

Sabbath School Today
With the 1888 Message Dynamic

The Book of Acts
Lesson 13: Journey to Rome

Soon after his arrival in Rome, following his policy of going to the Jews first, Paul invited the Jewish leaders to hear him state his innocence and explain his arrest (Acts 28:17-21). His purpose was to create an atmosphere of truth that allowed him to share the gospel. The results were mixed: some believed, and some did not (vs. 24). Paul then took the good news to the Gentiles. Paul had a “big idea”: that the gospel would unite Jews and Gentiles.

Here’s another “big idea” too big for reality: “Preach so that the people can catch hold of big ideas.” [1] Can the teaching of Seventh-day Adventists electrify the world? Can it hit the front pages of newspapers and get on the evening news? Can it “lighten the earth with glory” (Rev. 18:1, 2)? Can we be what the Lord told Abraham his descendants would be—“a blessing” to all nations? Are we somebody important-to-be?

The answer has to be an unswerving Yes!

Such a “big idea” does not convert the world—that won’t happen, we know, but for sure it’s a proclamation of truth so clear that it acts upon warring populations as that “other angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God” (Rev. 7:2). “With a loud voice” he commands the four angels to hold their four winds of warfare, hatred, and strife, until God “seal[s His] servants. ... in their foreheads” (vss. 1-3). (An “angel,” remember, = a “most precious” message.) Don’t let the message be muffled—there may be tragic consequences.

The sealing message has a direct effect on the “holding” of terrorism and international strife. Two world wars and numerous others, for example, can testify to negligence in proclaiming that special message which prepares a people for the close of probation—the sealing message. “In a great degree” it eluded us. Our God-given task is specific: prepare a people for the second coming of Christ and do it in this generation. If we will do so, the Lord has promised He will do His part: He will tell those “four angels,” “*Hold! Hold! Hold!*” their “four winds” until the sealing work is completed. [2] This should happen now, not wait another century for us to wake up and do it.

During the “two whole years” (Acts 28:30) that Paul spent in house arrest during his imprisonment in Rome, he wrote the four “prison letters”: Philemon, Colossians, Ephesians, and Philippians; all of which mention his incarceration.

The theme of Ephesians and Colossians is that God’s “mystery,”—the sealing message—and the salvation of Jew and Gentile in the same body (Col. 3:11, 15; Eph.

2:16; 3:1-6), has been revealed through the death of Jesus on the cross. In Ephesians, Paul states that redemption and reconciliation took place “in His flesh” (Eph. 2:15).

What does Paul’s letter to the Ephesians have to do with the God’s sealing work at the end-time?

Much, because Ephesians 3 in particular is concerned with God’s people reaching the zenith of character development which means being “filled with all the fullness of God” (vs. 19). That’s not perfection of the flesh (which is a heresy!) but Christlikeness of character—manifested in the church as a body. That’s why Ephesians belongs with Daniel and Revelation; it’s a message for the last days proclaimed by the Bride-to-be of Christ. This idea of something happening in the church, which is also “by the church” (Eph. 3:10)—repentance in and of the church as a body. Long said to be impossible, it has to come, and it will.

That means the sealing message is not proclaimed by a handful of zealots scattered almost invisible in the church, but it’s by the corporate body of the church. It means the church will at last be united in their understanding of the message! In other words, it’s God’s purpose that the entire body of the church be united in their heart-appreciation for the sacrifice of Christ as no corporate body in history has been so united, so grown-up in their understanding of the atonement. At last, they comprehend something—what it cost the Son of God to save this world. And that constrains them.

What Sunday-keeping churches just can’t see.

Paul’s prayer is that we might comprehend the grand dimensions of this *agape*-love of Christ (Eph. 3:14-19). It’s no fault of theirs they can’t see it—the false doctrine of natural immortality they inherited from Romanism (and eventually paganism) hides their eyes from “comprehending” the kind of death Christ died on His cross. We have yet to become united in our understanding of what happened there, but the Holy Spirit is working. We have a unique new covenant message to proclaim to “all nations.” It will arrest the attention of every honest soul in the world.

Was Paul’s gospel self-propagating? It seems that it did have its own built-in power pack. It motivated people even to the point of being thought extravagantly zealous: “If we are out of our mind ... [or] in our right mind, ... Christ’s love [*agape*] compels us, because we are convinced that One died for all, and therefore all died. And He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves” (2 Cor. 5:13-15, *New International Version*).

In other words, they sensed a motivation fueled by something special they saw in the sacrifice of Christ. Once you grasped what had happened, you just couldn’t sit still. The tongue-tied had to talk, and the timid grew bold (Isa. 32:4; Zech. 12:8). You saw the Messiah to be the second Adam; He died “for all.” That meant—if He had not died, *you would be dead*. Since He became corporately one with the human race, “all died” in Him; from now on nobody *could* go on “living for themselves.” You could no longer think

that you belonged to yourself, or that anything you possessed was yours. With one divine sword-stroke, the Gordian knot of human self-centered concern was cut. The cross did it.

A new purpose for living took over.

If you believed this self-propagating gospel, you just *had* to live “for Him who died” for you, and it wasn’t fear or hope-of-reward that moved you. Materialism, sensuality, all self-centered motivations, were transcended by this phenomenal new reason for living. You saw yourself eternally in debt to the Son of God. And the idea caught on, because there were honest hearts everywhere. Jews and Gentiles came out of nowhere, ready to respond.

This understanding of what the cross meant first burst on people’s minds at Pentecost. “Ye denied the Holy One and the Just,” cried Peter. “[Ye] killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses. ... Repent ye therefore and be converted” (Acts 3:14, 15, 19). And they *did* repent, and they were converted. “The truth in *agape*” compelled multitudes to respond—3000 in one day.

This was “the former rain.” Today we await “the latter rain.” That self-propagating gospel at Pentecost accompanied Christ’s beginning work in heaven as High Priest. Now His closing work in the cosmic Day of Atonement will be accompanied by a fully developed “everlasting gospel” that will “lighten the earth with glory.” The same cross-exalting motivation will fuel that final burst of soul-winning.

—Paul E. Penno

Endnotes:

[1] cf. Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, p. 169.

[2] Ellen G. White, *Early Writings*, p. 38.

Notes:

Pastor Paul Penno’s video of this lesson is on the Internet at:

<https://youtu.be/i-1YLS6ktx8>

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