

# THE END OF THE BEGINNING

by Ray C. Stedman

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We arrive this morning at the last page of the first chapter of church history -- the last chapter of the book of Acts. Luke's unfinished book introduces us to the whole record of the history of the church which continues to this day. This chapter is a resumption of the cliffhanger with which we concluded the previous chapter. There we left the Apostle Paul and his company on their way to Rome but stranded as shipwrecked sailors on the coast of the island of Malta. They foundered here after a long and perilous voyage during which they were driven across the Mediterranean before a terrible storm. They lost all their gear and finally the ship itself was utterly lost, just as Paul had said. But their lives were saved, as he had also predicted, because an angel had told him of all this.

Now we find the apostle and Julius the centurion and all the company of the ship on Malta as Luke picks up the story in Chapter 28:

**After we had escaped, we then learned that the island was called Malta. And the natives showed us unusual kindness, for they kindled a fire and welcomed us all, because it had begun to rain and was cold. Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, when a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand. When the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live." He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. They waited, expecting him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead; but when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god. {Acts 28:1-6 RSV}**

They spent some three months on Malta waiting for the winter to pass and for navigation to resume. The impressive thing about this account of their stay is that it was a time characterized by healing. It began with this amazing healing of the apostle himself from the bite of a poisonous snake.

Notice that Dr. Luke points out that this event occurred in the midst of what we would call a rather primitive, uncivilized society. The word translated "natives" in our version is really the word "barbarians" in Greek. The Greeks called anybody who spoke in a tongue other than Greek a barbarian. That is because whatever language they spoke sounded to these Greeks as though it were just a cacophony of sounds. They could distinguish no words. We have all had the experience of listening to a language utterly foreign to us and wondering how anybody can understand anything in it because it sounds like an unintelligible jumble of syllables. The Greeks thought the noises they made sounded like "bar-bar," the equivalent of our modern expression "duh-duh." To them "bar-bar" was the mark of someone who had not yet learned to speak the civilized language, Greek, and thus they called them "barbarians."

But this society was not so primitive that these were naked savages. Oftentimes primitive societies are more complex and more advanced in their own way than what we fondly (or unfondly) call civilization. Yet it is instructive that Luke tells us that the miracle occurred in the midst of a society which had no previous exposure to the gospel whatsoever. It is among this kind of a people that signs might be expected to occur during the introduction of the gospel because they were necessary in order to demonstrate the existence of a supernatural kingdom in which God rules. This was a situation which called for the manifestation of the confirming signs which had been promised to those who first carried the gospel out into the darkened parts of Earth.

It is also instructive to note that Luke records for us that these natives treated their guests with unusual kindness and courtesy. Literally in Greek it was "kindness more than ordinary." This indicates that the Holy Spirit was preparing the hearts of these barbarians, these pagans, to hear the gospel. Here was a people prepared to receive the message of God, disposed by the leading of the Spirit, the effect of the Spirit upon their hearts, to be open and receptive. That is almost always characteristic of paganism. Pagans are what

C. S. Lewis calls "pre-Christians," i.e., they are very open to the gospel. They have been prepared for it by the emptiness of their pagan faith.

Our problem as a nation today is not that we are returning to paganism but that we're going beyond it to a more deadly peril in human affairs -- the setting aside of light. We are not returning to paganistic darkness, but going on into a darkness that is even more profound. But the courtesy which these people showed is an indication of the work of the Holy Spirit to prepare them to hear the word that Paul preached.

Paul's witness began with the remarkable incident involving the viper. It is noteworthy to me that the Apostle Paul was gathering sticks along with everyone else in this ship's company. He did not draw himself up (as some might be inclined to do today) and say, "I beg your pardon! I'm a man of the cloth. This kind of work is beneath me. While you work I'll direct the activity."

Paul took up a bundle of sticks in which, unknown to him, was a snake that was torpid with the cold. When he laid the bundle on the fire the snake suddenly came to life and bit him on the hand. Luke describes it very vividly. He says that the snake was dangling from Paul's hand. It is clear that it was a severe bite which punctured the skin and allowed the poison to enter Paul's body. The natives immediately recognized the snake as a poisonous viper. They expected to see Paul soon fall over dead or at least to swell up -- the normal symptoms of snakebite.

Of course, they had a theological explanation for why he was bitten. These were religious people, as all men are, and they held a tenet which you can still find frequently among people today. It is that, "Calamity is always proof of evil." So they surmised that no doubt this man was a murderer; that must be why he was a prisoner. He had escaped from the sea, but justice, in the hands of the invisible fates, had not allowed him to escape. Now it had laid hold of him and he was bound to die. But as they watched and saw no harm coming they realized that this was not the case, and so in their pagan superstition they changed their minds and decided that he was a god.

What should we make of this? Why did this incident occur on this occasion? No doubt here we have one of the "signs of an apostle" which Paul refers to in Second Corinthians 12. This links very clearly with the passage at the close of Mark's gospel, which appears as a footnote in the Revised Standard Version. The Lord Jesus, appearing to his disciples after his resurrection, said to them:

**"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, and if they drink any deadly things, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover." {Mark 16:17-18 RSV}**

In this last chapter of Acts we have two of those signs manifested by the Apostle Paul:

1. He picked up serpents and they did not harm him, and
2. He laid hands on the sick, as we will see in a moment, and they recovered.

Many have misread that passage in Mark, and have taken it to mean that this series of signs, miraculous wonders, ought to accompany *anyone* who believes the Gospel. But that is to read it without careful recognition of the context in which these words appear. If you examine the context you can see that it begins with our Lord, risen from the dead, rebuking these disciples because of their unbelief, specifically their unbelief in his resurrection. It is a great commentary on the power of unbelief that here these men were gathered around with the Lord who was standing there in front of them and yet there were still some among them troubled with unbelief. Isn't that amazing? That is how strong the doubt and disbelief was in these disciples' hearts, even when the risen Lord was standing in their presence. And the Lord rebuked them because they would not believe the evidence so clearly set before them.

Then he added these words: "These signs will accompany those who believe:" i.e., "... those among you who believe in my resurrection." He means this group immediately before him. These signs will accompany them

as confirmation that they have believed in a risen Lord and will confirm the message that they speak. It was necessary for the apostles to preach the gospel of the Lord Jesus in resurrection power. Therefore it was necessary, first, that they really believe in his resurrection. And so, our Lord indicated, these signs would confirm it to those among them who believed. Mark concludes the account by saying,

**So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went forth [Who? These disciples who heard him.] and preached everywhere [in obedience to the great commission], while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it. {Mark 16:19-20 RSV}**

So we have here what Paul calls "the signs of an apostle," {2 Cor 12:12}. They established his right and his authority to speak to these people. He demonstrated two of them on this occasion.

The second is recorded in the next section -- the healing of Publius' father:

**Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the chief man of the island, named Publius, who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days. It happened that the father of Publius lay sick with fever and dysentery; and Paul visited him and prayed, and putting his hands on him healed him. {Acts 28:7-8 RSV}**

"They shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover." So this again was one of the signs of an apostle which was to accompany those who had seen the risen Lord and who believed that he was indeed risen from the dead. It may also be a manifestation of the gift of healing which Paul mentions in First Corinthians 12. It is a clear-cut case of the instantaneous healing of an individual by prayer and the laying on of hands.

Luke tells us that Publius was the "chief man" of the island. That was not merely a description of his standing in society; it was an official title given him as the head of the Roman government on Malta, and the title should perhaps be capitalized: "Chief Man." Publius owned certain lands near where the shipwreck occurred. It is likely that Julius the centurion arranged a visit with him. Undoubtedly Julius told this Roman governor what kind of man Paul was, and so kindness and hospitality were immediately extended to the apostle and his party, and Publius welcomed them into his home. So this man also evidences the preparation of his heart by the Spirit.

Wherever you find kindness demonstrated the grace of God is always behind it. While Paul is there he learns that Publius' father is ill. Evidently he has what we would call the flu. Luke, as a physician, diagnoses the case. He says he was sick with fever and with dysentery, which sounds very much like the common symptoms of the flu today. So Paul went in to see him, and prayed with him. Then he laid his hands on him as an act of identity, and he was instantaneously healed.

Notice that this is very similar to the case we read of in Mark's gospel in which the Lord Jesus went to see Peter and found his mother-in-law sick with a fever. And taking her by the hand he raised her up and healed her instantaneously. The healing of Publius confirms then that Paul is an accredited servant of the same Lord Jesus.

In the next section we have a most interesting corollary to this. We read of the healing of many on the island:

**And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured. They presented many gifts to us; and when we sailed, they put on board whatever we needed. {Acts 28:9-10 RSV}**

There is a very interesting use of words here. When Luke says that Publius' father was *healed*, he uses a Greek word which means "instantaneous healing." But when he says that these people were *cured* he uses another Greek word which refers to "a more gradual cure." It is an entirely different word. Not all of them were instantaneously healed.

Therefore many scholars have felt that we have here a unique combination of medical skill and divine healing,

that Luke was involved as a physician in these cures which took place during their three-month stay on the island, and that there is a beautiful blending, without any contradiction, of these two gifts of God: the skill of medicine in curing, and the divine power of God at work in direct healing. The two are not at all contrary but stem from the same wisdom and power of God and can work together beautifully, as we see in this account.

At any rate, many were cured and, as a result, when they came to leave, there were, literally, many "honorariums" given. The people expressed their gratitude by stocking the ship with supplies.

Now we read of the remainder of the journey to Rome:

**After three months we set sail in a ship which had wintered in the island, a ship of Alexandria, with the Twin Brothers as figurehead. Putting in at Syracuse, we stayed there for three days. And from there we made a circuit and arrived at Rhegium; and after one day a south wind sprang up, and on the second day we came to Puteoli. There we found brethren, and were invited to stay with them for seven days. {Acts 28:11-14a RSV}**

Luke's account was probably written from notes he took on this voyage. He even gives us a description of the ship. It had as its figurehead carved images of the Twin Brothers, Castor and Pollux, the twin sons of Zeus, or Jupiter. Thus it was obviously a ship dedicated to a pagan deity. But they traveled in this ship from Malta some eighty miles north to the island of Sicily where they put in at the port of Syracuse. They stayed there for three days and then sailed across the Straits of Messina to Rhegium which is at the very tip of the toe of the Italian boot. Then, a south wind blowing them directly north, they made their way quickly up the coast and landed at Puteoli, the great port in which all the ships unloaded as they brought grain from Egypt to Rome. It was 130 miles from Rome, near the city present of Naples. There Paul disembarked and began the final stage of his journey.

Here we get a wonderful note. There at Puteoli he was met by Christians. This is remarkable evidence of the wide spread of Christianity even this early. As best we can determine this was about A. D. 60. Paul had never been to Italy before. Nor, to our knowledge, had any of the other apostles. And yet there were Christians in many of the cities of Italy as well as in Rome itself. Here are some who are waiting to greet him when he lands, 130 miles yet from Rome.

**And so we came to Rome. And the brethren there, when they heard of us, came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them Paul thanked God and took courage. And when we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier that guarded him. {Acts 28:14b-16 RSV}**

Rome at last! And two companies of Christians came out from Rome to meet him:

1. One came as far as the Forum of Appius, which was 40 miles from Rome;
2. Another came 30 miles out to the Three Taverns.

If you want to walk in the footsteps of Paul, you can go to Rome and walk this same road. The Appian Way is still there and you can see these very places.

What an event this must have been! And what a delightful note is added by the way the body of believers met him here and encouraged his heart. As he approached the city he evidently felt some sense of fear and trepidation. He didn't know what was going to happen to him when he appeared before Nero. He must have been very uncertain as to whether he would ever again be free from his imprisonment. But what a comfort it was that these early Christians eagerly welcomed him and prayed with him and strengthened him, thus encouraging his heart as he came at last to Rome. When he arrived in Rome he could see God's hand still at work in the fact that he was given courteous and lenient treatment and was allowed to stay by himself in his own house, with the soldiers who guarded him.

The last major episode of this account occurs now in the final section. In his letter to the Romans Paul said, "I

am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek," {cf, Rom 1:16}. And he always maintained that it was his responsibility to go to the Jew first and then to the Greek. Here we have the last account in Scripture of that process and priority:

**After three days he called together the local leaders of the Jews; and when they had gathered, he said to them, "Brethren, though I had done nothing against the people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans. When they had examined me, they wished to set me at liberty, because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case. But when the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar -- though I had no charge to bring against my nation."** {Rom 28:17-19 RSV}

As Paul had always done, he began with the Jews. He invited the local Jewish leaders to come and see him. He could not go to them, because he was bound to a Roman guard. It is interesting that they responded. They didn't know him, though perhaps they had heard of him. But none of them had met him. Still they came together because he had been a member of the Sanhedrin, and therefore the Jewish colony was at least willing to listen to him. He simply explained his predicament, pointing out that he was an innocent victim of this strange hostility of the Jews toward him. He had done nothing against his nation. He himself was a Jew who longed to bless his people and help them, and to show them how God had fulfilled his great promises to them. But he found them strangely hostile. Even the Romans, when the Jews turned him over to them, wanted to let him go because they could find no cause of death in him. But the Jews objected. And Paul makes clear it was the Jews who were against him, not he against them. He had no charge to bring against his nation.

Isn't that amazing? How gracious is his forgiving spirit! As we read this book we have seen how Jewish zealots had hounded him and caused trouble for him in every city to which he went. They had aroused the populace against him, had beaten him, and caused him to be scourged and stoned. But he speaks not one word of resentment against these people, not one word of indictment or vindictiveness. He freely absolves them of any charge.

Then he points out the real reason why the Jews so consistently opposed him:

**"For this reason therefore I have asked to see you and speak with you, since it is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain."** {Acts 28:20 RSV}

He means, by that phrase, the promised coming of the Messiah. Is it not remarkable that now, almost two thousand years later, this is still the crucial issue in Israel -- the promise of the Messiah? This issue has never been settled and never can be settled. It remains a constant thorn in the side of any Jewish community. If you want to cause disturbance and arouse argument, to evoke both resentment and yet curiosity, you merely have to raise the issue of the Messiah and you will find yet today the same kind of reaction that Paul experienced. Jews immediately become deeply concerned and involved. Many, as in Paul's case, are turning to Christ these days, as they re-examine this question. It is still a live issue in our own time.

Now we get the response:

**And they said to him, "We have received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brethren coming here has reported or spoken any evil about you. But we desire to hear from you what your views are; for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against."** {Acts 28:21-22 RSV}

It is rather revealing that these Jews in Rome had received no word about the apostle. It is possible, of course, that they couldn't have received word before this any more than Paul could have reached Rome before this. The news may have been delayed. But it is much more likely that the Jews in Jerusalem had given up trying to trap Paul by legal means, by Roman authority. And perhaps the reason he was detained as a prisoner for two more years was that they were waiting for some kind of accusation to come from Jerusalem. It left his case undecided -- no one knew what to do. But the Jews in Rome were eager to hear his views. Their curiosity had been aroused because they had heard that this strange sect which had gathered around Jesus of Nazareth was in the Jewish communities everywhere spoken against. So they appointed a day:

**When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in great numbers. And he expounded the matter to them from morning till evening, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets. {Acts 28:23 RSV}**

What a magnificent Bible study this must have been! I would gladly exchange my theological diploma in order to have been there. What an opportunity these Jews in Rome had as this mighty apostle began to go systematically through the Scriptures. Obviously their curiosity was greatly aroused and they gathered in large numbers. They set aside an ample period of time. They took the whole day from morning till evening to debate and discuss and examine the Scriptures. They had a very competent teacher. Who could have interpreted these Old Testament passages better or known them more thoroughly than this former Pharisee, trained as a scholar, who knew the Old Testament almost by heart?

And they had a most fascinating subject -- Jesus in the Old Testament. Paul spoke to them about the kingdom of God, i.e., God's rule over all the earth, and about Jesus, the way to the heart of God. He tried desperately, by patiently expounding to them many of the great passages in the Law and the Prophets, to convince them that Jesus was indeed the Messiah.

Nothing is more fascinating than to see how these amazing predictions of the Old Testament focus upon one person in all of history, and upon the events of his 33-1/2 years of life. He is the fulfillment of prophecies stretched over hundreds and hundreds of years of previous history. The writings of the Prophets center around this one brief moment in history when a man should be born in Bethlehem, live in Nazareth, tread the hills of Judea, do mighty works, and finally die on a cross as predicted, but then be raised again from the dead exactly as predicted. We can guess some of the passages Paul must have used on this occasion. How vivid and clear they are! How many people yet today are still arrested by the accuracy of these great Old Testament predictions! What tremendous, compelling proof he set before these people! And yet, look at the discouraging results:

**And some were convinced by what he said, while others disbelieved. So, as they disagreed among themselves, they departed, after Paul had made one statement: "The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your fathers through Isaiah the prophet: 'Go to this people, and say, you shall indeed hear but never understand, and you shall indeed see but never perceive.'" {Acts 28:24-26 RSV}**

Why? The passage goes on to tell us why:

**"For this people's heart has grown dull,  
and their ears are heavy of hearing,  
and their eyes they have closed;  
lest they should perceive with their eyes,  
and hear with their ears,  
and understand with their heart,  
and turn for me to heal them." {Acts 28:27 RSV}**

The perversity of human nature! This is a passage which predicts that people would deliberately close their minds because they did not want to hear the ultimate message.

Now, we have done this -- all of us. We have anticipated, down at the gut level, where it was all going to come out, and it has been different than what we have wanted, and so we have shut our ears and eyes and our minds, and have not listened.

And Paul says that is what happened here, as Isaiah had predicted. The amazing thing is that he uses this passage from Isaiah in exactly the same way that Jesus himself had used it in his last encounter with the Jews. In the twelfth chapter of John's gospel we read:

**When Jesus had said this, he departed and hid himself from them. Though he had done so**

many signs before them, yet they did not believe in him; it was that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

"Lord, who has believed our report,  
and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?"  
Therefore they could not believe. For Isaiah again said,  
"He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart,  
lest they should see with their eyes and perceive with their heart,  
and turn for me to heal them." {John 12:36b-40 RSV}

And then John adds this amazing word:

Isaiah said this because he saw his glory and spoke of him [i.e., of Jesus]. {John 12:41 RSV}

And if we read the sixth chapter of Isaiah, from which that quotation comes, we find that it is the passage in which Isaiah said,

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim; {Isa 6:1-2a RSV}

And one called to another and said:  
"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;  
the whole earth is full of his glory." {Isa 6:3 RSV}

John says that Isaiah saw Jesus and beheld his glory and spoke of him. And yet Paul must say to these Jewish leaders:

Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen. {Acts 28:28 RSV}

With sad hearts the apostle and his friends saw these Jews turn away once again. This is the last time in the Scriptures in which you find the appeal of the gospel officially set before the Jewish people. One of the great mysteries of all time is Jewish unbelief. How can this people miss these tremendous passages, this clear-cut delineation of their Messiah?

And yet what happened here, as recorded in this passage, is nothing other than what is happening in much of the church today. What was the reason these people refused to move? As you analyze the account you can see that it was because it meant change. It meant that their comfort would be disturbed. They had worked out a comfortable theological explanation of who the Messiah would be. When God moved in ways different from what they had expected, even though he had predicted it, they refused to move with him. They hung back and clung to their tradition and refused to be disturbed in the comfort of their lives. They did not want to be changed.

And that is the problem today. Many Christians are doing the same thing. Having misunderstood much of Scripture, and applied it in ways that are not warranted, and having developed a very comfortable pattern of life, when the Spirit of God moves in fresh and vital ways we do not want to change, and will not follow. We resist anything that disturbs the tranquility of an accepted and commonly practiced tradition. We want to cling to the comfortable dead rags of the past, even though the Word of God has always marked out the pathway by which the Spirit works.

What a lesson this ought to be to us! Because as God bypassed the Jews, so he bypasses any who continually refuse to move with the creative power and the advance of the Spirit of God.

And so we come to the last two verses:

And he lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered. {Acts 28:30-31 RSV}

This is what I like to call "the end of the beginning."

The book of Acts is just the beginning of the record of the operation of the body of Christ at work in the world since his resurrection and ascension. It is just the first chapter. We have come now to the last page of that chapter. The rest of the record is being written as history is being unfolded. It is still being written today.

That is what we must understand. Fresh and wonderful chapters are now being written in our own day, ultimately to be incorporated into this account.

It is a tremendous privilege and joy to be a part of this divine record.

One of the most impressive things about this last section is the last word. Do you notice how the book of Acts ends? With the word "unhindered." That word describes the freedom of the gospel. You see, Paul was hindered. He could not go about the city. He was still chained day and night to a Roman guard. But he could welcome friends in. And he could walk around his house and yard, and he could minister and teach there. Paul never chafed under this restraint. His letters from this period are filled with joy and rejoicing. He never fretted about his condition, but he welcomed all who came and he sent letters back with them -- letters that have changed the world. It was during this time that he wrote Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, and the letter to Philemon. What tremendous truths are set forth in these letters which he had time to write because he could no longer travel abroad.

You and I can be grateful that God kept him still long enough to write them; otherwise we might have been deprived of these great messages which have changed the history of man time and time again.

Still, Paul had to appear before the emperor. And, in the next year or so, a great persecution broke out under the vicious Emperor Nero which was one of the greatest that Christians have ever experienced. But the Word was not hindered. No matter what the condition of the church, the Word of God is never bound. We must remember that.

Tradition and other Scripture suggest to us that, at the end of a two year period, which brings us up to the time Luke wrote this book, the apostle was released. Apparently he did appear before the emperor and his case was dismissed.

He went back to the island of Crete where he left Titus in charge, as the letter to Titus tells us. And he probably visited Ephesus once again even though he had said to them when he left, "You'll never see my face again," {cf, Acts 20:25}. It is very likely that he did come back and there left Timothy in charge. It is also very likely that he went to Spain. This he hungered to do, as he tells us in the letter to the Romans. And some scholars feel that he even may have visited Britain and preached there.

Nevertheless it is clear that eventually he was arrested again. This time, instead of being allowed to live in a hired home, he was thrown into that dark and slimy dungeon called the Mamertime Prison which you can still visit in Rome. There he wrote his second letter to Timothy, which reflects the conditions of that confinement -- cold and dank, lonely and isolated. And finally, according to tradition, he was led out one day in the early spring and taken outside the walls of Rome. There he knelt down and a sword flashed in the sun. His head was cut off and the apostle went home to be with the Lord.

If we will be obedient to what is set forth in such clear language here in the book of Acts, God will supply all the power and vitality we need. And the sweeping changes made possible by the life of Christ in his body can occur among us today, just as they occurred in that first century. The principles by which the church is to operate are declared here. The power available to us is exactly the same. The conditions of the world in which we live are exactly the same. Therefore nothing needs to be changed in the record of the book of Acts. The life of the body of Christ is to go on in this twentieth century exactly as it was lived in the first.

And may God grant that we will be men and women of faith, with vigor and vision, willing to move with the creative, innovative Spirit in our day and age, so that we might share in the triumphs of the gospel, as recorded



here in Acts.

As we leave this morning let us remember the words that we often have sung in the hymn, *Onward, Christian Soldiers*. The second verse says,

Like a mighty army  
Moves the Church of God;  
Brothers, we are treading  
Where the saints have trod;  
We are not divided,  
All one body we,  
One in hope and doctrine,  
One in charity.

**Prayer:**

Our Father, thank you for the challenge of this book, for what it has already meant to us, and for what it can mean to us in the days and years ahead. Thank you for the challenge of the apostle's life. How we are stirred today to be faithful to the same great cause for which he gave his life! We thank you for the access that we have to the Lord Jesus and to the power of a creative Spirit. Help us not to cling to discarded vessels which are no longer usable but to be ready to move in ways that are empowered and strengthened by your Spirit. We thank you now for this account, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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