that they were doing God's will and that He was caring for them even in the face of growing opposition.

It was the preaching of Jesus as the fulfillment of Scripture that He commissioned His disciples to do. In Luke 24:45-49 we read, "Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.'"

Before He returned to the Father, Jesus taught His apostles how He was the One the entire Old Testament foretold. These new Christians in Acts 4 were witnessing to the Jews with authority and power that the religious leaders did not have because they refused to know the meaning of the Scriptures over which they claimed authority. Jesus, however, warned them not to leave Jerusalem—not to begin witnessing—until the power of the Holy Spirit came on them. Just before He ascended from Mt. Olives, Jesus said to them, "for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:5,8; Acts 2:4).

The promise of the Holy Spirit is given to every person who places his or her faith in the Lord Jesus and His completed sacrifice of atonement for their sin. Ephesians 1:13-14 clearly says that the indwelling Holy Spirit is the seal of God on believers: "In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory."

Again in Ephesians 4:30 we find confirmation of the Holy Spirit's being God's seal: "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption."

The Holy Spirit—not the Sabbath—is the seal of God, the mark on all those who believe in the Lord Jesus. Paul also said in 2 Corinthians 1:22-23: “And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.”

It is the absolute promise of God that His children will receive gifts of the Spirit when they are born again. Paul says this in 1 Corinthians 12:1-11: “Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says “Jesus is accursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit.

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.”

There are many gifts, but they are all given by the same Spirit, Lord, and Father. These gifts are not exclusively the work of the Spirit. The entire Trinity gives believers His gifts, His service and His work. One cannot separate the gifts from the work of God; they are given individually by the Triune God for His glory and purpose. It is God who decides who receives which gifts, and we are never instructed to “seek more of the Spirit”. We are asked to obey God and do the work He places before us. He equips

us for what He asks us to do. As we learn to submit ourselves to Him, we give Him access to deeper parts of ourselves, and we experience His power more deeply and consistently as we learn to trust Him.

Above all, the gifts of God to His children are never bragging rights. We do not control them, nor do we decide how much of His gifts we receive. The gifts are for the building up of the body of Christ, and each of us is a unique member of the body. There is only one Spirit, and He is freely given to every believer. We are part of each other, connected by the one Spirit and corporately functioning as Christ’s body in the world. We must care for and nurture each other, and as a body we bear witness of Christ to the world.

MEDITATE

God calls us to surrender to Him all our dreams and desires to control. When we place our trust in the Lord Jesus, he gives us Himself powerfully, sending us into the world to witness of Him. He asks you to offer yourself as a living sacrifice (Rom. 12:1) for His service, trusting Him to equip and empower you, as He did the early church, for the work He has you do.

Our gifts may not look like the apostles’ gifts looked. We have advantages they did not have: printed Bibles and a universal knowledge of the historical figure Jesus. Nevertheless, if God needs to do something dramatic to confirm the gospel to unbelievers, He will. If those unbelievers have all the evidence they need available to them but do not believe, He may not allow them to see signs because they won’t believe what they already know.

We can trust God. Serving Him is not about “the gifts”; serving the Lord Jesus is about knowing Him and being committed to feed on His word and to pray.

He is faithful to keep us! †

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

STUDY 15

ACTS 4:23-31

FORMER ADVENTIST FELLOWSHIP BIBLE STUDY

The Sanhedrin released Peter and John because they could find no reason to arrest them; spiritual light shining in their darkness did not qualify as a felony. The apostles returned to their believing companions who proceeded immediately to pray for more power to witness boldly for the gospel.

1. In their prayer the believers addressed God (verses 24-25) by quoting the Old Testament. What facts about God do they use to address Him, and why might they have chosen these?

Exodus 20:11 _____

Nehemiah 9:6 _____

Psalms 146:5-7 _____

Psalms 2:1-3 _____

Acts 1:16 _____

2. In verse 26 the believers quote Psalm 2:1-2. In verse 27 they articulate the ways they understand the psalm to be interpreted. On what basis do they give this application to Psalm 2?

Psalm 2:1-2 _____

Acts 3:14-15 _____

Acts 4:29-30 _____

Matthew 14:1-2 _____

Luke 23:7-11 _____

Matthew 27:1-2 _____

Matthew 20:18-19 _____

3. How do you understand the interaction between the work of wicked, betraying men and God's sovereignty and predestination, as the believers mention it in verse 28?

Acts 2:22-24 _____

Acts 17:26-27 _____

Job 12:23-24 _____

Job 14:4-6 _____

4. In verse 29 they ask to be able to speak God’s word “with all confidence”. Where else do we find this desire expressed in connection with oppression and persecution, and why are these two things connected?

Philippians 1:12-18 _____

Acts 4:13-16 _____

Acts 14:1-3 _____

5. In verse 30 the believer’s pray that God extend His hand through the believers to heal and to do signs and wonders “through the name of Your holy servant Jesus.” What relationship do they acknowledge between God and His people in this prayer?

Mark 16:17 _____

Luke 10:1-12 _____

Luke 10:17-20 _____

Mark 9:38-41 _____

Matthew 7:21-23 _____

Acts 3:4-8 _____

John 4:46-53 _____

Acts 3:11-15 _____

6. Verse 31 describes God’s answer to the believers’ prayer for boldness. What do we know about the purpose of and the reason for this miracle?

Luke 24:45-49 _____

Acts 1:5, 8 _____

Acts 2:1-4 _____

Ephesians 1:13-14 _____

Ephesians 4:30 _____

2 Cor. 1:22-23 _____

1 Cor. 12:1-11 _____

1 Cor 12:12-13 _____

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MEDITATE

Who is God to you? How has God empowered you with His Spirit to witness for Him? What is God asking you to surrender to Him, entrusting yourself to Him for His purposes?

“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.” 1 Peter 2:24-25, NIV