

LIFE DISPELS FEAR

SERIES: HE IS ALIVE! AND HE IS STILL ALIVE!

By Ron Ritchie

Many of us here have had the privilege of studying the history of the Christian church. We have seen both the blessings and the persecution of the followers of Jesus Christ in generation after generation. Jesus said that he would build his church and that the gates of Hades would not overpower it, but at times, especially in these times, it almost appears that Satan is gearing up to try to disrupt and destroy all that he can before the Lord comes back to rule in righteousness.

According to *The National and International Religion Report* (April 18, 1994), a brutal persecution of Protestants is increasing steadily in the former Soviet Union. It seems that the Russian Orthodox church perceives Protestantism as an American plan to interfere in Russia, to even steal Russia from the Russians. And a systematic "cleansing" of Protestants similar to that experienced by those of all faiths under Stalin could occur soon in the Commonwealth of Independent States, said Boris Perchatkin, an evangelical Christian and former dissident. "Many Russian Christians fear for their lives and thousands are ready to leave...."

Last year some tribal conflicts broke out in Rwanda, Africa, and as a result the Christian churches were packed out with new believers. Now in the recent blood bath we are receiving reports that among the two hundred thousand who have been killed were thousands of Christians: preachers, priests, nuns, and men and women serving within religious relief groups. *Fear* rules the day within the country, and many missionaries who have gotten out to surrounding countries fear for the lives of their Christian friends and their families.

This spiritual attack against the church around the world is tempting the Christian community to give in to fear. *Fear* is the feeling of anxiety, dread, or terror caused by the nearness of danger, and it can impel us to flee our immediate situation.

But we don't have to be in Russia or Rwanda to understand what it means to be afraid. Our Bay Area can also be a fearful place to live. If you are a Christian professor or student trying to live out your faith on the campus of one of our high schools and colleges or universities, you have discovered that you are involved in some heavy spiritual warfare that can cause your heart to become overwhelmed with fear. Or if you are a single person or a husband or wife working in this secular community that is given over to all the wiles of the devil, you can be overwhelmed by fear to the point of wanting to flee to a more sane job market. If you as Christian parents are trying to raise your children in this community, you can easily become a captive of fear just thinking about all the possibilities of your children being kidnapped or introduced to drugs, gangs, or distorted sexual and family values. And that in turn can tempt you to think about ways to flee this morally corrupt area with the hope of finding a place of peace on this earth. If any of these are your experience, then you are eligible to be inducted into the "Hall of Fame of Fear" along with Christians from every generation since the beginning of the church of Jesus Christ.

Now, there is good fear: The Scriptures tell us that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverb 9:10). That is, it is right to have the greatest possible respect, awe, and reverence for the living God. But there is also bad fear: when we are tempted to believe that our risen Lord Jesus is no longer protecting us, he is no longer with us, or he has abandoned us; and so without checking in with him we become overwhelmed with the desire to flee our immediate circumstances.

The source of fear for the disciples of Jesus was that they had seen him placed on the cross of Calvary. Once he died, so did all their hopes and dreams about their place in the kingdom that he had promised he would rule in righteousness. In the midst of their grief and fear they forgot that he had told them that he was the resurrection and the life, that he would be raised from the grave, and that he would begin to build his church in and through them (Matthew 16:18-19). But he reminded them after his resurrection, "Surely I am with you

always, even until the end of the age" (see Matthew 28:16-20). He was saying, "The reason I say I am with you is that I am alive and will remain alive forevermore! Whether visible or invisible, I am present in your every circumstance, and I will never leave you or forsake you." This truth was personally experienced by Stephen in his physical death (see Acts 7:54-60), by Paul on the Damascus road (see Acts 9:1-6), and by Peter in Joppa (see Acts 10:9-16). Therefore, we are to fear not!

Now, some fourteen years after Peter's vision and the conversion of Cornelius and his family in Acts 10 (which we studied last week), we find in Acts 18 the faithful apostle Paul discovering as he had many times before....

Jesus: to the Jews a stumbling block, to the Gentiles foolishness

Acts 18:1-6

After these things he left Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, having recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. He came to them, and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and they were working; for by trade they were tent-makers. And he was reasoning in the synagogue every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.

But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul began devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. And when they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his garments and said to them, "Your blood be upon your own heads! I am clean. From now on I shall go to the Gentiles."

Three important historical events happened in 51 AD: (1) The Jews started to riot in Rome, so Claudius (45-54 AD), the fourth Roman emperor, had them all banished from the capital. (2) This forced the Jewish couple Aquila and Priscilla, natives of Pontus who were in the tent-making trade, to move to the city of Corinth. (3) At the same time Paul was on his second missionary journey out of the church at Antioch, in what is now Lebanon with his disciples Timothy, Silas, and Luke. They had preached in northern Greece, established churches in Philippi and Thessalonica, and visited Berea. Then Paul went into Athens alone and had an opportunity to share the good news of Jesus on Mars Hill. Afterward he walked some fifty miles west and arrived in the pagan city of Corinth, where his disciples again joined him.

Corinth was a seaport city on the southern tip of Greece with a population of a half-million people from every walk of life. It was known as the cradle of pleasure and a showplace of architectural beauty. The hill of the Acropolis towered above the city, and on top of the hill stood the great temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. One thousand priests and priestesses who were religious prostitutes were attached to that temple. Every evening they would descend from their nest and come into the city. As they walked in the dust of the city streets the soles of their sandals had hobnails that spelled out "follow me" wherever they went. It became a Greek proverb, "It is not every man who can afford to journey to Corinth."

In Corinth Paul was joined by the Jewish couple Aquila and Priscilla, who either had become Christians on the day of Pentecost eighteen years earlier (see Acts 2:9), or were led to Jesus as their Messiah by the apostle Paul himself. It was Paul's custom each Sabbath to seek to enter into the services of a local synagogue. Once they entered the synagogue, he would look for an opportunity to teach from the Old Testament scriptures with the hope of reasoning with the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles, "explaining and giving evidence that the Christ [Messiah] had to suffer and rise again from the dead," and concluding, "This Jesus whom I am proclaiming to you is the Christ" (Acts 17:3). Then Timothy and Silas, having accomplished their foundation work in Berea, joined Paul, Aquila and Priscilla, and Luke in Corinth; and "Paul began devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ."

In 54 AD Paul wrote a letter to the Corinthians from Ephesus, and from that we gain insight into his message to the Jews in Corinth. "For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God...For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; but we

preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1 Corinthians 1:18, 22-24.) That is, God's sending his innocent Son to die for sinners cuts across our self-righteousness and produces two reactions: To self-made people who have built their lives on the wisdom of this world, the cross is silly. But to those who are being saved, the cross sets them free from the domain of darkness, sin, and death and gives them a new life full of peace, joy, and wholesomeness in Jesus Christ.

Paul presented Jesus Christ as a propitiatory sacrifice that justified sinners through their faith in him, transforming them by the work of the Holy Spirit within, and then creating a new community into which Jews and Gentiles were admitted as equals. Paul saw the atoning death of Christ as a demonstration of God's justice and of God's wisdom; his costly plan of salvation both met our needs and satisfied his own just character.

The Jews, as we saw, wanted a sign, or a miraculous act; while the Greeks looked for wisdom, or facts and explanation. But in contrast to their terms, Paul preached Christ crucified. This was a stumbling block to the Jews. They believed that according to Deuteronomy 21:22-23, "cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree" (Galatians 3:13). Jesus could not possibly be the Messiah because he was crucified and therefore was placed under the curse of God. Any claim that he was the Messiah was blasphemous, and all who believed that should be stoned. And the story that Jesus rose from the dead was ridiculous because the divine curse could not be reversed. But Paul's response was, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us...in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." (Galatians 3:13-14.)

Someone has said, "Paul looked at the cross and agreed that it was the ground of his justification [that is, his sins were forgiven], the means of his sanctification [the power of sin in his experience was broken], the subject of his witness, and the object of his boasting. He saw in the cross the justice of God in judging sins, the love of God in bearing the judgment in our place, the wisdom of God in perfectly combining the two, and the power of God in saving all who believe."

The Jews in the synagogue of Corinth "resisted and blasphemed." Why so much resistance to the truth? Because the Jews, according to Paul in his letter to the Romans (9:31-33), "...pursu[ed] a law of righteousness, [but] did not arrive at that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone, just as it is written: 'Behold, I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense....'" So Paul shook out his garment, a symbol of giving them over to God for him to deal with. And then he said, "Your blood be upon your own heads! I am clean." That is, he no longer considered himself responsible to share with them the gospel of Jesus Christ, and he could stand before his Lord with clean hands and heart. This then set him free to spend his time in Corinth with the Gentiles.

Our wonderful Jewish brother in Christ Jesus, Tuvya Zaretsky, sent me a card Easter week and reminded me that PBC is always in his prayers. As you may know, Tuvya is the director of Jews for Jesus in the Los Angeles area. He also shared that during the Passover dinner they put on for the Jewish community, two of his family members were thinking seriously about accepting Jesus as their Messiah, while three other Jews did accept Jesus as their Messiah. Then he added in passing, "I'm ready to hit the beach! Please pray for me." It was spring break in LA, and thousands of students would be on the beaches. Tuvya and his team would spend the week boldly wearing Jews-for-Jesus T-shirts, walking up and down the beach all day long talking to students about Jesus Christ, and passing out literature that proclaimed Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. This is a time of joy and adventure, but it is also a time of fear because of the daily verbal and physical persecution they receive.

The cross: to those called, the power of God

Acts 18:7-8

And he departed from there and went to the house of a certain man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God, whose house was next to the synagogue. And Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, believed in the Lord with all his household, and many of the Corinthians when they heard were believing and being baptized.

Whenever I read this section I cannot help but think of these words of Jesus: "The kingdom of God is like a man who casts seed upon the soil; and he goes to bed at night and gets up by day, and the seed sprouts up and grows---how, he himself does not know. The soil produces crops by itself; first the blade, then the head, then the mature grain in the head. But when the crop permits, he immediately puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come." (Mark 4:26-29.) Here were Paul and his disciples faithfully preaching and teaching that Jesus was the Jews' crucified and now risen Messiah, and it appeared that no one was really listening. But once we sow the seed of the word in people's lives, we can rest from our efforts. The seed of salvation has been planted in the hearts of those who are in the process of being saved.

Paul did not have to go very far from the local synagogue; he simply stepped outside and went next door to the home of a new Greek convert named Titius Justus. Paul may have had him in mind when he wrote to the Corinthians a few years later, "But thanks be to God, who always leads us in His triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing...." (2 Corinthians 2:14-15). Crispus, a Jew and the chief of the local synagogue at which Paul and his disciples had just been forced out, also accepted Jesus as his Messiah, as did each member of his household in time. After these two men and all of Crispus' family members accepted the Lord Jesus as Messiah, other men and women from Corinth, both Jews and Gentiles, also invited Jesus to be their Lord. And they were baptized immediately (see also 1 Corinthians 1:14) in order to be obedient to our Lord's message to the apostles, "In your going, make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit...." (see Matthew 28:19).

One of our former elders and his wife, Jim and Marion Heaton, live in North Tahoe. He called me last week, and when I asked him how he was doing he said with great joy, "I couldn't be better because the Lord is so good!" I asked him what had happened, and he told me, "You know, for years I've had an early morning Bible study breakfast each week for a group of men in this village. A year or so ago I started another one in which none of the men were Christians. But just this morning one of the men told me he had accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior Easter week!"

However, right in the middle of what had to be a wonderful time for Paul of rejoicing in the Lord and the grace that he had extended to these dear Jews and Gentiles in Corinth, Paul entered into a time of great personal fear....

Spiritual warfare

Acts 18:9-11

And the Lord said to Paul in the night by a vision, "Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city." And he settled there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

The Lord had appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus, and then shortly after his conversion Paul was taken into the third heaven to meet the Lord, around 36 AD (see 2 Corinthians 12:1-10). And then in 51 AD he met the risen Lord once again in a vision, which was another fulfillment of the Lord's promise that he would be with us always until the end of the age.

"Do not be afraid [to the point of wanting to flee] any longer...." Now what was going on here? Well, when Paul wrote to the Corinthians a few years later, he gave us a peek into his heart at this time: "And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God." (1 Corinthians 2:1-5.) And in the midst of this wonderful spiritual victory where men, women, boys, and girls were being delivered from the domain of darkness and

placed into the kingdom of God, Satan sought to take advantage of Paul's weakness.

"...But go on speaking and do not be silent...." This was the man of whom God had said to Ananias, "...He is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake" (Acts 9:15-16). This was the man who would stand before King Agrippa and say that the risen Lord Jesus had called him to be a witness for him among the Jews and Gentiles with the message that would "...open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, in order that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in [Jesus]." (Acts 26:16-18).

"...For I am with you...." These were the very words our risen Lord Jesus had said to the eleven apostles. They stood on a mountain and heard him tell them, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-28). Here was the same Jesus who had told Mary and Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25), and his disciples, "I am the way, the truth, and the life...." (John 14:6). This was the same Jesus of whom the angel had told the women at the empty tomb, "He is not here, for He has risen" (Matthew 28:6). And this was the same Jesus who had appeared another ten times to his disciples over a period of forty days and then ascended into heaven with the promises that he would always be with them, and that one day he would return to this earth as the King of kings. This same Jesus, who had risen from the dead, had ascended to the Father, and was at the same time always present, at this moment was appearing visibly in a vision before Paul.

"...No man will attack you in order to harm you...." Now, at Paul's calling in Damascus the risen Jesus had promised him that his ministry would be filled with suffering. Somehow as he lay down in the home of Titius Justus and tried to go to sleep that night in Corinth, his mind must have run back over all the difficult times he had experienced at the hands of Jews in Asia and northern Greece. They had chased him out of Thessalonica and then followed him to Berea. Then the Greeks in Athens had mocked him and his message. And now the Corinthian Jews had rejected him, and he felt it was only the calm before the storm that would hit once they realized the impact on their community of the conversion of their leader Crispus. Paul was also aware of the pattern in which he had often had to leave as the point man in order for a small church to grow, and he thought he would have to leave his disciples behind again or else be arrested and beaten, if not killed. His heart became filled with so much fear that he started making plans to flee. But in this case our Lord intended to build his church in the wicked city of Corinth, and in order to do that he was going to hold back the hand of the evil one and his evil disciples for a time.

"...For I have many people in this city." These are some of the most encouraging words in the New Testament. For not only is our Lord Jesus involved in building his church, but he knows exactly how many people are ready to respond to his gospel of love, and he wants to "deliver [them] from the domain of darkness and transfer [them] into the kingdom of His beloved Son...." (Colossians 1:13). And he wants to do all of this through frail and frightened men and women like you and me by the power of his Holy Spirit and his word.

This promise to Paul was so convincing that he and his disciples "settled there for a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them." But once the church was established in Corinth, the Lord Jesus put Paul back on his old regimen. For after eighteen months the Jews had had enough of this teaching that the crucified Jesus was the Messiah, so with trumped-up charges they brought Paul before the judgment seat in Corinth. But the Greek governor refused to hear this religious case, keeping the door open to the gospel in that city. Paul was released, and the new chief of the synagogue, Sosthenes, was beaten by his fellow Jews for mishandling their case (see verse 17; this only caused Sosthenes at a later date to also accept Jesus as his Messiah [see 1 Corinthians 1:1]). So Paul then felt free with a heart filled with joy to return to his home church in Antioch (verse 22) before his new three-year adventure began in the seaport city of Ephesus, Turkey.

All our temptation to give in to *fear* can be overcome if we will continue to remember, and to remind our brothers and sisters, of some wonderful spiritual realities:

(1) Jesus, our wonderful Lord and Savior, is alive and at this very moment invisible but

present, and he will never leave us!

(2) Whoever we are at this moment in our community, our risen Lord wants to use us to build his church in the power of the Holy Spirit.

(3) This kind of ministry includes times of peace, so that all those the Lord knows about in our community who are open to the gospel can hear it from those of us who stay here to share it.

(4) This kind of ministry also includes spiritual warfare, which could hold our hearts captive by fear if we forget Jesus' words: "Surely I am with you always, even until the end of the age."

(5) There will be times when our Lord will give us the freedom to leave our current circumstances or even this area, but it will be based on his leading, not on fear in our heart. And our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and only he, can dispel the fear that so easily entangles us, because he is our *life*.

When John saw Jesus on the Island of Patmos some forty years later, he became very frightened, and then he told us about this experience: "And He laid His right hand upon me, saying, 'Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore....'" (Revelation 1:17-18).

Catalog No. 4366
Acts 18:1-11
Sixth Message
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April 24, 1994

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