

When he came to the end of his earthly journey, he could only speak of his overcoat and his books (II Tim. 4:13), yet he was so rich in Christ, and he made many people rich in Christ. This reminds us of John Wesley whose autographed will was discovered in 1768 in which only his clerical gowns, his watch, and his books were mentioned. That was all that he had in material things but many people were enriched through his ministry. Gandhi of India said to a missionary, "Sing me the deepest hymn of Christianity." "Which one?" the missionary asked. Gandhi said, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." All of us are familiar with the lines of this hymn: "My richest gain I count but loss. . . . All the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice to his blood. . . . Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."

In the third place, Paul was revolutionized in his concept of life. There are two things that stand out in Paul's new understanding of life:

First, abundant life through death. Paul says, "Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body" (II Cor. 4:10). One phase of the rich meaning of these words is that when Paul died to his self-life, others were brought to have life in Christ. Probably Paul also had something else in mind when he said these words which could be illustrated by his experience in the city of Lystra. Paul was stoned by the angry Jews and he was thought to be dead, and it was possible that he was dead, and they pulled him out of the city. But God healed him. Shortly afterwards, Paul again went to Lystra to preach the Gospel — what dedication and bravery! This time, we read of Christians in Lystra who evidently had been brought to life in Christ through Paul's reported death.

Second, Paul had only one goal in his life which is the "one thing" in his life — "I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14). This is the center of all Paul's efforts. This concentration creates a focus which generates dynamic power in Paul's life. A life without a focus can never achieve anything. A Christian or a Christian worker without a focus in his life or service cannot accomplish things for Christ. Dedication brings concentration, and concentration brings fruitfulness. When Paul was warned by the Holy Spirit of dangers that were waiting for him at Jerusalem (Acts 21:11), he would not listen to those who tried to persuade him not to go to that city. He understood the real intention of the Holy Spirit in revealing dangers to him, and he took them as challenge and went ahead. And he said, "And now I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem; not knowing the things that shall befall me there, save that the Holy Spirit witnesseth in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself so that I might finish my course with joy and the ministry which I have received of the Lord Jesus to testify the Gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:22-24).

When Mary Slessor passed into higher service, her mission had to send twenty men to take over her work. That shows the power that is generated by full dedication.

We pray that God will raise up more fully dedicated Christians and Christian workers all over the world who will have Paul's "one thing" in their lives.

## GOD AT WORK THROUGH MEN: PETER AND THE ROMAN OFFICER (ACTS 10:9-48)

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The historical occurrence recounted in this passage is of great significance to the church and Christianity, because the account of God's opening the door of the Gospel to the Gentiles is repeated three times.

Who was Cornelius? A Roman officer serving in Israel, he accepted faith in the living God and submitted to the religious laws and practices of the Jews. This was, however, inadequate for his salvation. But God still heard this devout man's prayer and wanted to bring him into the fellowship of Christians, and perfectly arranged a meeting with Peter who had to open the door of Christianity to him.

What can we learn from this account and apply to ourselves? The contemporary world is religiously inclined and exerts every effort in an attempt to achieve salvation. However, despite its religiosity, the world does not know Jesus and consequently cannot find that only way to God.

But to return to the text. Here God prepares Peter for a specific mission. He is charged with announcing the saving message of Jesus Christ, the Good News of Salvation, without works. As a devout Jew who had received the commandment from Jesus not to go among the pagans (Matt. 10:5), he could not comprehend the opportunity arising for Gentiles to be saved as well. Therefore, God prepared him in a graphic way and in a manner which he could understand. God uses various means to assert his will in history, and in this instance he resorted to a special vision to give Peter his commandment about the necessity of going to a pagan's house.

Peter's faithfulness in prayer was a prerequisite to this special revelation from God. We cannot, however, conclude that just because Peter prayed at a special time, God used him as an agent to deliver the Gospel to a pagan. God had him in his plan, so that Peter really opened the door to Christianity for the Gentiles with the keys which Christ, in a figurative way, had given him. It is interesting to note that through the prayers of Cornelius and Peter, God was able to adapt perfectly the time and place to complete the work of salvation in a pagan.

Peter was astonished by this divine proclamation and summons, so that initially he rejected God's command. In his prejudicial devotion he answered God: "Not so, Lord!" and in so doing uttered a paradox, for while he called God his Lord he could not reject him simultaneously. Still, God did not withdraw his command but repeated it three times so that Peter would be radically changed.

God's timing and placing of events are perfect, but we are more concerned about particulars and childish details than in unquestioningly obeying God's commands and acting on them. It is God's problem how to bring people to hear the truth which he has revealed to me. I must be

careful not to alter the truth while being faithful to my vision.

The meeting of Peter and Cornelius is extremely significant since God had prepared both of these men. We must always remember that God is the prime mover in the work of evangelism, much more than we are. If we believe that he has given us a message, then we also believe that he will give us people who need to hear that message. God will arrange a time and place for us to meet those who need salvation. Frequently we are too occupied with the organization of places to meet, and the gathering of people, and too little concerned about studying God's proclamation and the content of the message we need to share.

People are interested in hearing what God has revealed to us. The proclamation is given to us in the Bible. We don't need others! It is perfect and complete! We need only to understand it and share it with others.

The most wonderful words a minister of the Gospel can hear are those which Peter heard when Cornelius told him, ". . . therefore we are all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God" (v. 33).

And Peter did not hesitate to give a complete account of Jesus Christ, the one about whom we need to speak. He presented the heart of the Gospel in a very brief interval and in just a few sentences, but sufficient that a man who had been prepared by God could understand and accept it. How many times have our sermons concentrated on everything except Jesus, and then we are surprised at the lack of results!

The Good News for Cornelius and his house was this: salvation is possible through Jesus Christ (v. 36). This should be the content of our Good News.

Peter thus described Christ as the Lord of all. He was a historical personage and the fulfillment of prophecy. He was the God-man, of supernatural capabilities. Peter witnessed to this, because he saw and experienced it all.

Christ, the one about whom he spoke, died on the Cross and rose again — this is basic to the message — and revealed himself to his chosen ones.

Subsequently Christ commanded them to announce this to *the people* (this is what Peter says), however, Christ said in Matt. 28:19, "to all peoples in the world." Due to the prejudices of Jewish customs and orthodox Judaism, God had to intervene in a special way to change Peter and compel him to speak to a pagan. The result was forthcoming.

This account can serve as an example for us in our work, but we dare not anticipate God's repeating in detail every move he made with Peter. The lesson is clear. We must preach the Good News to everyone, without regard to racial, cultural, and national differences, not only to those we find pleasant and likeable, and those who are wealthy and influential because they can be more useful to us in our work, but to everyone. We dare not limit God's message and the Gospel, for then we will make the same mistake as Peter did. Then God had to intervene. Let us never say to God, "Not so, Lord," for he can punish us.

May we let God do the organizing and let us remain faithful to the message which is revealed to us!

## GOD AT WORK THROUGH MEN: PAUL AND THE GREEK PHILOSOPHERS (ACTS 17:22-34)

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Easter set the earliest believers on a path of effective communication. Easter released them from being frozen around non-living issues of the past to life-giving relationships because of, and around, the risen Jesus. Paul was among these effective communicators.

In the 15th and 16th chapters of the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit reveals some cardinal principles in the ways in which he leads Paul to become this effective communicator. The believer *lives by faith*. And the leading of the Holy Spirit in the total mechanics of communicating the resurrection of Jesus Christ may not be *explicit*. In fact, if "science is proof without certainty," then, "faith is certainty without proof." God leads as Paul follows his nudgings and the thoughts that he had dropped. In Acts 15:36-41 we read about the *Jerusalem Conference* with the issue of the Gentile Christians and the law. Paul along with Barnabas decides to revisit the churches to tell them about the decisions of the council. They violently disagree over John Mark (vs. 39). These saints of the early church do not seem to have any special guidance up to this point. Paul takes Silas and Timothy and moves out. This *move of faith* is then honored and clarified by a series of doors being closed while others are opened.

In Acts 16:4-9 there is trouble over the itinerary. The Holy Spirit shuts doors and prevents them from the wrong entry. In their *move of faith* they were not afraid of action or closed doors. They sought God more earnestly rather than stop. "How" the Holy Spirit gave his guidance is not as important as that he did guide. God gave the Macedonian call to the servants who had proved their submissiveness to him by accepting his course corrections while in the act of obedience. He could trust only such with the *vision of the lost*. While Paul refused to be either afraid or to sit inactive beside a closed door, he was used by the Holy Spirit to fulfill the *goal that God had for him to fulfill*. Since full knowledge of what lies ahead may cause us to be "afraid," God does not give all the details right at the beginning.

In Acts 16:9-15 the action begins. Now there is a team. Luke has joined them. While visiting the established churches they watch the genesis of new churches. They find a home to live in and a congregation to preach to while there are those who are being saved! In Acts 16:16-24 the whole picture changes. But in verses 25-34, Paul and Silas come into victory instead of despair. And quickly after the jailer and his family are baptized God removes his servants from Philippi through Thessalonica and Berea to Athens. And by this time Paul has understood the plan of God in terms of the compulsion to communicate the truth of the resurrection effectively, followed by the inevitable stirring up of trouble as well as the conversion of some.