

42a ACTS

This is Tuesday, the 10th of August, 2004. My younger daughter became a teenager today. Another milestone, another gallon of water under the bridge, so to speak.

I had a great day with her today, but we approach now the study of God's word. We're going to pick up tonight in Acts chapter 22. Why do we care about what is in Acts chapter 22? Well, we're going to pray and then I'll tell you.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer. Father, we are grateful for the days that you give us, the time that we have been allocated. We know that it is a stewardship and that we have a responsibility.

We have an opportunity to use our time, just like any other resource, in whatever way we choose. We pray that as we study your word tonight, God the Holy Spirit will show us the importance of our time and our opportunities and enable us to make use of what you have allocated to us in the days ahead so that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be glorified. We pray it in his name.

Amen. Where did we leave the Apostle Paul last time? As I recall, he had gone to Jerusalem with high hopes, with a plan of bringing the great news, not only of everything that God had done with the Gentiles and all of their response to the gospel, but he was bringing an offering for the impoverished church, the impoverished and oppressed saints there. And we get the idea that he was hoping to find support and encouragement from the Jews at Jerusalem, who had traditionally been a little bit stuck in the mud.

They weren't very forward thinking. They weren't very progressive in their understanding of God's plan. Today, we would call such people traditionalists.

We would call them narrow-minded, fixed with a particular worldview. And it could be any of a number of different kinds of worldview. Suppose you come from a family that is largely a-religious, meaning non-religious.

Religion of any kind is really not a big deal. Maybe on holidays they might go to church. But generally speaking, on a daily basis, the subject of God, if it comes up at all, is mostly by way of an expletive or an interjection or something, not an active desire to please God.

Everybody sort of grows up that way. Everyone has the same view of the universe and the world and America and life. And you, on the other hand, have now been energized and vitalized and motivated to live your life to please God.

You see the impact. You see the importance. You've got the vision to see the hope that is set before us.

You realize that the time is short. You realize that we have just a little time to get ready for all of eternity. And what a great opportunity, what great things God has done for us.

And so you wake up and you look at the day with a different perspective than the group from which you sprung. Well then, here's a holiday, here's a visit, here's a get-together with these people, maybe their family, maybe their friends, maybe their co-workers or whatever, some occasion where ideas are brought to the fore. And you begin to realize that you're sort of an odd man out.

You don't feel like you can really chime in and say, uh-huh, every time somebody says something because it's a different view. It's a distorted view of life. It's a self-centered view of life.

It's relative instead of absolute. It doesn't tie itself to standards of righteousness. It ties itself to what seems good to the group at hand.

It seemed good at various times for people to lynch someone in the South. It has seemed good for a group to run amok. This is what we call the mob.

This is what we call the herd. You find this out when you're in high school, especially when you get up into junior high and high school. You find that there is a way of thinking and a way of talking and a way of dressing and a way of acting with regard to music or culture or who do you like to watch and who do you like to see and is there a particular activity like a concert or a radio station.

It's gone much further now with MTV and all the rest of it, but back in the prehistoric days when I grew up, everyone listened to AM radio. FM was for audiophiles who liked classical music. All of the happening music was on the AM radio.

Well, people actually collected into groups based on their favorite radio station. There were two big rock and roll stations in Tulsa. Actually, there were three.

There was KAKC, there was KELI, and there was KMOD. Well, all the KELI people, and I was sort of one of them because I had a good friend who got me started in the radio business in Claremore, and then he went and became a disc jockey at KELI, one of the biggest stations in Tulsa, very well known. They played a particular mix of music.

KAKC was a little bit more traditional music, and then KMOD, they were sort of the progressive, but all the KAKC and KELI people said, oh, that's KOMOD, K-M-O-D, that's KOMOD radio. We don't want to listen to that. And so we looked with suspicion on anybody that listened to that music because they were kind of out on the edge.

That was the crumbly fringe. But people will find almost anything to band together and affirm each other. We sometimes call this a mutual admiration society.

You've seen it in school. The popular kids get together. Who are they popular with? The popular kids are not popular with the unpopular kids.

They're popular with each other, aren't they? Oh, you're popular. Well, what does that mean? That means that there is a group that hangs out with you, and you hang out with them, and you think each other is popular. But the vast majority of people think those stuck-up snobs, they look down on the rest of us, they dress nice, they do things because their parents are rich or whatever.

Mostly the popular kids are mostly the unpopular kids with the majority of people because they're so snobby. But we see this happen all the time, right? What do we learn from this? What's one observation? Even if you didn't know the Word of God, what's one observation you can make when you look and see people banding together? Agreeing, two or three or more people agreeing together doesn't make them right, does it? They can all look at each other and affirm each other and build each other up and agree, and, oh, yeah, you say something. You're right.

That's true. Somebody else comes back. Oh, yeah, you're right.

That's true. And you can have a society, you can have a little mini-culture that is affirmative and up-building and gives people a sense of security and a sense of belonging, much like today the popularity of gangs. Why would somebody join a gang? Because their family is fragmented and they're looking for a sense of belonging.

They're looking for affirmation. They're looking for reinforcement, somebody that they can count on. It is a pseudo-family.

Gangs and cliques and that sort of thing take the place in young people's life. You don't find someone who is rooted in a strong home, who loves their parents, and their parents love them, who love their brothers and sisters, their brothers and sisters love them. They find their security and their peace and their stability in their home.

What would attract them about a gang? Maybe a sense of danger or excitement. They might go out. They might sample it.

They might look over the edge of the cliff there and say, well, hmm. But there's no need. It's not a crying need.

It's something. It might be a fad. They might be attracted by the danger or the glamour, so-called.

But it doesn't last because they don't have a pathological need for belonging. But there are so many people today who are rootless. There are so many people who are looking for something that they can belong to.

They can join Jed Atkins and the Save the Squirrels Foundation or something. Lots of people, even in their adult years, want to belong to something, want to go to a place where people think like they do and accept them and affirm them. Right? You look at this in Acts 22.

What's the first word in Acts 22 that Paul uses? Brethren. My brothers. Is Paul from Jerusalem? Not originally.

What do we call it? Saul of Tarsus. He was born in Tarsus. He can't put the bumper sticker like you have down here, native Texan.

He can't say native Zionite, native Jerusalemite, can he? He wasn't even born in Israel. He has to get the other bumper sticker that says, I wasn't born in Texas, but I got here as fast as I could. It appears that Paul came to Jerusalem as a young man and got his training, grew up in Jerusalem.

That's what he tells us here in verse 3, which we'll get to in a moment. But, what does he do? He is appealing to them with this idea of camaraderie. What's the problem with this sort of rapport and this sort of belonging? It is only as strong as the people who make it up, right? People are fickle.

People change their minds. You can be in this week and out the next. You raise your eyebrows the wrong way or wear the wrong shirt to school one day and suddenly you go from being part of this clique to being outside and people are making you the butt of jokes and mocking you and having fun and humor and picking on you.

It blows with the wind. You can't predict it. You don't know how long it's going to last because it's only as strong as the weak character of the people who make that up.

And people who need to affirm and belong in a group are inherently weak. They can't tolerate sitting at a table by themselves and eating a meal. They've got to be with somebody.

They can't tolerate sitting in a chair in the evening and not being out among people. They've got to go because I can't stand my own company. I've got to go distract myself somehow.

One of the things that we can watch for in our own soul as believers is what are we like when we're alone? What goes on in our mind and in our soul? What sort of activities compel us when we're alone, when we're not influenced by the group, not influenced by the crowd? Is there strength? Because God can give us strength. The more we know of God's Word, the more we understand where we are in His plan, we realize the Lord Jesus, God the Father, God the Holy Spirit, that's a good group to belong to. Jesus doesn't say, behold, I and 16 other guys stand at the door and knock.

Behold, I and the rest of your church stand at the door and knock. If any man hear my knock and open the door, the whole church is going to come in and eat with him. It doesn't say that, does it? What is the implication there? For someone who is strong, for someone who is growing in the Lord, there are times when the Lord is enough and ought to be enough.

Do you have peace when you're alone? Do we have security when we're alone? Or do we have a restless spirit? Do we have a wandering eye? Is our idle mind quickly becoming the devil's workshop? It's a measure of how we're doing spiritually. If we can tolerate our own company and just be content to be, if circumstance merits it, it doesn't mean we have to be a recluse or a hermit, but there are always times when we just can't be with people we want to be with. We can be separated from spouse, separated from family, separated from parents.

What are you like when you're alone? There's nothing else you write down in your notes tonight. Write that question down. Put a question mark at the end.

What are you like when you're alone? That is a real good measure of where you stand spiritually. If you can't function well when you're alone, if you can't tolerate the condition of being alone, it's like a red light on the dashboard. It means, you know, I need to go to the Lord.

I need to go to the Word. I need to be that man of Psalm 1. Remember Psalm 1? How does the book of Psalms begin? 150 Psalms. What's the very first thing that it says? Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly.

Some people will take any company rather than no company at all. Well, I can't find good company, so it's like the band back in the 70's. Bad company.

If I can't find good company, I'll take bad company. What does the Apostle Paul say? Bad company corrupts good morals. It's better to be alone than to stand in the company of evil men.

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, who does not stand in the way of sinners. What is the way of sinners, by the way? That's their path. That's their street, right? That's where they circulate.

Do not walk in the counsel of the ungodly. That's your practice. Your walk is your life.

Stand in the way of sinners. Keep company with them. Nor sit in the seat of the scornful.

A lot of groups... I saw this when I was growing up in school. A lot of times little cliques and groups, you know what holds them together? Scorn. Have you ever seen this? Have you ever seen a group and when they get together, all they can do is pick and poke fun and find out what's the matter.

Oh, look at so-and-so, he's got tape on his glasses. What a nerd, what a geek, and all other kinds of offensive language. People who do nothing but look around and survey the world around them and find something wrong.

Their group bond is scorn. It's a shared scorn for something. Gangs, same way.

They have a scorn. If they can't find society or the man or the pigs or whatever, they don't call them that now, but 30 years ago, they would look at the police department and have all kinds of offensive names for them. Well, now if they can't find anything in the establishment to pick on, they look at each other.

Oh, I wear a red bandana and you wear a blue bandana and you can't wear a blue bandana in my red bandana area. I have decided that from this alley to this alley is my turf. And if you wear your blue rag on your head in my turf, now I'm all upset.

And I have scorned for you. You're not good enough to be in my turf, so now we're going to go break out the knives and the billy clubs and whatever else we've got, brass knuckles and whatever makeshift weapons, and we're going to go beat each other up because you wore a blue rag. I mean, what a stupid way to live your life.

It makes sense to them. It's pride. It's a point of pride.

It's like blood is thicker than water. It's sort of like a form of patriotism in a group like that. But if you stand at the outside and look at it, you say, that is just stupid.

It's stupid. But when you're in a group like that, you can't see that it's stupid. It's what you live for.

It's what you thrive on. It's what you go for. Why am I going on at length about this? Because last time, last week, when we looked at Acts chapter 21, we saw Paul going to Jerusalem, wanting to witness, wanting to gather and enfold his brothers into the Christian faith that God has revealed to him.

It is out of this loyalty. He is a Hebrew of the Hebrews, circumcised on the eighth day, trained at the feet of Gamaliel, he's going to tell us here in verse 3. And he has a love for his people. Great love.

You go to Romans, he spends three chapters out of 16 chapters in Romans talking about his brothers, the Jews, and what lengths he would go to to try to benefit them. And you see it here. He is literally walking into the lion's mouth.

God the Holy Spirit has told him, you're wasting your time. You're going to go down there and do nothing but get in trouble. What does it mean to have bonds and chains? You're in trouble.

Trouble is not always a bad thing. Paul was doing his job when he got stoned at Lystra.

He's done his job when he got thrown out of the synagogues and various towns.

But God the Holy Spirit never said, don't go to Lystra, did He? God the Holy Spirit never said, don't go to Corinth, don't go to Ephesus, don't go to Miletus, don't go to Troas. God never said that. But He did say, don't go to Jerusalem.

Paul went anyway. What would make Paul go against this repeated warning, this repeated injunction from the Holy Spirit? What makes us repeatedly do things we shouldn't do? Often it's a misguided loyalty. It's a misguided sense of belonging.

It is a misguided zeal. We talked about zeal last time and you see it continuing here. You've seen these black and white films when they show old timey films and they show the guy trying to fly and he's got his spiral whirly gig looking thing like Leonardo da Vinci drew.

Or he's got the eagle wings that flap and it's a motorized flapper and he goes off the ramp and then crashes. They have all these great old timey disasters and one of them they always show where the two locomotives going full speed and crashing headlong into each other. This is what I see happening right here in Acts 21 and 22.

You have the zeal locomotive of the apostle Paul who loves his people. There's nothing wrong with loving your people. There's nothing wrong with belonging to a group.

Our church is a group and I think we're happy to belong to our group and we love the people in this group. But you can't let it be a blinding zeal. You can't let it be something that stops your thought processes and takes away your objectivity where you can't see what's really right and what's really wrong.

You can't see what's true and what's false. You say, you know, I don't agree with these bumper stickers that I haven't seen one lately but they used to have them and it said, my country right or wrong? I don't support my country if it's wrong. Now, I am not going to go into civil disobedience.

I'm not going to break the law. I'm not going to draft dodge and go to Canada. But in a free society, in a democracy, we support what is right.

God doesn't say well, you know, being right is good but being patriotic is better. You see what I'm saying? Being right is the most important thing. What if you're German and Hitler comes to power in 1937 and 1938? Well, my country, right or wrong? You think it was right for the Germans to support the Third Reich? Germany was a great nation, had a proud history.

Not right to support something that's wrong, is it? But, what did Hitler do? He appealed to their sense of identity. We are the Aryans. We are the superior race.

We need to eliminate that which corrupts and that which dilutes and that which messes us up as a people because our group is important. And a lot of Germans who grew up with the teaching of Martin Luther ringing in their ears fell for that idea. My country, the fatherland, Deutschland.

And, it was a misplaced zeal. We have a hard time looking at the films and understanding all of these goose-stepping soldiers marching to their death under Hitler. But, it felt right.

It felt patriotic. It felt good to be told that you're part of a superior group and you need to go get rid of this inferior group. We can stand outside and see the blindness of it, can't we? We can stand outside of Acts 21 and 22 and we can see the hardness and the blindness of these people in Jerusalem when the Apostle Paul comes wanting to share Christ with them, wanting to share the good news of the gospel with them and they can't see it.

There is nothing more important for you and for me than to be sure we are not blinded by zeal, that we are not blinded by our membership in a group, membership in a family, membership in a social circle, membership in a company or in any other kind of a group, even a circle of friends because it feels right. It's like flying on instruments. You know how in airplanes they fly along and as long as you can see out the window and you can see the horizon and see the ground, you have some idea of kind of how you're flying.

Well, what if you get in the clouds? What if a fog comes in? What does the airline pilot do when it's dark and black and there's fog and cloud and there's no visibility? They say, well, zero visibility. How does he fly the plane? Well, there is a set of instruments. There's an artificial horizon, big round thing in the dashboard of the plane, if you will, that shows what is straight and level and it's supposed to tip if you get to tip in the plane one way and tip if you tip the plane the other way.

He has instruments that show the altitude and the airspeed and all the other things that are important to know where you're going. Well, now, what if those instruments quit working? What if he quits looking at them? He can feel like he's flying straight and level. Do you feel like you're going 70 miles an hour in a nice car when you're going down the highway? You can take a quarter and flip it up in the air and do heads or tails on the back of your hand.

You're flying down the road 75, 80, 90 miles an hour, but inside the car, you don't feel like you're going that fast, do you? You have no sense of what's actually happening. This is the problem with being in a group. It's like an enclosed environment and you don't realize a lot of times because there is this zeal, there is this ethos.

That's what's the matter here in Jerusalem. That's what's the matter in Israel with the Jews. They all agree.

They're not looking at the warning dashboard that God the Holy Spirit gives them. They have forgotten all of the miraculous deeds that took place in the Jerusalem church, the healings, the shadow of Peter falling on a leprous person or a crippled person or a blind person, and them being instantly healed. They have forgotten the day of Pentecost.

See, it's been 20-something years now. And they have forgotten. And they're not paying attention.

And it feels right. Everybody agrees. They're all nodding their heads and saying, yeah, this guy is leading our people astray.

We've got 1,500 years of history going for us here. This guy is bad news. This guy is a rabble rouser.

You know what I heard happened when he was off in Corinth? You know what I heard happened when he was over there in Ephesus? Why? He said this and he did that. And everybody said, yeah, what's the matter with that? Overturning the faith of the fathers. Messing up our group.

Messing up our system. Messing up our religion. Messing up our God.

So what do they do? They riot. They try to tear him to pieces. They beat him nearly to death.

And he's God's chosen apostle. He's going to write a third of the New Testament. And these people are trying to tear him limb from limb and kill him, and they think they're right.

They're not sitting there rubbing their hands together saying, what evil can I do today? Let me find God's man and beat him to a pulp. They're not thinking that way, are they? And we don't either. We feel comfortable.

We feel right when we're in a group. Well, here's my question for you as we close this first session tonight. How do you know? How do we know if we're blinded? How do we know if the instruments on the dashboard of the plane are stuck and we're about to crash into the ground? How can we find out what's really right and what's really true? You know the answer, don't you? It's doing just what we're doing tonight.

The Word of God is alive and powerful. The Word of God is sharper than any two-edged sword. The Word of God pierces to the very center of our being.

It divides in two the soul and the spirit, the joints and the marrow. The Word of God is a judge of the thoughts and the intentions in our heart. The Word of God can lay them bare and show us when we're wrong, show us when we're going down a wrong path.

If the Word of God had been important to people in Germany, and to some of them it

was, in 1937 and 1938, a lot of people in Germany who loved God and who had His Word in their soul saw what was coming and left. A lot of people who start out being in a family or in a group or in a circle of friends have the Word of God in their soul and see things trending in a bad direction and the Word of God shows it to them and you know what they do? They get out. They get away.

Do not walk in the counsel of the ungodly. Do not stand in the way of sinners. Do not sit in the seat of the scornful.

What's the alternative? The man who is blessed delights himself in the law of the Lord and it's the law of the Lord that washes through his soul day and night, helps keep him focused, helps keep his perceptions, his instruments that tell him reality and truth and righteousness, functional. It's the Word of God that gives us clear vision to stand back and see the way we see these people, the way we see people in history. The Word of God is so important and that's why it is a great thing that you chose tonight to come and hear the Word of God.

It is essential. It is more important than our daily bread. It is more important than the water we drink or even the air we breathe.

For what is the point of living if you live your life as a waste of time? What is the point of living if it's all going to go up in smoke and mean nothing? We have the opportunity because of Jesus Christ to live a life that has meaning, that counts, that has eternal impact. But the only way that can happen is to value the Word of God. How could these people have accepted the Apostle Paul? How could they have recognized him as God's chosen apostle and listened to the inspired words that he had to say? Who would you rather be listening to right now, assuming he could speak English? Me or the Apostle Paul? If I'm in this room trying to teach you and the Apostle Paul is right over there in that room speaking good American English, which class would you be in? I'll tell you which one I'd be in.

I'd leave this one and go over there. There wouldn't be anybody talking in this one. These people have the Apostle Paul trying to talk to them.

Most of us would give almost anything for a couple of hours with the Apostle Paul. These people have the chance for days of instruction, months of instruction, and they're missing it. They're trying to kill him.

We can't afford to make that mistake. Well, we're going to continue in looking at what these people do and what Paul does in chapter 22 when we come back from the break.