

Okay, I want to speak, not to you, but to a large number of people. For those of you who will turn this on someday and listen to it, I am in Greater Atlanta, in a small town just outside of Atlanta. I think we're south of the west of the city. It's a place called Lithia Springs...Stone Springs. And there's a small group of bold, brave, foolish Christians in the room with me. But this is not a message just for Lithia Springs. I'm hoping that anybody who ever steps out of the institutional church will one day hear this.

I'm going to read two passages of scripture to you: the kind of scriptures you would pass over and think nothing of. One of them is in Acts 18. The other one is in Acts 19, and you will find that they are very, very similar in their context. So, here's the 18th one. It is 18:17, and the background is Paul's last days in the city of Corinth. He was there 18 months, and just as he was about to leave, there was a great stir in the city. Some really angry people went out to find Paul to beat him. Well, I don't know where Paul was, but he wasn't where he should have been. At least they knew where he was supposed to be, and he wasn't there. And this is what happened as a result. Then they seized, all of them seized Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue, and they beat him.

Here's chapter 19. This is 19:28-29, "When they heard this, they were filled with rage and began to cry out, 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians.'" Now, this is also the last day Paul is in Ephesus. The other is the last day he is in Corinth. He had a way of leaving town, always in trouble. So, the last church that he started in Corinth, well, anyway, let's see the story that we're reading here would be around 19, the year 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, and then this one would be in 58, and it ends the same way, and here it is. So, the city was filled with confusion, and they rushed all together into the amphitheater, and they dragged in Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were with Paul and his traveling companions. Paul wanted to go in, but his friends stopped him. Could you imagine what the point is? I want you to listen. We're going to talk about this for about an hour and a half. The point is, this is what happens to dear innocent people; they are nothing but bystanders. This is what happens to innocent and uninvolved people. This is what happens to those who run around with church planters. One of them got beaten, and the other two got dragged into the amphitheater in Ephesus...dragged in. They had absolutely nothing to do with the way they were mistreated. These were people out looking for Paul and taking their fury out on somebody who was a bystander.

The first thing I want to do is make a simple statement to you and to everybody who listens to this. The heart of man is desperately wicked, and it hasn't changed in our day. Unethical things are happening constantly. There is no way in this world to prevent it. Being a nice, sweet Christian doesn't help the situation one bit. Unethical, unjust. It's abroad in the land. It's in our bloodstream. It's who man is.

Now, I'm going to start in the Old Testament and do this really quickly. Abraham had to gather a group and raise a small army to stand against some folks to free one of his kinfolk. Isaac had married a young lady, but had to work for seven years before he could marry her, and that was to his own uncle Laban, and this was just good Hebrew practice. He was, for all practical purposes,

made a slave. David is turned into not much more than an animal when Saul, jealous of him, begins trying to hunt him down and kill him like a dog. We come to the prophets, and we find Jeremiah in a pit. I always figured he was up to about here in mud, the pit of the miry clay. They threw him in there, and he had nothing to do but stand there in the mud. What is hard for us to really identify with is that all this stuff gets romanticized, right up until it enters your life. John the Baptist had his head cut off with jealousy. Even when Jesus first began His ministry, a group of Pharisees and Sadducees came out into the wilderness. Saints, this is so typical. This is not just something in the Old Testament or the New Testament; it's right here, right now. Let's see what's the latest thing going on, and then the religious people come to inspect it. When they did this with John, he called them a bunch of vipers. When Jesus began, He was under the scrutiny of those in charge of religion.

Peter is about to be beheaded. James has already been... It's Easter... we'd call it an Easter festival... by one of Herod the Great's sons, and he is pleasing the Jews. He's going to have Peter's head chopped off the next day. The church is praying, God love them. Peter is sound asleep. I guess he's learned a little bit from his Lord, who was himself crucified on a cross just recently. This is where this kind of man ends up. Peter was asleep. Now, when all of us read these stories, we immediately identify with them, but I guess really, we shouldn't. It was just Peter in that prison, asleep. There were thousands of Christians that night, both afraid and praying, but only Simon Peter was in trouble, and he was asleep.

Now, I'm going to use a term that will go on throughout the rest of this message. Peter obviously had a comfort zone that most of us could never obtain. He was sound asleep just before he was going to get his head chopped off. I think we could all agree that most of us would be awake that night, wouldn't we? So, I'm going to say this to all of you. Where is your comfort zone? Some of us have a very low comfort zone, and when it gets violated, we're uncomfortable. Keep that in mind. Our endurance level. How much can we endure? We're going to look at Paul and find out that we have just so much that we can endure. We have a scale. You endure that much. We get to that point, and that's it. Then there's the stress level. The endurance and the stress level...how much stress can we bear before we have to stop and bail out? I want to go through Paul's life now.

About 47 years ago, I was a young minister, and I did something that I don't know why nobody else ever thought of, but it sure did get me a lot of trouble. I decided to read Paul's life through his letters, in the order he wrote them. So, I was reading his letters in the order he wrote them, not the way they're in your Bible, and I began to realize, my goodness, some of those letters got written right in the middle of the book of Acts, where you could turn to a verse and say right there is where Paul wrote a letter. The first one is Acts 15:40. You write a little note. Now Luke didn't leave a little note and say, "By the way, right about here, Paul wrote a letter," because Paul didn't even know those letters he was writing would ever be called part of the New Testament. But right there is the first letter he ever wrote, the first letter ever written, the first piece of Christian literature ever written, and this goes on through Paul's life. When you begin reading his letters in the order they're in, something happens that you can never get through Bible study. I don't care who you are, what you know, because Paul's letters are in absolute chaos. Total absolute jumble. They cannot

be comprehended as a whole, but when you put them in their proper order, and then you get Luke helping you, the story emerges, and you can date the years. One of us here in this room, sitting over at that door, can even tell us what was happening in the Roman Empire in those particular years.

So, if we say that Paul wrote Galatians in Acts 15:40, that's I'm sorry, that's a verse of scripture, not a date. That's in the spring of the year 50. We can ask our brother what was happening in the spring of 50, and he'll be able to tell you right away what happened. So, you get even more context here, and all of this begins to move. Did you know that nobody living on the earth at that time knew that Paul was a great man? Barnabas would have never left Paul if he had known what great esteem he is looked upon today. I'm going to quote a statement. "He could not possibly be important because I know him." Do you ever read stories about things that happen, and they ask the man, "Why did you let him through? Why did this happen? Why did you do something like this?" And his answer was, "Well, I never expected anything like this big to happen and be in my life." So many things have been gotten away with in human history because the guard, the keeper, or whatever knew that he was nobody and therefore nothing could happen to him. Therefore, he was not expecting anything great to happen. Are you following what I'm saying?

Well, Paul is not a great man if you know him, because you and I are not expecting to ever have Paul in our lives. Paul of Tarsus must have had the worst reputation among Jewish Christians. He was out there with the Gentiles. First of all, he's running around the uncircumcised, unclean heathen. What is that man? Where? Where did you say he went? He got up. He got beaten up there, didn't he? And the sons are just like him. As soon as he got saved, Paul was beaten in Damascus, and he had never even done anything. The only thing he did was preach in a synagogue in Damascus. And Damascus, I'm sorry, the rulers of the synagogue had the right to beat people. They got hold of him, and they gave him a good beating. Well, a little bit later, they have him, the whole city is guarded, and they're trying to catch him and kill him. You know the story you heard as a little child: he was let down in a basket and got away. He came down something called the Royal Highway to Jerusalem to try to meet Peter. He tried to meet the apostles, but they were all in hiding because persecution was underway in Jerusalem. Folks, these are not the kind of people you want to run around with. They're born to trouble like the stark sparks fly upward. So, Paul gets into Jerusalem. He can't see the apostles. They're all in hiding. He meets Peter, James, and John for 15 days, but he's not hiding. He's not an apostle. So he goes over to the libertine, the free synagogue, the synagogue of free Jewish people who come there from the rest of the world and not Israel, and he begins preaching in that very synagogue where Stephen is stoned to death, and lo and behold, the brothers in Jerusalem have to sneak him out of the city because the folks in the synagogue want to kill him just like they did Stephen. He's taken back home, and he disappears in Tarsus, way up the coastline. In fact, the coastline goes like this, and it curves like that. There's Tarsus right at the curve.

He's minding his own business when Barnabas shows up and says, "I would like for you to come down to Antioch. You told me that you've been called to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. Well,

I got a bunch of them you can preach to.” So, he comes to Antioch with him. He's there for several years; as far as we can tell, this dear brother lives in peace longer than at any other time in any time we know about him. He and Barnabas set out on their first church-planting journey. They leave Antioch, and they go to Cyprus. You will not find this in any history book, but it is an ancient legend of Cyprus that Paul went to the town of old Pathos. He preached in the synagogue, and the synagogue leaders grabbed him and beat him, stretched him out over a pillar, a broken pillar, and beat him. Now, he's already been beaten once. He's got...when we hear him speaking about these things that happened to him in the past in 2 Corinthians, we were missing one of the beatings. I don't know where he got beaten, but the people in Cyprus, to this day, can take you to that pillar over which he was bent and beaten, they say. So, I'm going to buy into that and say, "Well, we don't know anywhere else. It sounds reasonable." That's what the Cyprians believe. So, he's just getting started on his journey, and he's gotten beaten.

Now he sails up to Pamphylia and then goes 4,000 ft. above sea level to a plateau called Galatia. He gets run out of the first town. He gets run out of the second town. You know what happened in the third town? Yes, you do. The third town was Lystra, and he was stoned to death, they thought. You know, one of the people who stood over his body that day was Barnabas, and they thought he was dead, but I think there was another one there, too. He was about 18 years old, looking down at that bloody, beat-up body. His name was Timothy. He's from Lystra. This is not in the Bible, but it stands to reason, and I wonder what he was thinking when he looked at that beaten, emaciated, bloody, stoned body. I set him (Timothy) down to be 20 years old on the day he got converted. Okay, let's make him 18. I don't want to go any earlier than that, for the simple reason that Paul wouldn't have a 14-year-old kid go with him. Because, on his second journey, he had him circumcised and went with him, which would put him around 20, but I'm not putting him older than 20 when he leaves with Paul. So that takes me back to 17, 18. If Timothy hadn't been standing there, he would have seen him before the day was over, because poor little Paul...the man's got no good sense. You know what he did? He got up, walked back into the city, and talked to the church. Then they bathed him, and somewhere that day, Timothy, who got saved on that first journey, looked at that man.

Now, folks, look, I'm trying to de-romanticize this. This man is beginning to look like a religious nut. You may want to make him a hero all you wish, but that church he started is now in trouble. The church he started before that was in trouble, and the church he started before that was in trouble. In this one, he got stoned within an inch of his life. The reason I brought up Timothy's age is that I want you to know whether you make him 17 that day, 18, 19, 15, 16, it doesn't matter. Years later, when Paul said, "Let no man despise your youth, Timothy," he was approximately 40 years old. Oh, you have no idea how many sweet little old ladies were really upset because their son got saved and gave up the gods, and how she told her next-door neighbor this evil, wicked man came into our city and stole our...a thousand years our family has been worshipping...The Jews came right in here in that synagogue, sitting right there in that bench, and turned all those Gentiles, those God-fearers, took them right out there in that forum out there, and let them over

there in this know one of these religious cults is going. Saints, the man is surrounded by controversy and the problems he creates in other people's lives, but here's one thing I want to say to him: his stress level is virtually nonexistent. His comfort zone is infinite. His ability to tolerate is beyond anything I have ever known in my life or ever heard about anywhere in this world except one man, and that's Prem Pradhan. We'll get to that in a minute.

Well, this was a good time to turn around and go home. You got a bloody back. You're half dead. You probably got big bruises all over your body. So, he goes to the next city, Derbe, and starts another church. Brothers and sisters, you never met a man like this, and I'm going to tell you something else. You shouldn't because these people are so rare. They come once in the millions, and if you're part of their life, they become your greatest nightmare. All the churches started by Paul of Tarsus on that first church-planting journey paid the price of knowing who the man was. Did it ever occur to you that Barnabas never went with Paul on the second journey? Did it ever occur to you that Silas did not go with Paul on another journey? Now, I'm trying to tell you that this man is mad. He has no comfort zone. He has no stress level. And his ability to endure just keeps on coming.

Now, I'm going to tell you what he did when he got home from the first one. He sat down and said, "That's enough of that. I'm not going to do this anymore. It's enough." He went by and told the saints in Jerusalem how and asked how they were doing. Then went down to Antioch and saw the brothers and sisters there. Then he took off on his second journey. Well, he started the church in Philippi. He fared much better in Philippi than anywhere else. They dragged him before the magistrates who were sitting on something called a Bema, and they beat Silas and Paul without even asking what crime they had committed. Now saints, there's nothing in this world that will get to you and make you bitter more than injustice, and those men are beaten bloody, hauled off to a rock...a big sheer rock like this has been carved out of stone, and they are in this small prison, and there's an earthquake. Who do you figure started that song? Silas or Paul? I say it was Paul. It's for the simple reason that Silas didn't go with him on the next journey. I have a notion that Silas looked over at him and said, "You've got to be out of your mind."

Can you imagine what his back looked like by then? This has got to be at least his third or fourth beating. Now, you can get beaten two ways. You can get beaten with rods. That's merciful. The other one is with something called the cat of nine tails, which has rock and glass buried up in its little, little tails. Paul's back had to not only look horrible, but I have a notion that he screamed bloody murder when they poured salt into the stripes. How do you know he did? Because that was the only way people knew, in that day, to stop an infection. Have you ever had salt poured into an open wound? You have? It's excruciating.

Okay, this is his second journey. So, he goes to Thessalonica, raises up a church, and then goes to Berea. I want you to get a picture of this, please. Don't look at Paul, look at the men, the Thessalonian Jewish people who had already raised the city against Paul, and then go over to Berea and tell the Jews there what kind of a man he is in Thessalonica. I want to pause here and tell you

about a movement in America from the late 1880s to the early 1900s called the Berean movement. The Bereans were more noble than others, for they searched the scripture. Well, that's not really true. The Jews search the scripture. Those Gentiles are not going to get near a Torah or any other Scripture. So, they should have said the Jewish people in Berea were more noble than the Jewish people in other cities because they searched the Scripture, but the Gentiles did not have access. There's no Jew in this world who would let a Gentile get near holy writ.

What happens in Berea? There is a plot against Paul, and God bless these brand-new Christians. Just got saved. Love those people. They, a group of them, brothers and sisters, took him out of town, took him over to a ship or a boat, and helped him get all the way to Athens. They were brand new Christians. That boat pulled out with Paul on it. I can't help but wonder if one of them was glad to get rid of that man. He is not only being treated this way; very few people in the world are, and they have to be driven by something; most people never see anyone so driven in all their lives.

Now, Paul arrives in Athens, and he finds nothing but peace there. They poke fun at him. They call him a seed-picker. Now, a seed-picker is somebody who has just got into Athens, and he's going around to the different kinds of philosophical schools picking up something here and there and then sounding like he's a philosopher. An ignorant man going around just getting something else, and something else, and something else, and that's who Paul was, and this is how the world looked upon Paul, by philosophers. Nobody beat Paul in Athens. They are above such needs. Philosophers do not get their hands dirty. They "philosophize," and if something were to happen that looked like they might have to do this, they would make sure they either disappeared or philosophized some more about whatever the danger was. I'm going to prove that in a minute.

Now, Paul goes down to Corinth, and he has 18 months of peace, and then people in the city get mad at him, and poor old Sosthenes gets beaten in the presence of Gallio, who I believe was the first cousin to the emperor at that time; and he (Sosthenes) got just a really good beating. Now folks, he's no Paul Tarsus. Paul Tarsus gets beaten, you know, annually. How would you like to be Sosthenes? I was dusting benches off at the synagogue, and they knew that Paul was a Jew, and they knew where the synagogue was, and they came in here and grabbed me and dragged me through the street, and then beat me in front of an entire amphitheater. Probably mostly by the fact that they were both Jews. Saints, it does not pay to run around with Paul Tarsus.

Okay, that's Corinth. Now then, things are getting pretty bad. It is almost exactly at this time, a little earlier than this, that a group of people in Galilee, peasants, form a secret society, and they earn the name daggersmen because they're getting fed up with all of the emperors who've been thrashing Israel. So, here's what they do. They have a little short dagger they keep under their toga, and then during a festival, they'll go up to either some Roman or more likely some devout Jew who's doing business with the Romans, walk up to him, and stab him, and then walk away and scream, "Somebody stabbed that man." They earned the title of daggersmen, Sicarii, but the only people they are murdering are Jews who are doing business with Romans, or Romans. And the next person they're after is Simon Peter because Simon Peter has defied the laws of Moses. But

pretty soon after a passage of a few years, they realize that there's a man out in the field who's desecrating the laws of Moses worse than anyone, and his name is Paul of Tarsus.

Paul begins to get wind that he may one day be on the prayer list of the Sicarii. The Sicarii will decide on a name. They do it a lot. They do it by vote, and whoever gets the next highest votes is the one they're going to kill next. What they do is then they pray for the man's soul. I'm telling you the truth. So, Paul comes home from Corinth, but he doesn't go directly home. He sits down with Priscilla and Aquila, and I'm wondering why Priscilla and Aquila are running around with this man. He talks to them in the church, and Paul says, "Aquila, you're a Roman. Priscilla, you're a Roman. Priscilla says, "I was born in Rome. I grew up in Rome. I belong to the royalty of Rome." Paul says, "Priscilla, would you be willing to sell your home in Corinth and move to Ephesus? It's going to be a while before I get there, but I want you to start attending the synagogue." So, they agree. They sail over to Asia Minor and go to Ephesus. She buys a home. He speaks in the synagogue and is very, very well received; nobody has ever heard of him. News doesn't travel real fast in that world unless you eventually become Paul of Tarsus, and then it begins to get blistering fast. He leaves there with Priscilla and Aquilla. He goes to Jerusalem again, goes home, and then begins gathering some men. You know the story, and he comes to Ephesus with the six men. One of them was Aristarchus, who was beaten up, and another one was Gaius from Derbe. There's Timothy, and there's Titus, and Secundus. He's got six, and he begins training them.

Now, I've already read what happened after being there for 2.5 years. The silversmiths grab Aristarchus and Gaius and drag them into the amphitheater. Now, when they say "drag," I think we'd better take them literally. These were very unhappy people who were trying to hurt Paul. I'm telling you folks, the man to speak kindly of him: Paul of Tarsus was deranged. This man has got something not hooked up and right in him. He wants to go face the entire crowd of 24,000 people in the amphitheater, yelling, "Great is the goddess, Diana," and they literally hold him back and keep him from it. You know, the only thing that man could think of was 24,000 Gentiles; I could preach the Gospel. Forget my beaten back. Forget the screaming hate raging, and forget poor old Aristarchus and Gaius. I've got to get in there and preach the Gospel.

I want you to know that when Paul got out of there, the brothers and sisters in Ephesus were greatly hated. I think I can say, from having looked at this so much, that the saints in Thessalonica were literally ostracized by the community, the society in Thessalonica. I have a notion they couldn't get a job unless they hired one another. I'm going to tell you what, these people are also crazy. When Paul and Silas were preaching in Thessalonica, they began spinning yarns about the early persecution of the church in Jerusalem. They say, and Paul quotes them: "Boy, we could get persecuted." Paul, when he writes the letter to him, says, "You asked for it, and you're rejoicing within God." So, saints, if you ever run around with a Paul of Tarsus, you'd better learn how to rejoice. Now, I want to come back to your comfort zone. I want to come back to your stress level. I want to come back and ask about your endurance.

Now I want to tell you something. Every man and woman in this country operates within their comfort zone, and their stress level, and if they get in a situation where that stress level gets too high, or that comfort zone gets breached, they'll find another job, they'll move to another town, or they will come up with a new philosophy or a new theology. Someone very wisely said, and this is off the subject, a man's theology will change according to his morals. I thought that was profound, and I have never seen anyone disprove that statement. But the same thing is true whether we realize it or not: we are captive to our stress level and our comfort zone, and we make our ambitions, we live our lives, we develop our convictions to match them. We don't know that, but we will not get far outside that comfort zone or stress level.

Gene, are you saying that in a condemnatory fashion? No, ma'am. I am saying that by revelation. You won't hear me use that word very often. I learned something—that I must honor how God made us all. Now, please look over here at Cindy. How high do you figure Cindy's stress level is? Is she going to preach on the streets? Is she going to get her back beaten four, five, six, seven, eight, nine times? Cindy, I don't mean to in any way; I'm trying to make a point. Cindy, you and I know that you're not going to do that because God made you the way you are, and I understand that I have to honor Cindy the way God made her. That's one of the reasons I'm talking to you right now. We make the mistake, we Christian workers, especially the nutty ones...I'm not speaking of myself...I'm done with the nuts out there. (laughter) To think that all Christians should live the way Paul of Tarsus lived. Is that not the impression that we kind of get a byproduct of a secondary, "Paul did this, and he did this, and we'd better that." It's not true. God did something in Paul's mother's womb, but I'm going to turn that around right quick and tell you this. You should also recognize that, every once in a while, God sends one of these crazy people around, and you cannot match his stress level, his comforts, or his endurance. What you can do is the same thing they did, and I don't think anybody's ever heard this statement made before. You can help him. You want to know what else you can do? Don't make life any harder on him than he's already having to deal with, and I'll get to that in a minute. Personally, I'm not asking for pity or help. I happened to know and knew when I signed up for this job exactly what I was getting into. I'd already read Paul's letters in their chronological order.

Every once in a while, running around with these kinds of men, you'll get pressed out of your comfort zone. Every once in a while, you get pressed out of your stress level, but I'm going to tell you something: that's good for you. It really is. This will cause you to grow. It's a privilege and a work of God in His transforming nature to do this in our lives, to put us in a situation that we ourselves cannot contain. It is better that you embrace that than start blaming God for how you're being treated. Now I would like to say this for Paul Tarsus and Gene Edwards, so you don't start blaming them.

The story is here, saints. These things have to happen. It's built into the very song of the universe. It's in the very bloodstream of creation. Every once in a while, one of these crazy people has to come around, and they have to change things, and always, the system of the world will rise up and cause unmitigated...the belches of hell upon them. It's just the way it is. I think I'm being as even-

handed here as I'm capable of. I know that I'm supposed to protect you, but you also need to know that if you're going to run around with me, some of the mud's going to get splashed on you. I don't know what your job is. Your job is to, I suppose, not get bitter and embrace and grow. I know what mine is. It just doesn't get better.

I wrote this down. You'll find it in a book. When a man has been through a church split once, he bails out. A few will survive two. A few will survive three, but nobody in the ministry is going to keep on going when he goes through four splits. Somewhere around 50 or 60, these are my exact words, 50 or 60, he will bail out. I am 75 years old, and I have been at least through 13. I'm not going to give them the privilege of making me bitter. These are the fields in which we grow. There are a lot of different people I'm a little bit afraid of, but one of them is people who think they are one of these people with this kind of stress level, but then they become judges. They don't get into stressful situations, but they judge...I'll tell you what I'd do if I were him...I'd do that a little bit better than he did. I told you that we've lost over half our churches in the last five years, and almost every one of them follows the same pattern. In fact, they all follow the same pattern except for one, and I'll tell you about that.

We have now come to the end of Paul's life. He went to Jerusalem. Somebody thought that he had seen Trophimus, a Gentile, in the temple in Jerusalem, because his head was shaved - thought he was the same person - and he yelled out to some bystander there, "Paul of Tarsus is in this place, and that man's a Gentile. He's desecrating the temple," and everybody in that town wanted to kill him, anyway; read the story. The church feared for his (Paul's) life, the church in Jerusalem, the Christians, the Jews there. I would like to know what their opinion of this man was. He's coming in from his third journey, and he always returns to Jerusalem to report. This time, he doesn't get to. Brothers gather up with him and say, "You're hated in this city. The daggersmen are present. They're here to kill you."

Well, they drag Paul out. I assume that those other four or five men were taking a vow. Somebody help me. Is it five? I think it's five men. He paid for vows for them to fast, and they probably all got beaten up, too; they all had their hands shaved. But here's all these people crammed down all the streets yelling, screaming, bloody murder, and the Romans have a way, when somebody's causing a problem, you don't ask who he is; the first thing you do is you beat him. So, the soldiers grab him and start beating him. Paul says, "Do you have the right to beat a Roman citizen?" And the gentleman whose name is mentioned in the Scripture said, "You are a Roman citizen?" I am. I paid for my Roman citizenship." Paul said, "I was born with mine." Then he switches to three languages while talking to him, and the man says, "You're not the Egyptian?" By the way, that Egyptian is also known in history. He said, "No, I'm a Jew." And he said, "I want to speak to these people." He then switched from Greek or maybe Latin to Aramaic and Hebrew. Same thing... a crowd... hot dog; I can preach Jesus Christ to these people. So, the Roman soldier lets him, and he starts telling his story of how he got saved on the Damascus road, and he does really well right up to the resurrection. Well, he's put in prison for a few days, and he's marched out of Jerusalem. This story is so unbelievable. The Romans have taken a liking to Paul, and the number of guards

around him to get him out of town has increased, because a group of men said, "We will never eat again or drink water until he's dead." He was surrounded by about 300 Roman soldiers, and you cannot help but wonder how that guy must have felt who had taken that vow. He can't even see Paul, much less reach him. I assume that he kept that vow and died of starvation.

Do you understand? Let me ask you, what do you think they were talking about in the marketplace the next day? The Jews were talking about this horrible man named Paul, and the Jewish Christians were trying to look around like they never heard of the man. Anyway, Paul goes to prison for two years, then gets on that ship, and spends over a year getting to Rome, and he writes this beautiful letter. Bring me my cloak and some sheepskin; I want to do some writing to try to get there before winter. He's probably no older than 60 years old. Might have been 62. Saints, I wonder what his body looked like. I bet you he was one of the most scarred-up human beings that you and I could imagine. Then he wrote these words to Timothy: "All in Asia Minor have left me."

I was reading this just before I left the institutional church. I was 30 years old. I remember so clearly, I read that, and I said, "Whatever happens, Lord, I'll die a failure. I'm not going to succeed at what I do." That has been a comfort to my life ever since. With a pedal to the metal, not stopping for wood, water, coal, or diesel...that's a southern saying...I always knew I'd fail. How do I know? After all Paul did, the saints in Asia Minor forsook him, and you know something else? I am certain that man was not bitter. He had to be above that, and so, they took him out and chopped his head off. "I finished the course, and I'm waiting for a crown. He was so optimistic, but I have a notion that Paul of Tarsus had no idea there would be around 20 billion copies of his letters. That's part one of this message. We're going to take a 10-minute break, and then we're going to turn the page, and we're going to look at the other half of the story that's right here.

(Continued in Part 2)