

GOD OPENS THE DOOR

By Pastor Paul Penno

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The following ad once appeared in a London newspaper: "Men wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful." The ad was signed by Sir Ernest Shackleton, Antarctic explorer. Amazingly, the ad drew thousands of respondents, eager to sacrifice everything for the prospect of meaningful adventure.

Today we come to the 13th chapter of Acts where Paul begins the first of his three meaningful adventures.

From the church at Antioch officially sending out foreign missionaries we can learn many important principles about the missionary involvement of churches. How the church came to recognize this call of God is instructive. "As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them." Acts 13:2. The beginnings of the missions of Jesus and the apostles are preceded by prayer; which provides opportunity for action of the Spirit; and the Spirit leads directly to mission. Prayer is viewed here as a service we do for God. To this is added fasting. Fasting emphasizes a state of uninterrupted concentration which made it possible to ascertain the will of the Lord. That is the main purpose and value of fasting.

"And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away." Acts 13:3. The message the church received was to release their best for missionary service, and their earnestness was such that they were willing to do so. This is typical of churches that have a missionary vision, churches whose main aim is more than survival or maintenance. Mission is so important to them that they willingly take steps that may seem harmful to the church in order for the missionary program to thrive. They have a corporate orientation towards others.

The history of missions is replete with great leaps forward that took place when people got together to pray. In the Haystack Meeting of 1806, some students from Williams College, who had a concern for the spiritual welfare of their fellow students, met twice a week for prayer. Because they were ridiculed, they met outside the college in the countryside. One day five of them got caught in a storm and sought refuge under a haystack. While they waited there they prayed,

and their special focus of prayer was the awakening of foreign missionary interest among students. Their leader, Samuel Mills, directed the discussion and praying to their own missionary obligation. He said, that unless students dedicated their lives to foreign evangelism, the gospel would not be taken to places like Asia. He exhorted his friends with the words that later became like a watchword for them: "We can do this if we will."

After some discussion these five students offered their lives to foreign missions. This gave birth to the first student missionary society in America. It was from this haystack meeting that the foreign missionary movement of the churches of the United States had an initial main impulse. This has been described as setting in motion "a golden chain stretching from the haystack meeting to the greatest student uprising in all history. Urgent prayer arising from a desire for all that God wishes makes us receptive to him and inspires a great leap forward in the history of the church.

The Spirit directed Barnabas and Saul to be set apart for reaching the lost. "So they, being sent forth by the Holy Ghost, departed unto Seleucia; and from thence they sailed to Cyprus." Acts 13:4. These were the top leaders of the church, and the young church in Antioch presumably had many needs. But when God calls, we must release even those we consider the most important and valued persons. That's how important missions is. One does not have to be brilliant (humanly speaking) to be a missionary. One has to be called, and God often calls ordinary, unspectacular people to do special things for Him. But sometimes he sends the most talented. When brilliant people respond to the missionary call, we may say, "What a waste! Their audience will be uneducated, backward people. Why should the most brilliant go to them?" But throughout history God has called some of the brightest people in their generation to the mission field—for example, John Nevin Andrews went to Europe; Ellen G. White went to Australia; E. J. Waggoner went to London; and Elder Cudney and Bro. Tay went to the South Pacific islands and Pitcairn. As David Livingstone said, "God had only one son and He was a missionary."

A little child lay ill in his home in a small mid-Illinois town. The mattress on which the baby was lying was being mysteriously jerked and agitated, making rest for the child impossible. A bed was then made for it in an overstuffed chair, but the chair moved across the room to the wall and began to tip over. The frantic mother at last made a bed on the floor, whereupon both baby and mattress were

scooted under the bed. The distracted parents called in the ministers of the village to pray for relief from these eerie and sinister happenings.

The report of this unusual incident was commented upon by *The National Spiritualist*. This editorial stated that incidents like this occur because those in the spirit world endeavor to impress the dwellers on the earth with the reality of life beyond the grave.

The question arises—If a Seventh-day Adventist were called to a home in such an emergency, would he have the needed spiritual authority over Satan to bring deliverance?

Every Christian worker should consider himself a warrior in the cause of truth, and be able to say with Paul, “I am set for the defense of the gospel” (Phil. 1:17). What sort of defense must one have to make a successful stand against these exhibitions of Satan’s power that will appear more and more frequently as we near the end?

Cyprus is a large island off the south coast of Turkey west of Antioch. Barnabas was from this island and it was here that he brought Saul for their first missionary venture together. They had John Mark with them. Mark is the one who later wrote the Gospel of Mark. God opened the door for them to teach the Word of God to a Roman authority.

“And when they had gone through the isle unto Paphos, they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew, whose name was Bar-jesus: which was with the deputy of the country, Sergius Paulus, a prudent man; who called for Barnabas and Saul, and desired to hear the word of God.” Acts 13:6, 7.

Paphos was the capital of Cyprus, and the chief Roman official there was Sergius Paulus, an understanding man, who wanted to hear the word of God. There is a great controversy going on today between Christ and Satan. This battle is for the hearts and souls of God’s people as well as for the people of the world. The present truth for today has been revealed to us in connection with the third angel’s message. These truths are: The character of God is love. God has justified the race of sinners by His Son’s death on the cross. This forgiveness of sins includes the washing of blood which cleanses us from all sin. The truth of justification by faith in connection with the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary is Jesus’s gift to prepare a people for His second coming. Jesus took our “sinful nature” and yet defeated sin; and thus we have a Saviour who is near to us and not

afar off. This is the word of God which Barnabas and Saul taught the Roman proconsul.

He was opposed by a Jewish false prophet named “Son of Jesus [Joshua].” It is unusual to find a Jewish false prophet and sorcerer, for the Jews traditionally shunned such demonic activities. As a Jew he knew the truth of the living God but had apostatized and immersed himself in Eastern religion. He was “false” not because none of his prophecies came true, but because he had abandoned the truth of God and had become a man skilled in the lower and the uncanny arts and strange powers of the medium priests and magi. He mixed religion with science and magic until the dividing line between the three no longer was clear in his own mind. As a Jew, practicing magic, he commits what Luke regarded as the worst sort of idolatry. Bar Jesus acted according to the devil’s word-obstructing designs. Through this promotion of idolatry he filled the classic role of the magician-false prophet, such false teachers would arise and lead the people astray into idolatry.

The name Elymas means “sorcerer” or “wise man.” He got himself into a position of influence because he pretended to have special insight into what was going to happen and could offer “wise” advice to those who made decisions. This man had gained the proconsul’s confidence. It is certain that he was able to do things that either were, or seemed to be, marvelous. It is natural that the magician’s knowledge and powers should have made him a striking and interesting personality; and a person like the proconsul, keenly interested in nature and philosophy, would enjoy his society.

During our evangelistic meetings one of the first nights a woman came sitting on the front row. I welcomed her. Over the course of the meetings it became apparent that she had covered all her bases in terms of collecting all the religions of the world into her little apartment and practiced them all. She believed that there was only one God, but there were many ways or paths of religions leading to the one God. Just to be safe she wanted to be a practitioner of them all. The evangelist John Bradshaw, tried to reason with her that Jesus was the only way to God, and thus Christianity was the only true religion and the Bible was the revelation of the true God. She had many holy books and writings in her possession and sought to be wise in them all.

Here Saul and Barnabas encountered a Jew who had also covered all his bases incorporating many religions under one umbrella. When

Barnabas and Saul came along, Elymas recognized that if Sergius Paulus paid attention to them, his own days as an influential person would be numbered. As a result he opposed the gospel and did everything that he could to turn the proconsul from it.

Leading one to Christ is not merely an academic exercise, nor is it a matter of making a successful sales pitch. Rather, it involves all-out war against the forces of hell. Saul and Barnabas found themselves in a spiritual warfare over the soul of Sergius Paulus. Those powers of darkness which lay behind Elymas's system, strove hard to stem the progress of the gospel.

The governor was just one man. Elymas represented a spiritual kingdom of deception and a terrible syncretism of Yahwehism and paganism. As the spirits indwelling him sought to stop the movement of the gospel, Elymas must be stopped in his tracks. Bar-jesus represented the strongest influence on the human will that existed in the Roman world, an influence which must destroy or be destroyed by Christianity.

Not long ago a Seventh-day Adventist introduced his Roman Catholic girl friend to me requesting I marry them. After some discussion of compatibility, I suggested to them that they might join my Bible class. She seemed to be willing without any prejudice. I expressed the thought that one of the major solidifying factors in holding marriages together is unity in terms of religious faith. I desired the best welfare of their marriage. Then he interjected, But honey don't you feel pressured to become an Adventist? He became a hindrance to her moving forward, and then the thing kind of fell apart. We must be careful in not becoming an unwitting tool of the evil one to discourage others from coming to the truth as it is in Jesus.

Elymas contradicted Paul and Barnabas to their face, evidently in the governor's palace where, by the proconsul's request, they came to present the gospel.

It is here that the presence of the Holy Spirit is mentioned in a special way to fill Paul in a powerful way to pronounce judgment on this man. "Then Saul, (who also is called Paul,) filled with the Holy Ghost." Acts 13:9. The secret impulse which pushed Saul into the foreground came from the Holy Spirit, who then presided and still presides in the church. The Holy Spirit selected and still selects His agents and directs their steps.

Saul "set his eyes on him." The searching glance with which Saul transfixed the wizard showed how completely the wizard's character

and motives were understood, and how indignantly the apostle's soul flamed out against them. Saul's eyes were illumined by the Spirit of the Lord, which searches all things. Saul's stake in the heart of this sorcerer was not impaired vision, but a perceptive stare into the soul.

In dealing with demonized persons contact with demons is often made through direct, intense eye contact. Through experience one can learn to detect the change that comes over a person's eyes when the demons have come up to take temporary control of the victim. Demons will often cry out in fear or anger at the brightness as a Spirit-filled Christian stares intently at them.

Filled with the Spirit, Paul spoke to Bar-jesus. Luke has him let fly a long string of deeply incriminating charges regarding Paulus's court chaplain named Elymas. The denunciation uttered by the apostle must have told the detected impostor that his career of wickedness was at an end. In three terrific exclamations the apostle revealed to him his depraved character: "O full of all subtilty and all mischief." He was guilty and villainous, a deceitful rascal, full of cunning and criminality.

Next, that instead of being a Bar-jesus—*i. e.*, a son of the salvation of Jehovah—he was a veritable "child of the devil," because you oppose the work of God.

Thirdly, "thou enemy of all righteousness;" thus making him "equal to the father of lies," "pierced through with hatred against the good."

In a short, sharp question the apostle unfold to him the wickedness of his present behavior, "Wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord?" Acts 13:10. The ways of the Lord aim directly and rightly at the salvation of all men, and the two preachers of the gospel have just explained to the Roman governor these ways, and Paul sees that the false prophet will not cease to make crooked the straight paths of the Lord and to turn Sergius Paulus away that he may not believe and become blessed.

In the New Testament we find Paul standing undaunted against the sorcery and witchcraft of his day, and admonishing the early believers to do the same. He encouraged the church to believe in and expect victory over Satan, because of the superior and effective weapons of the Christian warfare. "For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds" (2 Cor. 10:4). To Paul the gospel was a thing of power (Rom. 1:16), and in all his ministry he went about demonstrating that power.

Few of us realize the contact we will soon be forced to have with Spiritualism. Of this the Spirit of Prophecy says, "This delusion will spread, and we shall have to contend with it face to face."—Early Writings, p. 88.

"And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming: whose [the Lord's] coming is *at the time of* the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders." 2 Thessalonians 2:9.

What is the working of Satan "with *all* power and signs and lying wonders"? It must be the grand masterpiece of his deceptive work in the earth. And when is that? and what is it?

As to the time *when* it is, the Scriptures plainly answer: It is when Satan comes down in great wrath—intense energy—knowing that his time is short (Rev. 12:12), and when he will work with such power that, if it were possible, even the very elect would be deceived, just before the coming of Christ. Matt. 24:24-27.

And as to *what* it is, no one need be in doubt who has considered the character and watched the workings and wonders of modern Spiritualism. Modern Protestants and Catholics are too much involved in the great error of the immortality of the soul, and the consequent conscious state of the dead, to be able to see the real deception that it is. But when we consider that all the dead, with the few exceptions which the Scriptures mention, are unconscious in their graves, waiting the general resurrection in the future, and then suddenly find myriads of unseen intelligences abroad claiming to be the conscious living spirits of dead men, revealing the secrets, imitating the actions, the voice, and even the looks, of those whom they respectively claim to be, we gather something of an idea of the monstrous outburst of mendacity that has fallen upon the world; and when we see this accompanied with wonders which are startling and preternatural, we are made to feel that here is a movement in which Satan has come into more immediate contact with the human family than he ever has been able to do through any other device whatever. And this movement, when it has reached the degree of development which other scriptures predict, will alone answer to the prophecy of "all power and signs and lying wonders."

Paul wrote, "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Eph. 6:12).

When one wrestles she does not occupy a ringside seat and look on. Rather, she comes to grips, cheek to jowl, with her opponent. This aptly describes our ensuing conflict with the hosts of darkness as they endeavor to ensnare the world, and the remnant church in particular. What will ensure spiritual victory in this final titanic struggle?

Satan has thousands of trained, dedicated agents all over the world who never begin the day's work without first effecting rapprochement with their "spirit guide." Because of this daily, intimate, and very real spirit association they become perfect mediums through whom the uninhibited power of Satan flows, and hence can perform spectacular miracles and many startling phenomena.

If the gospel worker is to make a successful stand against these exhibitions of satanic power, his equipment must consist of something more than a formula of words, argument, logic, reason, or doctrinal exegesis. If this is the sum total of his armor, he would do better not to challenge Satan nor take the field against him, for he will surely suffer an embarrassing defeat. (See Gospel Workers, page 276.)

But we never read of Paul or any of the other apostles being driven off the field by Satan. When the damsel fortuneteller persisted in following and praising Paul and his evangelistic group, the apostle rebuked the entity, and the spirit's control was broken. When Elymas the sorcerer sought to obstruct the conversion of Sergius Paulus, Paul rebuked him, and the sorcerer was stricken with blindness. These and many other triumphs over Satan were not accomplished by force of logic or argument but by a demonstration of power. The enemy was silenced, the superiority of the power of God was demonstrated, and men stood in awe of the ministry of the apostles.

The day of our final spiritual struggle with Satan is rapidly approaching. The prince of evil and his trained agents are multiplying the number and variety of their lying wonders. In all the world these manifestations, under one guise or another, are attracting more and more favorable attention. At all levels of learning and in all classes of society they are convincing men of the reality of the supernatural.

A well known warlock (wizard or sorcerer) by the name of Mr. Meregildo operated out of a town in Argentina. He was so famous and his cures so dramatic that people would trek to Arroyo Seco from overseas for his services. Before he died, he evidently passed his powers on to twelve disciples. Three times a church was established

in Arroyo Seco and three times it closed down in the face of severe spiritual opposition.

After several days of Bible study and prayer, the Christian pastors and leaders came together in one accord and placed the entire area under spiritual authority. A few of them traveled to Arroyo Seco. Positioning themselves across the street from the headquarters of Mr. Meregildo's followers they served an eviction notice on the forces of evil. They announced to them that they were defeated and that Jesus Christ would attract many to himself now that the church was united and pledged to proclaim him. Less than three years later eighty-two of those towns had churches in them.¹ Unusual breakthroughs in world missions are increasingly being associated with spiritual warfare.

Paul invoked an appalling judgment upon the sorcerer. "And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon thee (vs. 11), which was a richly merited retribution for his heinous wickedness in having sought to prevent the salvation of a soul. Yet it was mingled with a fourfold mercy.

In the first place it was a bodily affliction when it might have fallen on his life as it did with Judas who hung himself. Second, it spared his life, whereas it might have cut him off, as it did Herod. Third, "and thou shalt be blind, not seeing the sun for a season." It was only blindness, whereas it might have been loss of reason, as in the case of Nebuchadnezzar. It might have been for the whole term of his natural life, whereas, as with Zacharias, it was only for a season. The blinding of Bar Jesus exposed the magician as a fraud. He claimed to be a prophet: as such he would have been a source of divine light and leadership, one who made paths straight so that others could follow. But in reality he was a fount of darkness and corruption. The curse of blindness communicated his true identity.

Jesus had commissioned Paul to open the eyes of the Gentiles, that they might turn from darkness to light and from the authority of Satan to God. If the devil desires to snatch away the newly planted word, how can Paul stop him? The answer is that Paul must be invested with authority that is greater than Satan's own. Paul's successful

¹ Account taken from report of the Spiritual Warfare Track Workshop at Lausanne II, by Edgardo Silvoso in a paper entitled "Spiritual Warfare in Argentina and the 'Plan Resistencia.'" Harvest Evangelism, Inc. P.O. Box 9039, San Jose, CA 95157.

unmasking of Bar Jesus says that Paul could do the work to which he had been called because he possessed authority over all the power of the Enemy. Ironically, this superiority of Paul to the devil is expressed by the infliction of blindness, which Paul himself had suffered at the hand of the Lord. Paul, in spite of his own dark past, now shows himself to be one of the devil's staunchest foes.

This miracle left a deep impression upon Sergius Paulus. The judgment took instant effect. "And immediately there fell on him a mist and a darkness; and he went about seeking some to lead him by the hand." Acts 13:11.

This was a convincing display of prophetic power. This shows that Paul was "filled with the Holy Spirit." Paul is a genuine prophet like Jesus and Peter. His reading the heart of his opponent, and his ability to declare a curse in the name of the Lord is akin to the power of Jesus. This demonstrated the kingdom of God reaching new territories and overcoming the powers of Satan. Paul engaged in a "turf-war" with the false prophet, and conquered him. The sign of this victory is not only the helpless condition of the magician, but the conversion of the Proconsul to the faith.

"Then the deputy, when he saw what was done, believed, being astonished at the doctrine of the Lord." Acts 13:12. Sergius Paulus was "an intelligent man" (13:7), a provincial governor. He hailed from a family which rendered distinguished service to the empire in the first and second centuries. He was not a naïve simpleton who would be easily attracted to the supernatural, the type with whom miraculous ministry will be effective.

He is a good example of signs and wonders in evangelism. The proconsul believed when he "saw what had happened" (13:12). But that was not the cause of belief. The real cause of his belief was "for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord." Paul's teaching had been faithfully done; that was the foundation of belief. But the proconsul's heart was opened to receive this message through the miracle. It was a trigger for belief, a confirmation of the truthfulness of what was being said. The miraculous was important because it directed people to the truth. People are not to respond primarily to the miracles but to Jesus and the gospel.

Martin and Gracia Burnham are everyday people. They began serving as missionaries with New Tribes Mission in the Philippines in 1986, where they raised their three children. Martin grew up in the Philippines with his missionary parents, and he wanted to be a

mission aviation pilot his entire life. He and Gracia were examples of grace and servanthood both to other missionaries and the Filipino people. While celebrating their eighteenth wedding anniversary at Dos Palmas Resort off Palawan Island, they were kidnapped May 27, 2001, by the Abu Sayyaf Group, terrorist Filipino rebels. They were held hostage for 376 days in the jungles of Basilan and Mindanao. When a Filipino military group attempted to rescue them, Gracia was wounded and Martin was killed. During their captivity they shared with their captors the food that was sent to them, and they also shared the gospel with them, challenging the rebels' Muslim beliefs.

After Gracia was reunited with her family and children in Rose Hill, Kansas, she said, "We want everyone to know that God was good to us every single day of our captivity. Martin was also a source of strength to the other hostages. He was a good man, and he died well." Dan Germann, an executive with New Tribes Mission, said of Martin and Gracia, "These are people who loved God and didn't reluctantly move toward a mission field. They did it gladly, because their eyes were fixed on Him. In that sense, they are our modern day heroes."

Martin and Gracia are examples to all of us in our own everyday worlds, for Martin once said, "I'm not called to the Philippines or to be a missionary. I'm called to serve Christ." And so are we called to serve Christ.