

GOD AT WORK IN AREAS OF UNKNOWN POSSIBILITIES (ACTS 16:5-15)

Manuel Scott

Rev. Scott, Los Angeles, California, USA, is the Pastor of Calvary Baptist Church.

A minister is said to have called on an elderly member. The woman was past ninety, blind, half deaf, and unable to walk. Nevertheless, she was radiant and responsive, all aglow with contagious poise and power. The minister was moved to inquire as to the secret of her apparent grace and charm. In answering she said that in early childhood she was a regular participant in the Sunday school. She confessed, however, that she was the black sheep of the class, a troublemaker for her teacher, and a distraction to the learning process. Obviously, the classroom session was much improved in her absence. Notwithstanding, far from what anyone might suppose, she concluded, "It is what went on in that Sunday school class that keeps me glowing and going now."

Here is an illustration of the fact that we do not know how much good we do nor how much God is getting done in bleak, barren, and burdensome situations. We do not know what eternal thread of purpose and program runs through these tangled webs of dismay, disappointment, and disillusionment. We do not know what spiritual achievements are accomplished through stress, strain, and seemingly senseless struggle. We do not know how, time and again, failure, frustration, and fear bring forth much fruit.

The sixteenth chapter of Acts records that Paul and his company made plans to spend time in Asia, but were prevented. They set their sights on Bithynia, but the Spirit set up roadblocks. Contrary to the course they had charted they touched down at Troas. It was here that Paul heard the momentous Macedonia call: "Come over into Macedonia and help us." In responding to the summons the Gospel entered the continent of Europe, a watershed and landmark in the establishment of churches and the expansion of Christianity. The Greek-Roman world with its mind and machine and roads and regimes was an unequaled facility for the furtherance of the Gospel. More often than seldom the Christian evangelist aspires for Asia, but is compelled another way; and has his hopes on Bithynia, but is hindered.

To the end that this veto of ventures will not drive us to desertion and despair, we must undergird ourselves with nerving theological affirmations and formulations. When our dreams are tossed and blown, and when success eludes us, and stress enfeebles us, authentic ideas of God serve as a bulwark of defense and a source of comfort and counsel.

One such idea is that God is at work in the world with an agenda to which he allocates priority. God never abdicates his throne or abandons history. Jesus has his signature on this sentiment: "My Father worketh hitherto," he said, "and I work" (John 5:17).

Rene Descartes, the philosopher, as pointed out in a plenary paper, is

monstrously mistaken in supposing that the totality of reality is represented in man (the thinking subject) and the natural world (the object man thinks upon). The existence of which we are a part involves God, the transcendent power and imminent presence, who initiates conditions and introduces changes in the time-space continuum in keeping with his ultimate intentions. God acts in spite of man's sins or Satan's might.

"Behold, he taketh away, who can hinder him? Who will say unto him, what doest thou?" (Job 9:12).

A second theological formulation is that man, unlike God, has an epistemological disability. We know a little and God knows everything.

Well over two decades ago George Buttrick told us that a part of man's dilemma is his constitutional and invincible ignorance. From this dilemma not even the mature Christian is delivered. As the Scripture says, "We know in part," "We prophesy in part," "We see through a glass darkly." Until that "which is perfect is come" our perspective and penetration are partial; only fragments are in focus. We will understand it better by and by. Someone has defined religion as "awe in the presence of the unknown."

In no system of truth or branch of knowledge is human ignorance so immense and man's I.Q. so low as in theology. Our ideas of God involve us with incomparable and incomprehensible infinity. Two questions in the book of Job remind us of this.

"Canst thou by searching find out God?"

"Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection?" (Job 11:7).

We have to do with a God about whom thick clouds and great darkness gather. We have to do with a God whose ways are not our ways and whose thoughts are not our thoughts. We have to do with a God whose understanding advances beyond man's as a mind of an Einstein surpasses that of an ant. We have to do with a deity whose designs include not just cultures and countries, but the cosmos; not just the hour, but the ages; not just individuals, but the family of man; and not just the space-time context, but the trans-temporal and trans-spatial. We have to do with a monarch and master who "moves in mysterious ways" and manipulates with ambivalent actions. He supports us, but he also sacrifices us. He gives us the pleasure of experiencing his presence, but he also pains us with an experience of his absence. He knows the way we take, but veils in secrecy the way he takes. He opens doors that no man can shut and shuts doors that no man can open. He helps, but he also hinders. He heals, but he also hurts. He blesses, but he also bleeds. He answers prayer, but the answers are often denials and delays. He promises a crown, but he constrains us to bear a cross.

Moreover, when we are caught in confining and oppressive circumstances we should console and counsel ourselves with the idea that God's relationship with us is one in which he not only does things for us, but he gets things done by us and through us. God chooses us in order to use us. We are slowly coming to appreciate in the Christ family that in the God-man relationship there is a "God for us" side and a "God by us" side. This utilitarian motif and method of God unfolds in a single verse in John's Gospel. John spotlights the summit scenario in the Bible salvation story. "For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). We are not simply God's sheep, fed and tended

by him, we are his servants, running errands and doing chores. We are not just his allies. We are his agents and ambassadors. We are not merely his dependents, we are also his disciples to whom he gives tough assignments. We are not just God's guest; we are his host. We are more than his creation; we are his channels. We are not merely members of Christ's body; we are means to his ends. We are holders of both a sonship and a servanthip. We have a charge to keep, a race to run, and a course to finish.

In many maiming and mean situations God often makes his goal while our goal is missed. Moses misses the promised land but God plants his "peculiar people" there. David's dream to build God a house is denied, but God gets it done through his son. Paul did not make his journey into Spain, but the Gospel did.

Finally, when the areas in which we work are unpromising and the possibilities unknown, we can be refreshed in remembering that the best is yet to come. God has prepared for us some better things. When at a wedding in Cana Jesus turned water to wine, the governor of the feast remarked to the bridegroom essentially this: "You have saved the best for the last" (John 2:10).

This is a fitting parable and prophecy of what our Lord has done for his laborers. Golden streets, pearly gates, jasper walls, and trees bearing twelve manners of fruit with leaves which are good for the healing of the nations are symbols and metaphors used by the Seer of Patmos (John) to say that the best is yet to come.

New Testament evangelism is inseparable from New Testament eschatology. Evangelism stipulates the imperative (go make disciples). Eschatology supplies the incentive (I will give thee a crown of life). The New Testament church bore the "bitter now and now" by beholding the "sweet by and by." They did not stagger at the promise: "In my Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:2). They felt intensely the inscrutable desirable destiny for the Christian pilgrim that Paul expresses: "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him" (I Cor. 2:9).

GOD AT WORK IN TIMES OF PERSECUTION (ACTS 7:54-8:8)

Billy Kim

Rev. Kim, Suwon,

Korea, is the Director of Far East Broadcasting Company in Korea and National Director of Youth for Christ, Korea.

Most of us have witnessed God at work in normal circumstances in a given country. Some have experienced adverse situations and even severe persecution. In these portions of Scripture we will try to analyze how God worked in the early church in times of persecution, and also how God is working in this modern day in times of stress and persecution of the Christian church.

Persecution is a storm that is permitted to scatter the seed of the Word, disperse the sower and reaper over many fields. It is God's way of extending his kingdom; bringing good out of evil and making the wrath of men to praise him. "All things work together for good. . . ." "There is that scattereth and yet increaseth," we are told. So it was when the Huguenots were driven from France, the Protestants from Spain, the Puritans from England, and the North Koreans to South Korea.

Persecution brings about growth. Through persecution Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were able to bring a heathen and adulterous nation to recognize the fact that there is one true God. Because of persecution upon Elijah's ministry, the people of Israel realized who their true and living God was.

As we study the book of Acts, these facts stand out:

- first impressions produced in Jerusalem
- first pentecostal message
- first opposition
- first true communism
- first discipline
- first persecution
- first church organization
- first Christian martyr

Usually we are fearful when we hear of great persecution of a church or a group of Christians. But the church's greatest danger has never been created by persecution or opposition. When she has been opposed and persecuted she has been made pure and strong. Wherever the church is patronized and admired by the world she becomes weak. How shall we safeguard against this? We must obey God. If the church is obeying God she can never be weakened by patronage, and she can never be paralyzed by compromise. She must forevermore stand alone bearing her testimony, opening her portals to receive the wounded in order that they may be healed. A great church stands ready to take the wanderers back again, and lead them to health and blessedness; never permitting the standard of her ideals to be lowered or her message of righteousness to be silenced.