



THEMES IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

WEEK SIX: THE POWER OF TESTIMONY (2)

At the end of Study for Week five, we learned a little of Barnabas, the encourager, who had the courage to stand up to the leaders in Jerusalem on behalf of Saul. Sometimes God calls on us to stand up for someone and if he does, don't start worrying how it might impact on yourself. Having a testimony means having a conviction about what God has said or done.

One daily reading that I get said: Paul a great theologian, deep thinker and card-carrying apostle of Jesus almost always, when speaking to non-believers, started with his testimony. It is a powerful tool.

Read Acts 11:19-30

Here we read about the effects of the stoning of Stephen. Chapter 8:1 tells us that after his death *"A great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles."* On the face of it this may have seemed like a catastrophe but when we read 8:4, it tells us that *"..those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word."* What seem like problems to us are opportunities for God to work in new and different ways. Rather than cause the followers of The Way to depart from their beliefs, it inspired them to continue sharing their faith, and over a wider geographical area.

On January 9, 1985, Pastor Hristo Kulichev, a Congregational pastor in Bulgaria, was arrested and put in prison. His crime was that he preached in his church even though the state had appointed another man to be the pastor whom the congregation did not elect. His trial was a mockery of justice. And he was sentenced to eight months imprisonment. During his time in prison he made Christ known every way he could.

When he got out he wrote, "Both prisoners and jailers asked many questions, and it turned out that we had a more fruitful ministry there than we could have expected in church. God was better served by our presence in prison than if we had been free." (Herbert Schlossberg, Called to Suffer, Called to Triumph, p. 230)

As mentioned in Study No.4, **THE WORD OF GOD IS NOT BOUND**. Nothing can stop the work of the Holy Spirit. Romans 8:28 *"And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his*

purpose for them.” In Genesis 50:20 we read: *“But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.”* This was Joseph’s testimony before his brothers when they came to Egypt to buy corn in the time of famine.

- Do these verses encourage you to share the good news of the Gospel and what it has meant in your life?
- Try and memorise these verses so that in difficult situations you can bring God’s word to mind.
- Are you aware of the extent of Christian persecution throughout the world? Do pray for organisations such as Open Doors, Samaritan’s Purse, and the Barnabas Fund as they continue to work across many countries.

Read Acts 12:1-19

In Jerusalem, King Herod was ratcheting up the pressure on the church. He killed James, the brother of John the beloved, and because that went down well with the people, he decided to have another go at Peter. He sent 16 soldiers to arrest him and put him in prison. His thinking was to bring him out in front of the people after Passover, just as Jesus had been.

- Verse 5: But while Peter was in prison, the church prayed very earnestly for him. The word earnestly here also means, constantly. I believe this is a message we need to grasp. How much praying do we participate in, as individuals, or as a church?
- Ensure that we remain aware of what is happening to fellow Christians and pray on their behalf.

It is hard to read this chapter without smiling at the turn of events. Peter, sleeping, bound in chains between two soldiers, with guards on the door and gate. *7 Suddenly, there was a bright light in the cell, and an angel of the Lord stood before Peter. The angel struck him on the side to awaken him and said, “Quick! Get up!” And the chains fell off his wrists. 8 Then the angel told him, “Get dressed and put on your sandals.” And he did. “Now put on your coat and follow me,” the angel ordered. 9 So Peter left the cell, following the angel. But all the time he thought it was a vision. He didn’t realize it was actually happening.*” The angel was so practical in his instructions. They walked past the first and second guard posts and then through the gate and onto the street that led into Jerusalem.

We are told that when he came to his senses and realised he was indeed free, he knew where the people would be gathered to pray. This should encourage us to know

where to go when we are in need. The other side of that is, are we prepared to welcome those who need help, and are we constantly praying for such?

It's easy to imagine the young girl Rhoda who went to the gate and recognised Peter's voice but was so excited, she forgot to let him in. It may have been the first time she had seen such an immediate answer to prayer and wanted everyone to know.

- When we pray, do we expect God to answer?
- God always answers prayer but not, at times, immediately or in the way we think it should be. **1 John 5:14** "*And we are confident that he hears us whenever we ask for anything that pleases him.*" The key to having our prayers answered lies in those words: *anything that pleases him*. **James 4:3** "*And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure.*" God knows the end from the beginning and knows, as any parent knows, that it's not always a good thing to give children everything they ask for.

Even the people praying couldn't believe God had answered their prayers, telling Rhoda that it must be an angel. Meanwhile Peter carried on knocking and eventually they let him in and were astonished when they heard his miraculous account. Nevertheless, he did not stay but *departed and went to another place*. I love the NKJV which says, "*Then as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers about what had become of Peter.*" When Herod searched and couldn't find Peter, he had the soldiers put to death.

Acts 12:20-24 tells us that Herod died a violent death. Despite his efforts to get rid of the People of the Way, it says, "*But the word of God grew and multiplied.*"

There is a lovely recitation called THE CHURCH TRIUMPHANT which includes these words: **"God has always had a people. Many a foolish conqueror has made the mistake of thinking that because he had forced the church of Jesus Christ out of sight, he had stilled its voice and snuffed out its life, but God has always had a people."**

Charles Wesley may have had the story of Peter in mind when he wrote that wonderful hymn: *And Can It Be*. Make it our prayer and experience today:



**My chains fell off, my heart was free; I rose, went forth and followed
Thee.**