

## Purpose of Heart

2 Chronicles 15, Acts 4:19–26

Acts is the inspired history of the first thirty years or so of the Christian church. It was written by Luke the physician, author of the gospel which bears its name. The gospel of Luke ends with an account of Christ's ascension. The book of Acts begins with a more detailed account of the ascension. Acts thus is a continuation of the story of Christ in the gospels. It records how believing Gentiles were brought into the church. Beginning in the book of Genesis, the Jews were God's chosen people; God revealed himself to the Jews so that they in turn could be a light to the nations, and the knowledge of God could fill the earth. The book of Acts records the history of that critical time when God was teaching his people that his saving activity extended to nations. Our text today begins with "the persecution that arose over Stephen" (v. 19).

Recently I read about persecution of Christians at the University of Oklahoma. Several years back, the campus newspaper, the *OU Daily*, led a hysterical crusade against law professor Brian McCall for publishing conservative and Christian views in a book. Subsequently, the University conducted a secret investigation which completely exonerated the professor. But Professor McCall was pressured into resigning his position as associate dean for academic affairs. This culminated in a lawsuit that was settled on confidential terms in 2019.

Now former student Kylee McLaughlin files a lawsuit against the University, alleging that she was "bullied, harassed and discriminated against" and *removed* from the women's volleyball team for having Christian and conservative viewpoints. The Twitter feed for the head volleyball coach at OU headlines a "retweet" from an organization named "volleyequality" that describes itself as "the volleyball community who (*sic*) demands equality among all persons ... we reject racism, homophobia, and discrimination in any form."<sup>1</sup> One might ask, what does any of this have to do with volleyball? Why remove a good player who is an asset to the team because of the sincerely-held convictions of her heart?

The University of Oklahoma has sent a message loud and clear that it has zero toleration for any form of Christian expression. Christians at OU must keep quiet or be rejected. This is persecution.

The persecution of Christians that took place after the stoning of Stephen wasn't pleasant. Many families hastily gathered a few possessions, vacated their homes and fled Jerusalem at great personal hardship. But the official persecution had the effect of scattering the early believers, who went as far as Antioch in Syria and the island of Cyprus, preaching the Word wherever they went. And as we see in our

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.lewrockwell.com/2021/07/david-deming/outrageous-free-speech-violations-at-the-university-of-oklahoma/>

text today, a great number believed and turned to the Lord. The church grows through persecution! Think of it: souls are in heaven today because of the persecution of the early believers in Jerusalem. This should give us encouragement in the present political climate, when Christians and Christian values are increasingly coming under attack. But the church had been forewarned. Jesus said, "In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

But it was not the persecution itself that got the results, it was the early Christians' message which they spread wherever they went. What was it they preached? Note verse 20: they preached "the Lord Jesus." The only valid subject of preaching is Christ! It is Christ alone who changes lives. "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor. 5:17). God doesn't send out preachers to give psychological, sociological or familial advice or human wisdom. He sends them out to preach Christ. Only Christ can change a life from the inside-out and bring about lasting change, breaking the chains of destructive habits and enabling men and women to experience victory over sin and live the abundant life.

We read in verse 21 that the hand of the Lord was with these early believers, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord. Success in evangelism depends on the blessing of God. The church plants and waters, but only God can give the increase. Man tries to come up with techniques and methods that supposedly bring results, such as the altar call, and getting people to sign a decision card before the magnetism of the meeting wears off, but in the end we must reckon with the fact of man's depravity and spiritual deadness. "As in Adam all die" (1 Cor. 15:22). Only God is the Lord and giver of life. Only God can raise the dead. Only God can bring spiritually dead people out of their rebellion and unbelief and bring the light of the gospel to hardened hearts. That is why the church needs to pray for evangelistic work and mission works. That is why the men and women of our presbytery need to pray for our mission works in Grand Rapids, Battle Creek, Dorr and Manistee, Michigan; Merrillville, Indiana; Markdale, Ontario, and for all faithful churches: God, bless the proclamation of your gospel. May your word go forth with power and conviction to change lives, to bring men and women from darkness to light, to bring them to Jesus, to cause them to seek the Lord, to make them into attractive disciples and soul-winners. Lord, build your church, overpower the gates of hell! The Lord did it in the book of Acts, and he can do it again today, as we read in our text: "And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord." Praise the Lord!

In verse 22 we read that the church in Jerusalem sent out Barnabas as a missionary: "they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch." This is instructive. Barnabas was sent out officially as a missionary of the church in Jerusalem. The

church there examined him and concluded that he possessed the requisite character and understanding. When they sent him out (ἐξαπέστειλαν, the same verb as in Gal. 4:4, “when the fullness of the time had come, God *sent forth* His Son”). Just as the Father saw a need to send his Christ, so the church in Jerusalem saw a need to send one of their own, Barnabas, to help out with the work in Antioch. So they sent him out as a missionary. This is the Barnabas who will become the apostle Paul’s travel companion. The text goes on to say that “when he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord.” God is not satisfied with our merely going through the motions of worship and service. He wants us to purpose in our hearts full devotion to the Lord. I think of young Daniel, taken captive from Jerusalem to Babylon, who wanted to remain true the Lord in a hostile environment. “Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king’s delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank; therefore he requested of the chief of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself” (Dan. 1:8). Daniel’s obedience and faithfulness to God began in his heart: he “purposed in his heart.”

So it was with Barnabas. He realized that true obedience begins in a regenerate heart. So he encouraged the new Christians in Antioch “that *with purpose of heart* they should continue with the Lord.” Continuance is the evidence of grace. We read in John 8 what Jesus said to the Jews who professed to believe in him: “If ye *continue* in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed” (John 8:31).

So Barnabas came from Jerusalem to a new field—Antioch—and saw the grace of God there. “When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad.” How had Barnabas “seen” the grace of God? Obviously not directly but reflected in the lives it touched. The gospel was having an effect. It was going out to save sinners—to totally transform them from the inside out. Here is the fruit of the gospel: continuance in the faith. Barnabas “saw” the grace of God and rejoiced. So today the church should rejoice in the grace of God, not in dazzling human performances. Christians get excited about moving music, talented performers, powerful speakers. The purpose of worship is to *meet with* the living Christ, not to be moved by men. The purpose of worship music is not to wow a crowd but to communicate God’s truth, not to draw attention to a performer but to draw attention to Christ. The purpose of a worship service is not to have the participants say, “That was really great!” but to say, “Hallelujah, what a Savior!”

As a godly man and missionary sent out by the church, Barnabas was the kind of person that God’s people ought to listen to. What was Barnabas telling the people? He “encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord”—not merely that they should continue with the Lord, but that they should do it “with purpose of heart.” Christian, you and I ought to serve the Lord purposely. The dictionary defines *purpose* as “the reason for which something is

done or for which something exists.” What is your purpose in life? Some young people seem to live for nothing more than playing computer games. I read the tragic story of a couple who played computer games for hours on end and were so focused on their screens that they neglected their infant daughter for not just hours but days. The infant daughter died in her crib but her parents didn’t know it. She died of malnutrition while they were raising a virtual child in an online game!<sup>2</sup>

Christian, your life-purpose ought to be greater than merely playing computer games! It ought to be something like that of the apostle Paul, who wrote, “for to me, to live is Christ” (Phil. 1:21). The apostle Paul was single-minded; wherever he went, he preached Christ. But we don’t have to be preachers to have that single-mindedness. All of us—preachers and people alike—ought to be single-minded in our pursuit of God and our desire to serve him. Scripture tells us that whether we eat, or drink, or *whatsoever* we do, we are to do it all to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). Yes, God requires each of us to be *that* single-minded! To do less is to be an idolater, to worship and serve another master than Jesus Christ. Barnabas’s advice was spot-on: that believers should continue with the Lord “with purpose of heart.” Every word here is important. To “continue with the Lord” (προσμένειν) means to continue *uninterruptedly*, every moment of every day. Following Christ is a 24/7 proposition, not just one day out of seven, not just when it’s convenient. The demands of discipleship are comprehensive and total.

Norma and I have been reading through 2 Chronicles in our daily reading. Out of all the kings of Israel and Judah, most of them were spiritual washouts, doing evil in the sight of the Lord. Only seven of the kings were good kings, but even some of them turned bad.

Take Joash. Joash did what was right in the sight of the Lord all the days of Jehoiada the priest. He raised the funds to repair the house of the Lord. This was formally a good thing, a good work, though not from the heart, as we will learn. But after the death of his mentor Jehoiada, tragically, Joash left the house of the Lord God of his fathers and served wooden images and idols. Wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem because of this. Moreover, God sent prophets to bring the covenant people back to the Lord, but the people wouldn’t listen. All Joash’s commendable service was not done out of a renewed heart that sought only the glory of God, so it didn’t pass the muster of Scripture. Joash refused to listen to God’s prophets; in the language of the Bible, he would not “give ear” to them. He did not have a renewed heart, or spiritual sight or hearing. He was not born again, and very likely he is in hellfire now for eternity.

Or take Amaziah. Scripture records that he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord. Early in his reign he executed the men who murdered his father, but he did

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<sup>2</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/04/01/korea.parents.starved.baby/index.html>

not execute their children but spared them, following Scripture that specifies that children should not die for the sins of their fathers. This self-restraint and desire to obey Scripture was commendable. Later, he decided to augment his army by hiring 100,000 troops from Israel at great cost—one hundred talents of silver. But a prophet of God came to him and warned him not to go out to battle with covenant breakers, for God would not be with him. Amaziah said, “What about the hundred talents of silver I just spent?” The prophet said, “Obey, and God will make it up to you.” Amaziah listened to the prophet. This was commendable; it was formally a good work, though again not from the heart, as subsequent events prove. For later on, after he had defeated the Edomites, he did the stupidest thing: he set up the Edomites’ gods, took them as his gods, bowed down before them and offered incense to them. He took as his own the gods of a conquered people! God brought another prophet who said to him, “Why have you sought the gods of the people, which could not even rescue their own people from your hand?” A good question! The story of Amaziah demonstrates that worshiping idols is insanity. Amaziah began well—he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord—but he ended badly, as an idolator, as Solomon had done before him.

As Norma and I have been reading 2 Chronicles we have been impressed at the number of references to the heart. The heart is a very important theme in 1 and 2 Chronicles, being mentioned some 58 times in all in these two books. One reads about God’s servants who walk before him with all their *heart*; people returning to God with all their *heart* and all their soul; those who set their *hearts* to seek the Lord God of Israel; a king who did evil, because he did not prepare his *heart* to seek the Lord; the Lord showing himself strong on behalf of those whose *heart* is perfect toward him; another king who prepared his *heart* to seek God; another king who encouraged his people to obey in the fear of the Lord, faithfully, and with a perfect *heart*. When King Hezekiah invited all Israel to observe a great Passover, it is noted that the hand of God gave them *one heart* to do the commandment of the king and the princes. And on and on it goes. This is a big theme in the books of the Chronicles.

There are three references to the heart in our Old Testament reading today, 2 Chronicles 15. At the time of King Asa there was a Spirit-sent revival of true religion. God worked in the hearts of his people so that they entered into a covenant to seek the Lord God of their fathers with all their *heart* and with all their soul. The congregation took an oath of faithfulness to the Lord. It was a time of great rejoicing, for the people had sworn with all their *heart*, and sought him with their whole desire; and he was found of them. Oh, that God might so bless us his church today—that we might truly seek him and find him! But there’s more: “the Lord gave them rest round about”—a time of peace and prosperity, rest from their enemies. Obedience brings blessing!

Isn't it apparent that God is interested in the heart, in our heartfelt obedience? That only heartfelt obedience pleases him? That he is displeased by half-hearted obedience?

What about you? Be honest now, is it your aim to serve God every moment of every day with purpose of heart? If not, why not? Do you not love him? Do you not trust him with your life? Are you too busy, too distracted? Do you consider something else more important than God—your pleasure, your security, your work, your family? If so, then be advised that anything more important to you than God is your god—an idol. According to the Bible, you're an idolater. If you are consistently an idolater, then you are not a Christian. You might be pretending to be one, but you are really not a follower of Christ.

This is an important matter! Take stock of your own life. If something else is more important to you than God, then that is idolatry. It needs to be confessed and forsaken. You need to cry out to God for his grace and mercy. You do not have to continue down the wrong path. Forsake your sin and ask for grace to continue with the Lord with full purpose of heart!

We read in 1 Chronicles 17 that “the heart of Asa was perfect all his days.” The word for “perfect” is *שָׁלֵם*, an adjective related to the word *שָׁלוֹם*, peace—“completeness, soundness, welfare, peace.” Oh, how our fragmented society needs God's peace! We were told that once we had a black president, once it had been proven that a black man could attain the office of the presidency, there would be less racial strife in our society. But today, five years later, the U.S. is more racially polarized than at any time in our history. Oh, how we need the peace of God that passes all understanding to heal our broken land! This kind of peace comes only as a gift from God. May our obedience—as Asa's—be with a perfect heart, a heart transformed by the gospel. Only when the members of a congregation live according to the gospel will it experience “the peace of God that passes all understanding.”

We read in Acts 11:26 that “for a whole year they *assembled* with the church and taught a great many people.” The fundamental thing that the church does is to “assemble together” (*συναχθῆναι*; cf 1 Chron. 15:9–10). This it does at the command of Christ, and when it closes down public worship at the command of anyone else, it dethrones Christ and deprives him of his rightful kingly authority, unlawfully transferring that authority to someone else. That is idolatry—ecclesiastical idolatry which ought to be repented of. The church must always enthrone Christ and reject all usurpers. Jesus Christ is the only king and head of his church, ruling it by his word and Spirit. As Christ's kingdom, the Lord Jesus Christ exercises exclusive sovereignty within its bounds. When a governor usurps power that belongs exclusively to Christ, he or she is to be vigorously resisted. The church's main duty is to *gather*—to gather for worship on the Christian Sabbath at

the call of the elders, coming together into one place to worship the risen Christ. If a governor says, “No, you can’t,” the church must answer with one voice, “Sorry, the church is the exclusive kingdom of Jesus Christ. We will continue to worship him, no matter what. Like Job we say, ‘Though he slay me, yet will I trust him.’ ‘Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also; the body they may kill: God’s truth abideth still, his kingdom is forever.’”

Brothers and sisters, let us all endeavor with full purpose of heart to continue with the Lord of glory. The Lord Jesus Christ is the perfect Savior, perfectly suited to the sinner’s need. You cannot get to heaven without his perfect righteousness credited to your account. But if you call out to him in true faith, he will save you. He will never cast you out. Amen.