

www.biblicalresources.net

Number 3 Issue 2

"Diggings" Subscriptions
c/o Melanie McNutt
6425 Ridge Run Drive
Knoxville, TN 37921
mamcnutt@aol.com

WBC Foundation
(World of the Bible Center)
P.O. Box 3900
LaGrange, GA 30241
Phone: (706) 885-0363

Biblical Resources
Educational Material
P.O. Box 3900
LaGrange, GA 30241
Phone: (706) 885-0363
Fax: (706) 885-0364
www.biblicalresources.net

Biblical Resources
Study Center
c/o Hannaniah Pinto
P.O. Box 3900
LaGrange, GA 30241
biblicalresources@earthlink.net

Jim Fleming
Lecture Bureau
c/o Sally Dowland
212 Knox
Houston, TX 77007
Phone: (713) 863-1769
sdowland@mindspring.com

Explorations in Antiquity Center
130 Gordon Comm. Dr.
LaGrange, GA 30241
(706) 885-0363
www.explorationsinantiquity.net

Guidance In Difficulty

Our last issue pointed out how the use of interchange in "*The Acts of the Apostles*" was much like that found in The Gospel of Luke. You will recall the A-B-A-B-A-B pattern. In Acts the interchanges (problem within the church – then problem without the church, occurring 6 times) allows us to see how the early church leaders relied upon outward circumstances and signs initially rather than relying upon insights – the work of God within – to help in their decision making. When tough times come to us today, we also rely too quickly and easily on outward circumstances to guide our decisions. But when we do this, the Lord does not give up on us. God always works with what God can get; thank the Lord!

From "Outsight" to "Insights"

As the early church leaders struggled to grow and develop the church in the 1st Century, they began their journey on discernment and awareness that even through outward difficulty and hard times God's presence guides. The work of God within—their insight—strengthened and enabled them to continue their ministry and to avoid the temptation to view hard times as a reason to stop. They were confronted with a series of issues from the tragic suicide of Judas, the brutal stoning of Stephen, Paul's transformative experiences, and the apostles' struggle with the religious establishment of that day. Their

struggles with these issues provide us the opportunity to see how they mobilized their insights into actions that better united them as a church. Their awareness of God's guidance in difficulty grew as they matured in their faith.

Early Church Growth

During the 1st Century, the church began to grow through a large ingathering of Jews from the Diaspora – especially between the feasts of Passover and Pentecost, (March –June).



Harvest Sheaf and Grinding Stones

Prompted by the curiosity about Jesus – that man so brutally tortured by the Romans, but who said, "Father forgive them, they do not understand what they are doing." Some stayed throughout both feasts to learn more. Followers of Jesus saw the importance of, "adding water to the soup" to provide sustenance while ministering to and educating them during their stay in Jerusalem. They learned to live in common and share experiences and provisions.

Unification not Division

However, with the growth in population came different views and conflicts about how to practice their faith, namely certain rituals and requirements necessary to enter Judaism. This provided an opportunity to resolve the differences by focusing on the meaning behind their practice/rituals and not merely on how one carried out that ritual. An example is the conclusion of 1st Century Jewish Christians that the method of baptism would never separate them, but that the meaning underlying baptism would unite them. These were the qualifications they eventually concluded:

- 1) Running water was preferred to standing water because it was considered to be “living water” (God’s grace). But if your church is in the desert without running water, standing water was fine.
- 2) Cold water was preferred to warm water because warm water reminded them of Roman steam baths. But if your church didn’t have cold water, warm water was fine.
- 3) Immersion was preferred. But if there was not enough water for immersion, sprinkling was fine.



*Baptistry at Explorations in Antiquity,
LaGrange, GA*

What did unite them was the Trinitarian formula (Father, Son and Spirit) and water.

Another example of thinking things through was male circumcision required by Judaism. Because of Jesus’ inclusion of women, Christians decided not to require gender specific circumcision.

Whether male or female, we all enter the church the same way. In this way differing views brought into the church from without, were resolved by their reliance on God’s guidance and insight into the need for inclusion, thereby allowing the church to grow as a body.

Paul’s Childhood Experience

The dramatic effect of God’s guidance is seen in the transformative experience of Paul on the road to Damascus after he had authorized the stoning death of Stephen. The work of God within, and emerging insight, enabled Paul to engage in a powerful ministry to the Gentiles. Earlier in his life outward influences drove Paul to crackdown on people not loyal to the Temple. He ultimately became a “hit man” for the synagogue that he was attending. His actions may have been influenced by childhood experiences when his parents/family were torn from the land of Israel and the Temple and his parents apparently sold as slaves. Eventually they earned their freedom and sent their son, Paul, to Jerusalem. Evidence of this is found in the fact that Paul attended the “Synagogue of the Freedmen.”

Paul probably had a pretty serious chip on his shoulder. Upon his return, he became an ultra nationalist with a hatred for Jewish followers of “The Way.” He persecuted them and anyone who ministered to the Greek population and who were sensitive to Greek speakers. Stephen was identified as one who supported the ministry to the Greeks and was killed as a result. Actually Paul’s own resentments and lingering hatred were hurting him. It was like kicking against thorns. In the conduct of his life Paul was hurting himself--kicking against thorns. But God’s Grace helped Paul and can help you and me not to be held back by our own resentments. As with Paul, hatred, resentments, and envy so cloud our vision that “insight” has a tough time developing and growing.

Saul's Coming To Belief

Three things were important in Saul's coming to his belief in a gracious God:

1) The face of Stephen.

Following the example of his Lord, Stephen said, "Father, do not hold this account against them," just before he took his last breath. The Book of Acts says, "his face looked like that of an angel," which has transparent meaning to a Jew from the Hebrew Bible. All angel stories begin: "Fear not" ... and end "they departed in great joy." Stephen was not afraid of death and had a joyful look upon his face—like an angel. I imagine that Saul woke up occasionally in the middle of the night in a cold sweat with the face of Stephen clearly visible in his mind.

2) The voice and bright light on the road to Damascus: "You're only hurting yourself."

3) The words of Ananias: "Brother Saul." Ananias believed Saul could have truly changed. Some people do change and we do not need to give up on them.

Sanhedrin Elders

Let me remind you that there were many good people in the Sanhedrin. Some of the elders may have modeled how reflection and insight led to more effective responses and actions. Nicodemus, who came to Jesus by night in the 3rd Chapter of John, was an Elder. Joseph of Aramathea, an Elder, gave his own family tomb. Rabbi Gamaliel, also an Elder, defended John and Peter after they had been arrested and brought to the Sanhedrin. Rabbi Gamaliel stood up and said, "Look, Messiahs come, and Messiahs go. If this movement of which they preach is of God, we cannot stop it.: if it is not of God, it will melt away. Leave these guys alone." And, then he reminded them of the sons of Judas of Galilean and Theodus of Jordan. The freedom of the apostles to preach in Jerusalem was indebted to this Jewish Scribe, who had influence over the Sanhedrin for fifteen years.

As long as he said, "leave them alone," no one could touch the Apostles. They were safe to continue preaching. From 30 to 44 AD the apostles had cover and protection from a God – fearing Elder, which the Book of Acts honors as Rabbi Gamaliel. They also had the benefit of his wisdom and experience.



The Sanhedrin met in the basement of the southern portico of the temple

Seeking Rightness

After 44 AD, Rabbi Gamaliel apparently no longer had influence in the Sanhedrin, but the apostles stayed in Jerusalem in spite of the problems outside of the church. When difficulty comes, the Book of Acts gives examples of asking God for a sense of rightness --not ease. The apostles had the sense that they should stay. They did not interpret difficult times as outward signs from God that they should leave Jerusalem. The Greek speakers did leave Jerusalem but not because they believed that they had a sign from God to stop ministering. They continued to minister but out of the realm of the Synagogue of the Freedmen. Some well meaning Christians today say, "this hard time is a sign from God that we are to pull out."

We need to be careful what we call blessing and curse. It's a terrible theology to believe that when something bad happens to someone – this is God's judgement. The same theology says that if you have a windfall of profits, it means that God is blessing your actions and directions. Remember, Jesus said

in the Book of Acts and at the end of the Gospel According to Matthew, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, the uttermost parts of the world”. Who would have imagined that between “Jerusalem” and “Judea” there would be a persecution? One does not reevaluate and stop just because the journey has become difficult.

For the apostles, there was much persecution after they were no longer under the protection of Gamaliel. Peter was arrested by Herod Agrippa. The apostles stayed in Jerusalem. The relative of Jesus, James, had a heart for his Jewish brothers and sisters and so was known as one who always prayed in the Temple. James was killed in 64AD at the hand of a bad high priest named Ananias. James was so popular amongst the Jewish population that their petition to the emperor to banish Ananias succeeded. Still the apostles stayed in Jerusalem. Instead of focusing on what they had lost, they focused on what they still had. This is easy to say; hard to do.

God With You Not Against You.

Something happens, and the temptation is to say, “God’s sending me a message; it must be a sign.” The disciples apparently thought that they were supposed to always have 12 disciples so they must replace Judas. Perhaps, too quickly, they decided to cast lots and elect Matthias. When it came to the stoning of Stephen, they were now going to reflect, listen to experienced teachers, and develop insights. Some may have thought the stoning was a “sign” that they all were to leave Jerusalem. We all know Christians like that. Something happens--God’s telling you something. No, not necessarily. In the apostles’ case, in spite of the difficulty they stayed in Jerusalem. Some of the Greek speakers like Phillip went to Gaza and met the Ethiopian eunuch. It would be smart for some of the Greek speakers to leave Jerusalem for a while with this hotheaded congregation and its hit man, Saul, around. But you can

observe that they reflected. Difficulty and difficult times does not mean that God is against you or your direction. I can imagine that part of their reflection was on Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem –thank God this was not the way that Jesus thought.

During the whole way to Jerusalem, Jesus’ friends were warning him; don’t go to Jerusalem—it’s going to be rough.” Jesus, I imagine, said, “thank you for your concern,” and he went on to Jerusalem. One does not change the world from a safe address. Thank God that hard times and difficult issues were not interpreted as “signs” that Jesus should not go to Jerusalem.

Should we not thank God for difficult and hard times? Can we today still use difficulty as a way to grow in strength, vision, and wisdom?

Further reading possibilities by Dr. James Fleming.

1) **God Present in Difficulty**

Struggles with Life’s Hardest Questions
140 Page Book Cost \$20.00

2) **Acts: New Discoveries**

Areas of Spiritual Growth in the Church
175 Page Book Cost \$25.00

3) **Life of Paul, Mediterranean Study Cruise**

165 Page Book Cost \$25.00

These and other resource materials are available at:

Biblical Resources Educational Materials
130 Gordon Commercial Drive
LaGrange, Georgia 30240
Telephone 706-885-0363
Fax 706-885-0364
Website: www.biblicalresources.net