

## Looking Ahead Through The Rearview Mirror After Jesus Left



Pastor Dave Spate

September 13, 2009

Probably the strangest thing we experienced when we were on our tour through Turkey happened just outside of Antioch (biblical Antioch). We traveled by mini-bus back into the desert up mountain roads that really needed a 4-wheel drive truck. As we crested the top of the Mountain we came across the ruins of an old Monastery which was founded around 390 AD. You see, during that time in history, Constantine, the Roman Emperor, had become a Christian and so Christianity became the latest rage. People flocked to the church, people lined up to be baptized, pagan temples were torn down and in their place huge Christian Basilicas were built. It was seen as a golden time for the church. BUT, as the world came to church, it wasn't long until the world infiltrated the church. Christianity became easy – demanding very little; it became about what the church gave you (meet your needs) instead of us doing whatever it takes to get to know God and His will for our lives. Even the great Preacher of the time, Chrysostom (in Antioch) was told to keep his sermons shorter so the people could get to the afternoon games earlier. And so, as one person said, *“the concern was how to get the world out of the church,”* men like Simeon the Stylitist, (some called him Pillarites,) headed for the desert and the lonely mountain tops, pulling back from personal comforts, the crowds and, with amazing self restraint, stripped away the world in order to get to know God better.

One Lent, he gave up water and food for 40 days; people said it was a miracle. Then he climbed to the top of the mountain we were on and stood for days in silence to experience God. But it got stranger. The word got out that he knew God deeply, so people came to seek his counsel. Then he built a 4 meter high by 1 meter wide pillar and chained himself on top of it. He did this because as the people kept interfering with his communion with God, he decided to move closer to God by standing on the pillar. But they kept on coming and he kept on building the pillar higher until it ended up being over 15 meters high. He stayed on top of the pillar for 37 years.

I admit; it was strange. But here is the amazing thing. No matter what he did or how high he built his pillar, people still kept on coming to seek his counsel, to have him pray for their healing (actually the monastery was build to care for all the pilgrims who came to be healed and to go deeper in their faith and *to experience the holy.*) We spent the morning in quiet prayer, like pilgrims centuries before saying personally that *we desperately want to*

*know God and that He could have all of us.* It was an experience I will cherish. Here is the profound thing; despite the fact that Simeon did strange things in order to meet God, people came for miles and miles to seek his counsel because people crave to touch holiness. People came to where they found God especially present.

Why are we seeing so many people young and old feeling drawn to the Celtic or early fathers' prayers and spirituality? It is because there is a craving within us that, despite the fact we settle so often for fluff spiritually, our heart craves depth. You see *our hearts often crave for so much more than our bodies want us to experience.*

This Fall, I want to take us back to our roots. To look again for the first time at the books of Acts, which was the womb of the church. But we need to do this very carefully because it is easy to just become an enthusiastic spectator or an admirer of Jesus and the early church. Luke makes it clear that these Christians were no more spectators of Jesus than Jesus was a spectator of God. They were *in* on the actions of God and God was acting *in* them and God was living *in* them; which, of course, means He wants to live powerfully *in us.*

However, when you are taking a journey back in time, it is fair to ask, *"Because the book of Acts is placed in a different culture and time, how can it relate to us today?"* Yes, it was a different time with many differences to how we live today. But (i) in many ways we are still the same; we still crave community, still have this need to know God, still struggle with selfishness and have the same capacity to be wonderful and sin to the point that is leaves us ashamed, and (ii) I would also add that time is a lot like distance, it is a strange thing.

If you have a certain amount of money you can step on a plane and within hours be across the globe in a different world, culture and setting. In a similar way, I found that in the middle East, their view of time is not linear, (where we see history happen and then it is left behind and out of memory); their view is that the past sits very close to the present, almost side by side, leaking in our present situation all the time. I think God wants to place the events of the book of Acts side by side with our present this Fall, so He can leak into our present in a more intimate and powerful way. I think it is just like the small words that are written in your side view mirror, *"The objects in the mirror may be closer than they appear."* I think that, as we study the Apostle Paul's life, we are going to find that many things we study will end up amazingly near to our heart and I believe to God's dreams for

our lives. So, can I ask that you in your personal devotions and/or with your small group to jump into the book of Acts for the next few months? Let's together, Look Ahead Through The Rearview Mirror.

### **Remembering our Roots**

This Fall, I want to specifically study the Apostles Paul's life and journeys. But to set up his story, this morning I want to set the scene by walking us through the first 8 chapters of the book of Acts. It will be a whirlwind tour but I think if you asked one of the folks in the early church, they would have felt like they had been caught up in a whirlwind of unbelievable yet completely true events. Grab your Bibles. Remember, this was happy in the lives of real people.

#### **Acts 1: The End of the Earth and To Infinity**

Luke, the author of the book of Luke, just continues the story of Jesus into the book of Acts. Please don't miss the amazing things being said here.

*Acts 1:1 – 9, "In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."*

*So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"*

*He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight."*

Last week, I traveled to Edmonton to do a memorial service for wonderful lady. I met with the family, saw the urn, wept over the loss and understood that I would not see

her again until glory. Can you imagine how earth shattering it would be if I ran into her in the mall tomorrow afternoon? I would start to follow her around, I would want to touch her hand, I would hang on her every word.

The disciples were no different than we are. Can you imagine what those 40 days must have been like? (Acts 1:10 – 11, *"They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."*) And then to stand there as you saw Him rising up into the sky, right in front of your eyes? You would have stared and stared and started into the clouds. I'll bet the angels snuck up on them and they didn't even notice them for a while. (Acts 1:11 – what a promise!)

One of the themes which will appear again and again in the book of Acts is the Resurrection. Why? Well, when was the last you have seen a person come back from the dead? Exactly; it is completely unique. It is completely without replication. It completely affirms the claims that Jesus made; that He said He was the Son of God come to save us. As you will see in a moment, when Peter is threatened, he better keep quiet about this Jesus. He can't, because he has seen Jesus resurrected and come back to life. Paul ends up beaten and left for dead in the ditch outside of a place called Derbe but he got back up and told others about his Jesus because he met Him on the road to Damascus. Jesus, who was dead, yet risen, spoke to Paul on a road side. And it completely overhauled Paul's thinking and his life.

Bottom line to all we do at Brentview, is one simple fact, the Jesus who died on the cross, rose again and because He rose again, He is able to not only forgive your sins but able to walk with you during life. Chapter 1 begins by stating the unbelievable, profound, completely amazing, totally true fact that Jesus is Risen; He is risen indeed! This fact alone makes the rest of the journey possible. *When was the last time you were overwhelmed by the fact that you have a RISEN Saviour?* Well you do.

## **Acts 2: One Strong Wind**

In Acts 1:5, Jesus told them to wait for the Holy Spirit, who would be coming. I'll bet when they heard that, they simply turned to each other and said, *"It doesn't sound like a big*

*deal.” (Acts 2:1 – 4, “When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.”)*

Again, put yourself back in their shoes. You are sitting there, minding your own business, at a quiet prayer meeting when all of sudden there is this sound like a jet taking off (a tornado.) Just as you look up, expecting the roof to begin to lift off, fire comes in through the roof. If that wasn't bad enough, the fire seemed to have a mind of its own, it became to divide and fly across the room and hover above each person. I am sure people began to scream. Then someone said, “*I give you permission to enter me.*” (I believe God waited for people to give their permission to enter them in a new way with His Holy Spirit.) Then ALL HEAVEN broke loose. People started speaking in different languages than they had ever known.

Now look at verses 5 and 6, “*Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language.*” What sound did they hear? The jet engine sound of the tongues hitting the house where the Christians were (people always run toward a disaster to take pictures on their cell phones; that hasn't changed.) And in verse 7 (“*Utterly amazed, they asked: ‘Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans?’*”) says they were not only amazed to hear these Galileans speaking in languages from their home country but they were using words that described the wonderful workings of God. That is when the first Christian sermon was heard. Peter, the tough and tumble fisherman, came to preach (verses 17 and 18, “*In the last days, God says, ‘I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.*”) This is a promise to us today. Verse 21, “*And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.*” Can you imagine being there and wondering, “*What does the word saved mean?*” Verses 23 and 24, “*You pinned Him to the cross and killed Him but God untied the death ropes and raised Him up.*” There it is again. Jesus is risen. As the truth of that statement sank in, over 3000 people became believers. Believers in what? In the resurrected Jesus.

Verses 46 and 47, *“Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”* When Jesus touches your life, He wants to join you to a family and, if the family is truly Christian, it will be a precious and powerful family for you.

### **Acts 3: A Lucky Beggar**

Acts 3:1-8, *“One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. Now a man crippled from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, “Look at us!” So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. Then Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God.”*

We find out later that this man has been disabled for over 40 years. Can you imagine this meeting as they were walking up toward Solomon's courtyard where the Christians meet for 3-o'clock prayer meeting? On the steps going into the temple they met this man who wanted money. I can just see Peter checking his tunic and finding not even a nickel. Here is the question for verses 6-8, *how did he know that when he said stand up and walk – it would work?* I don't think he was sure it would work but he decided to trust in this Jesus. Why? Because He was the Resurrected Jesus. He believed that if Jesus could rise from the dead, then rise into the clouds before his eyes and keep his promise about the Holy Spirit, he was sure he could heal this man. When the crowd started to gather look what he told them. *“You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this. By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see.”* (Verses 15 and 16)

#### **Acts 4: Counselling the Counsellors**

The result was that they were thrown in jail and brought before the counsel. Acts 4:8 - 12 (The Message), *"With that, Peter, full of the Holy Spirit, let loose: "Rulers and leaders of the people, if we have been brought to trial today for helping a sick man, put under investigation regarding this healing, I'll be completely frank with you—we have nothing to hide. By the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, the One you killed on a cross, the One God raised from the dead, by means of his name this man stands before you healthy and whole. Jesus is 'the stone you masons threw out, which is now the cornerstone.' Salvation comes no other way; no other name has been or will be given to us by which we can be saved, only this one."*

Verse 31, *"The resurrection power filled them."* Can you feel the excitement that must have been there?

#### **Acts 5 Keeping the Church Pure**

A man named Barnabas saw that some people had some needs so he sold a piece of his land and gave the money to the church benevolent fund to help. It wasn't long until some others did the same. But there was this couple who wanted to be seen as lead people in the church. Acts 5:1 – 6, *"Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet. Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God." When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him."* Why was God so harsh here – why did this happen so early in the church's story? Because, without purity, the Church will fall. When will we understand that only as the church lives justly, will the world want to engage with the resurrected Jesus?"

Yesterday, I heard of the Bishop, in the Antagonist region in Nova Scotia, together with a First Nations RC man have, together, signed a legal agreement to pay 15 million to First Nations children that were abused by some priests in the past. The First Nations man said – this was his church, his faith and together they had done what was right. When the church does justice right, the world see God as being just as well. Look what happens when the church lives in purity.

Acts 5:12, 15, 16, *“The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed.”*

### **Acts 6 Great Churches Struggle**

Acts 6:1-4, *“In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.””*

In the middle of God’s blessing, there will always be issues that need to be worked through. God was bringing wonderful widows into the church that needed care. They needed to figure out what to do; right here is where Deacons were first invented. And the result was in Acts 6:7, *“So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.”*

Right now, God is doing some wonderful things at Brentview but there are things that we are working so hard to fix. Patience, prayer and wisdom are needed. Thank God we have godly Elders who kneel around our Boardroom table seeking God’s answers.

### **Acts 7 Our First Martyr**

Acts 6:8-10, *“Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen, but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.”*

Stephen loved to debate others so he could share his faith but on one occasion he was hauled off to court. He was speaking so well and then he got carried away and then

they dragged him out of the city. (As I read this, think what it would be like if they happened to one of our Elders or Staff?)

*Acts 7:51-53, "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him. You who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."*

*Acts 7:54 – 60, "When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep."*

What a loss. Who did he see; who was he speaking to? It was the Resurrected Jesus. The Christians mourned the loss of the great man but they knew from that day on, that even in death, the Resurrected Jesus would be present.

## **Acts 8**

That set off a terrifying persecution of the church in Jerusalem. The believers were all scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. All, that is, but the apostles. Good and brave men buried Stephen, giving him a solemn funeral—not many dry eyes that day! They were forced to leave home base where the Christians all became missionaries. Philip proclaimed the Message of the Messiah. When the people heard what he had to say and saw the miracles, the clear signs of God's action, they hung on his every word. Many who could neither stand nor walk were healed that day. The evil spirits protested loudly as they were sent on their way. And what joy in the city!

Who became Christians? Well there was a wizard, a man who practiced the black arts and whom the devil had his tentacles in. He kept following Philip around trying to figure out how Philip did his magic tricks and then when he realized his power source was

God. He was saved and baptized as well. And then the Ethiopian Finance minister was saved as well. The #2 man in all of Ethiopia became a believer when Philip *'preached to him Jesus'* and was baptized in a puddle on the side of the road and went home a new person.

I know we could have mined so many wonderful spiritual lessons along this journey. Maybe for yourself read Acts 8:15 and see what it says about the filling of the Holy Spirit look at the first half of chapter 8 again and you will see that, although Simon the Wizard was saved, he found out that after becoming a Christian, there were many old habits and ways of doing things that needed to be touched by the power of Jesus.

Did you pick the theme that God has running through these 8 chapters? It is that all this happened because Jesus Rose from the dead. It is no wonder Paul in Philippians 3:10 says, *"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection."* Why?

If He can pull off the Resurrection, there is nothing He can't do. If He can rise up into the clouds before the disciples, there is no place He can't go. If His Holy Spirit can come through a roof into the lives of the disciples in the Upper room, He can come in to our lives in profound ways as well. If He can be there at the moment of Stephen's death, I know I will be cared for even at the end of my life. If He can meet Saul on the road to Damascus, He can change our life as well. If He can rise from death into life, He can give me a new life as well.

Can I ask you again; when was the last time you were completely overwhelmed by the fact that Jesus rose from the dead? We need to be as we are followers of the Jesus who rose from the grave.

This Fall, as we "Look Ahead Through the Rearview Mirror," I believe that the Resurrected Jesus has some great things to give us, who are the church at Brentview acting out His dreams.

<p>For information about Brentview Baptist Church and its ministries, please contact the church office at: 3512 Charleswood Dr NW, Calgary, AB T2L 2C3 Phone: 403-284-4691 Fax: 403-284-0132 email: <a href="mailto:mail@brentviewbaptist.com">mail@brentviewbaptist.com</a> Website: <a href="http://www.brentviewbaptist.com">www.brentviewbaptist.com</a></p>
--