

THE ARM OF THE LORD

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Nothing is more calculated to impress God's people with His ability to deliver them in the present hour of need, than to remind them of His leading in their past history.¹ A rehearsal of their past glory is not to arouse a spirit of nationalism and pride, but rather to humble them with a sense that God alone saves and we are to submit to His means and purposes.

When Paul and Barnabas crossed the pond from the isle of Cyprus to mainland Asia Minor, they came to Antioch in Pisidia, a hundred miles inland, with a letter of recommendation from Sergius Paulus to his daughter Sergius Paulla who resided there.² The best place to find an audience to proclaim Jesus was at the synagogue. You begin with God's chosen people in order to reach the masses. There was a considerable Jewish community in Antioch, having been relocated a century earlier by Antiochus.

Paul's preaching appointment had been prearranged by the synagogue leader for the Sabbath worship service. It would have been a most anticipated event. Scattered throughout Acts 13 we have some idea of those with whom Paul came in contact. There were the officials of the synagogue (Acts 13:15). The Jews and "men of Israel" meeting on the Sabbath (Acts 13:14). Then there were devout proselytes (13:43), possibly former contributors to the synagogue who had become Christians. There is mention of "God-fearers" (Acts 13:16), non-Jews in regular attendance at the synagogue. Sympathizers of the Jewish faith (13:50; 44), who were there. And the "leading men of the city" (13:50), part of the municipal aristocracy and local elite.³

This is one of ten sermons recorded by Luke in Acts, as a record of the expansion and growth of the early Christian church. Stephen's sermon is the longest (Acts 7:2-53). Three are recorded from Peter's lips (Acts 2:14-40; 3:12-26; 10:34-43). The other six came from Paul.

¹ "We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history." Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches*, p. 196.

² John B. Polhill, *Paul and His Letters*, p. 87.

³ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Missions*, Vol. 2, pp. 1103, 1104.

What a wonderful insight this gives us of Paul's early apostolic preaching!

The scripture reading for the day was taken from "the law and the prophets" (Acts 13:15). Deuteronomy 4:25-46 for the Torah and 2 Sam. 7:6-16 from the prophets.⁴ Then the elder invited Paul to share the burden on his heart to the congregation. Paul's sermon began with a terse summary of Israel's history from the patriarchs to King David (13:16-22). "The God of this people of Israel chose our fathers, and exalted the people when they dwelt as strangers in the land of Egypt, and with an high arm brought He them out of it." Acts 13:17. Paul's sermon title might well be captioned "The Arm of the Lord." The arm is the member most used in working; the strength of one's arm represents the strength of its owner.

I used to use my arms in climbing rock walls. There was a particularly sheer grade on Highway 50 called "Lover's Leap." In climbing it I put so much body weight on the arms that my shoulder tightened up. It's called a rotator cuff. I had to go to the orthopedic doctor to receive a shot in order to reduce the pain and temporarily unfreeze it so that I could begin gradual exercises to restore healing. During some five weeks my right arm was practically useless for lifting and doing work. The arm signifies the power of a man.

Therefore the arm of the Lord signifies the power of God. Thus it was by the arm or power of God, that the Israelites were delivered from Egypt.

All the power manifested in the deliverance of Israel from Egypt,—the dividing of the Red Sea, the overthrow of the Egyptians, the dividing of the Jordan, and overthrowing of the walls of Jericho, as well as the miraculous provision of food and drink, was the working of God's right arm. All the wonders connected with the coming of the Lord to save His people, and to punish the wicked, are the operation of the arm of the Lord.

Herein is rejoicing and not sorrow, in contemplating the devastating power of that arm, as seen in the destruction of the world of the ungodly. All that terrible power is simply the measure of the mighty power by which God delivers His people. Not simply the power by which He will save them when He comes, but the power by which He saves them now from their sins. God's people are "kept by the power

⁴ J. W. Bowker, "Speeches in Acts: A Study in Proem and Yelammedenu Form," *NTS* 14 (1967-68), pp. 96-111.

of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” 1 Peter 1:5. That is, they are kept by the arm of the Lord.

“Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed? For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground; He hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him.” Isa. 53:1, 3. Christ is the arm of the Lord, and especially Christ crucified. A helpless infant; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; unable Himself to do anything; despised and rejected of men; thought to be stricken, smitten of God, and as a malefactor hung upon the cross for the jeers of the mob, He was nevertheless the arm of the Lord, that brings salvation, the power of God, and the wisdom of God. All the mighty power of God is manifested in the cross of Christ. Who of the men of the world believed that in that little babe in the manger in Bethlehem, or in the poor, despised man hanging on the cross, there was the power that could move the world?

The comfort for us is that no matter how poor we are, no matter how insignificant and despised, no matter how ignorant and sinful, the arm of the Lord is all sufficient for our salvation. Yes, it is in just such conditions that the glory of its power is most manifest. God does not despise the poor and the outcast, for there is where His own arm is. Then praise the Lord when you hear of the stretching forth of that mighty arm; and if it proceeds to shake terribly the earth, then cling the closer to it, and nestle the more confidently in the bosom of the Almighty, for there is everlasting safety.

John Paton was a missionary in the New Hebrides Islands. One night hostile natives surrounded the mission station, intent on burning out the Patons and killing them. Paton and his wife prayed during that terror-filled night that God would deliver them. When daylight came they were amazed to see their attackers leave.

A year later, the chief of the tribe was converted to Christ. Remembering what had happened, Paton asked the chief what had kept him from burning down the house and killing them. The chief replied in surprise, “Who were all those men with you there?” Paton knew no men were present—but the chief said he was afraid to attack because he had seen hundreds of big men in shining garments with drawn swords circling the mission station.

“And about the time of forty years suffered He their manners in the wilderness.” Acts 13:18. In these few words the Apostle Paul in his discourse in the synagogue at Antioch disposed of the forty years’

wandering of the Israelites in the wilderness. Their manners were such that God literally “suffered” them. The record is one of murmurings and rebellion. “They believed not in God, and trusted not in His salvation.” Ps. 78:22.

“So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.” What does that teach us as to the nature of the inheritance to which God was and still is leading His people?—Simply this, that it was an inheritance that could be possessed only by those who had faith—that faith alone could win it. Worldly, temporal possessions may be, and are, gained and held by men who disbelieve, and who even despise and blaspheme God. Indeed, unbelieving men have the most of this world’s goods. Many besides the writer of the seventy-third Psalm have been envious at the prosperity of the wicked; but such feeling of envy arises only when one looks at the things that are temporal, instead of at the things that are eternal. “The prosperity of fools shall destroy them.” God has chosen the poor of this world, “rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which He hath promised to them that love Him.” James 2:5. That kingdom is “not of this world” (John 18:36), but is “a better country, that is, an heavenly,” for which the patriarchs looked. It was to this country that God promised to lead His people when He delivered them from Egypt. But it can be possessed only by those who are “rich in faith.”

When a traveler in the early days of the west, came to the Mississippi, he discovered there was no bridge. Fortunately it was winter and the great river was sheeted over with ice. But the traveler was afraid to trust himself to it, not knowing how thick it was. Finally with infinite caution, he crept on his hands and knees and managed to get halfway over. And then he heard—yes he heard singing from behind. Cautiously he turned, and there, out of the dusk, came another traveler, driving a four-horse load of coal over the ice, singing as he went! We may rest our faith upon the promises of God to get us to the heavenly shore.

In Paul’s sermon all the stress is on God’s mercy—his election of Israel, His exaltation of His people, His gift of an inheritance, His gift of rulers and kings. The pace slows with David because this is the point Paul wanted to stress. God “raised up” (vs. 22) David. David and the promises to him foreshadow the promise fulfilled in Christ. David was a special expression of God’s mercy, a man who fulfilled all God’s will for man, a man after God’s own heart.

We read at David's anointing by Samuel that immediately "the Spirit of the Lord came upon David." What did David do then? Did he assume a lordly air, and demand to be treated as a king? Did he at once place himself before the public, proclaiming the fact that the Lord had chosen him king, and attempt to seize the authority, or demand at least to be consulted in regard to public affairs?—Nothing of the kind; he made no claim whatever in his own behalf, simply because the Spirit of the Lord was upon him. If he had put himself forward, he would have shown himself unfit to lead the Lord's people.

"Of this man's seed hath God according to His promise raised unto Israel a Saviour, Jesus." Acts 13:23. Men often make promises that they cannot or do not fulfill. But God's promises are as much better than man's promises as the heavens are higher than the earth. He never promises anything that He cannot do; and He never forgets; and He cannot lie. Therefore when God promises anything, it is just as sure as though it were already done. He may not do it just when we think He will, or in just the way that we suppose He will, but we may be certain that it will be done at the right time, and in the very best way, and exactly as He promised. So do not be afraid to trust Him, though He seem to wait long sometimes; He has not forgotten, and He will surely keep His promise.

Booker T. Washington describes meeting an ex-slave from Virginia in his book *Up From Slavery*: "I found that this man had made a contract with his master, two or three years previous to The Emancipation Proclamation, to the effect that the slave was to be permitted to buy himself, by paying so much per year for his body; and while he was paying for himself, he was to be permitted to labor where and for whom he pleased.

"Finding that he could secure better wages in Ohio, he went there. When freedom came, he was still in debt to his master some three hundred dollars. Notwithstanding that the Emancipation Proclamation freed him from any obligation to his master, this black man walked the greater portion of the distance back to where his old master lived in Virginia, and placed the last dollar, with interest, in his hands.

In talking to me about this, the man told me that he knew that he did not have to pay his debt, but that he had given his word to his master, and his word he had never broken. He felt that he could not enjoy his freedom till he had fulfilled his promise."

David received a special promise from God, a promise of a descendant who would be God's own Son and with whom He would

establish a kingdom that would last forever. This promise to David had been the goal of Paul's entire historical sketch.

God so loved lost and dying man that He promised to send His only begotten Son to die for them, "that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Thousands of years passed by and God had not yet fulfilled His promise. The Lamb of God had not yet been slain. Had God forgotten His promise? Could it be possible that God would not keep His word? No, *never*. God *never* disappoints those who trust in His word. God had for a long time been quietly preparing the way for His coming Son.

That had been the whole point of the opening of Paul's sermon—God's mercy to Israel from the patriarchs to David, especially as epitomized in the promise to David that He would send a descendant whose kingdom would have no end. Now that promise had been fulfilled in the Savior Jesus; now that message of salvation had been sent. Jesus *was* the Son of David; it was above all to David's people, the people chosen in Abraham (v. 17), the Jews, that God had sent the Messiah and the message of salvation in Him. Paul addressed a synagogue consisting of Jewish listeners and devout God-worshipping Gentiles who identified closely with the Jewish faith and looked to the promises given to Israel. The tragedy of this speech would be that the Jews, the very ones to whom the Messiah had first been sent, would ultimately reject this message of salvation (13:45f.).

God's covenant promise in Christ has yet to be believed on the part of His people. The proof of this is that Christ has not yet returned to gather in His people to take them to their eternal inheritance. So the problem persists—one of unbelief in the promise of God.

As an illustration of this at a church which shall remain unnamed where I was invited to preach last Sabbath, I spoke of the covenant promise and God's great love in giving His Son to die for the sins of the world. Afterward an elder statesman, retired pastor in his nineties, called to say that they had been receiving messages in the pulpit with the theme "Do and live." This is the old covenant. It is the promise of the people to obey in order to get eternal life. But the elder said the hearts of the people had been reached that Sabbath day and melted by the cross and love of God. Would that the leaders and pastors of our churches would awaken to capture the great themes of the Bible to proclaim from our pulpits.

The Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. They were given the everlasting covenant. They had the law and the prophets. The

gospel was foreshadowed in every minute detail through the sanctuary with its priesthood and sacrificial system. And, yet, what good did it do them? Because of unbelief in Jesus their Messiah they did not see Him as the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. Paul said, believe me I know, I was part of the religious elite of Jerusalem. "For they that dwell at Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they knew Him not, nor yet the voices of the prophets which are read every Sabbath day, they have fulfilled them in condemning Him." Acts 13:27. The prophets foretold that the Messiah would suffer, die, and yet be the Saviour of His people. On the basis of the prophetic message, then, Jesus could be their Saviour who died a shameful death as their substitute. By condemning Jesus, the Jews in Jerusalem fulfilled the words that the prophets had spoken concerning the Messiah.

We have a similar sad episode in our church history when Jesus came to His people with the message of His everlasting covenant. This beautiful truth was present by E. J. Waggoner at the ministers' Bible Institute held early in 1890 at Battle Creek. When it became apparent that the church leadership was not receptive Ellen White spoke to them in a sermon delivered at the Review Office chapel. It can be dated to March 8, 1890. She said, "Christ said: 'Why do you not hear my words?' I would say, 'Why do you not hear the words of Christ that are presented to you? Why will you have darkness? They are so afraid to see that there is another ray of light. They will build up every conceivable barrier against it. You are working just as the Jews were. Do not hang on to Brother Smith. In the name of God, I tell you, he is not in the light. He has not been in the light since he was at Minneapolis. You have gathered together, you have built up yourselves, and you have tried in every way to resist the Spirit of God. May God have compassion on your souls.'"⁵ As long as this unbelief in God's everlasting covenant persists, we shall remain this side of the second coming of Jesus.

The problem with the Jews was they had the voice of the prophets. They refused to believe the humble Messiah was the fulfillment of their prophecies. Thus the voice of the prophets was silenced. Do we have a similar problem with the voice of the prophet? Folks don't like it when the voice of the prophet is brought to their attention. The

⁵ E. G. White, Sermon, March 8, 1890, Battle Creek, Michigan. *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, pp. 595, 596.

voice of the prophet is our history. Our history still speaks. It's voice will not be silenced until there is an answering chord from God's people. The prophet's words are on the record. Since God inspired them they cannot be silenced. God's wounded heart requires a response.

As is so often the case, God has been wounded in the house of His friends. Paul reminded his Jewish listeners, "And though they found no cause of death in Him, yet desired they Pilate that he should be slain." Acts 13:28. The Jews and the Roman Pilate were the immediate actors upon the scene to instigate the murder of Christ. Here the church united with the State to justify His execution, legally, by the laws of the land. But in so doing they merely revealed the enmity within the human heart toward God. This is the great barrier of separation between humanity and God, even religious man. Had we been there as participants, our heart's enmity against God would have demanded His crucifixion. That is the nature of man. That is sin in its awful reality. It will murder the Son of God or in lieu of that will question, and reject His truth, because it goes against our cherished opinions.

But the reality is that God will never stand for that. You may crucify God, but He will bring it right back around to you again. "But God raised Him from the dead." Acts 13:30. This vindication of His condemned Son by God the Father is the "glad tidings" which was "the promise" "made unto the fathers." Acts 13:32. The resurrection from eternal death is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The resurrection of Jesus is connected with an enthronement text from the Psalms, indicating that the Father has highly exalted His Son, in triumphing over His enemies of sin, death, the devil, and wicked men. "Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee." Acts 13:33 (quoting Psalm 2:7). We understand this to mean that the resurrection was the significant moment in the process of installing Christ as co-ruler with the Father on His throne, and to represent the human race as their High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary.

And, then, we have the wonderful quotation from Isaiah 55:3 in the context of the resurrection. "And as concerning that He raised Him up from the dead, now no more to return to corruption, He said on this wise, I will give you the sure mercies of David." Acts 13:34. The sure mercies of David embrace the resurrection of the dead. God made great promises to David, but none of them could be fulfilled except by

the resurrection, and David so understood them. He confessed that he was a stranger and a sojourner as all his fathers—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were. Psalm 29:12. Now all that say such things declare that they seek a better country, that is an heavenly. Christ is the Son of David, and He is to sit upon the throne of His father David, and to “reign over the house of Jacob for ever.” Luke 1:31-33. But the fact that the sure mercies of David are performed only through Christ and the resurrection, shows that everybody who believes and accepts Christ has a share in them; for Christ died and rose again for all. Whoever accepts the Gospel becomes a member of the house of David, a subject of the kingdom of Israel.

There is not a monarchy in history that has adopted children that stand to succeed to the throne. However, we are adopted by Christ and are legitimate children, standing in right of succession to His throne.

The bottomline of this proclamation of Paul’s addresses the core problem of our alienation from God which is sin. Through this Man your sins have been pardoned. See verse 39: “Men and brethren” “through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins.” This is a universal gift to every person. This is what legally justifies our life and existence on earth. The cross legitimizes our existence legally before the throne of God. This gift is to every individual: man, woman and child. “Through this man,” *i.e.*, in [*dia*] Christ, we are all in Him.

And then Paul makes the subjective appeal to every human heart listening. And his sermon did reach their hearts so that they had to make a decision. “And by Him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses.” Acts 13:39. To the one who believes that Christ “was raised again for our justification” (Rom. 4:25), he presently experiences what was legally declared by the Son’s resurrection, “Thou art my Son.” There is a sense in which when we are born again and appreciate what it cost for our sins to be forgiven by the death of Jesus, that a legal declaration is made by God that we are pardoned; and that experience has a profound effect upon our assurance of salvation in Christ.

This is not “do and live;” it is God’s covenant, “believe and live.” We say, Amen, to God’s promise. It is not justification by works of the law of Moses which was the Jew’s problem. It is not justification by faith and works which is our problem. All the works done to keep the law and minute details worked out in the spirit of prophecy cannot save

because it is simply our works. But the simple, Amen, in response to God's promise, is the faith that saves, because it is the Christ of resurrection power from the dead who alone can do the works of God in our life. The minute details that Jesus wants worked out in us, is His work to perform. So let us not hinder the Master Shepherd in his office work as High Priest to deliver us from our sins and perfect our characters as He sees fit.

Paul's sermon had a profound effect upon the hearts of his listeners. They were strangely warmed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They were "persuaded" "to continue in the grace of God." Acts 13:43. He received instant feedback. They wanted him in the pulpit the next Sabbath (vs. 44).

I don't care how powerful the message of Christ is proclaimed, there will always be someone who will stand up against it and seek to influence the minds of others to reject it. This is all done out of selfish motivation to control the minds of people. "The Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy, and spake against those things which were spoken by Paul, contradicting and blaspheming." Acts 13:45. Some of the Jews who zealous stood for the promises given to David as beneficial only to their racial group or convert God-fearers, were offended by Paul's application of the covenant promise of the forgiveness of sins given to the Gentile pagans. To them this was an offense.⁶ So they allowed their prejudices to stand in the way of their receiving Jesus.

The gift of Christ was given first to the Jews. They were "ordained to eternal life" (vs. 48); but they "put it from you" and judged themselves "unworthy of everlasting life" (vs. 46). They put a stop to the work of Christ for them. They hindered His atoning work on their behalf. However, the Gentiles received it gladly "and glorified the word of the Lord: and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed." Acts 13:48. Thus this proves that God has elected everyone to be saved, including the Gentiles; and they made their calling and election sure by believing the word preached unto them. They judged themselves worthy of everlasting life. Do you so judge yourselves worthy? That is, do you see that Jesus is the Worthy One in whom you have been elected to salvation?

⁶ John J. Kilgallen, "Hostility to Paul in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 14,45)—Why?" *Biblica* 84 (2003), pp. 1-15.

A sentence in the diary of James Gilmore, pioneer missionary to Mongolia, has stayed with me. After years of laboring long and hard for the cause of Christ in that desperate land, he wrote, "In the shape of converts I have seen no result. I have not, as far as I am aware, seen anyone who even wanted to be a Christian."

Earlier in his ministry he expressed his dreams and burdens for the people of Mongolia. Handwritten in his journal are these dreams: "Several huts in sight. When shall I be able to speak to the people? O Lord, suggest by the Spirit how I should come among them, and in preparing myself to teach the life and love of Christ Jesus."

The love of God for you, dear soul, is a big idea. I pray that your mind can begin to wrap around it and thus judge yourself worthy in Christ for eternal life.