

LOVE THAT NEVER LETS GO

by Ray C. Stedman

During our studies through Acts, I am sure you have felt in your own heart, again and again, the impact of the faith, the prayers, and the power of Paul -- Christ's mightiest missionary apostle. Who would ever have dreamed that this mighty apostle would eventually fall into the devil's trap and disobey the Spirit of God? But that is exactly what we have seen happening to this great man as he neared Jerusalem but was forbidden by the Holy Spirit to go any further. And yet, out of the passion of his heart to be used of God to reach his people, Israel, and to bear witness to this unbelieving nation -- motivated by the highest of desires -- he nevertheless disobeyed what God clearly told him to do. He continued on and thus fell into great difficulty.

Of course, Paul would never have fallen for some of the traps that you and I stumble into! He was a man of like passions with us, and I am sure he felt the usual temptations to misbehave. He knew all the lure and attractiveness of immorality, of illicit sex, and felt a desire occasionally for some of the debauchery which was so widespread in his day, as it is in ours. He knew the feeling of the hunger after prestige, of the ambitious surge of pride. He recognized the attraction of the power of wealth. But he tells us that he kept his body under subjection, and buffeted it, lest, having preached to others, he himself should be cast away. He walked carefully in these areas, well aware of the power of temptation.

No, it took something much more subtle to reach the Apostle Paul. Probably the subtlest temptation of all is to be tempted to do what is right, to do what God wants done, but to do it on our own time schedule and not be willing to await the unfolding of God's program. And that is what finally trapped Paul.

This is what Abraham did -- do you remember? Abraham knew that God had promised him a son, and he waited quite a while for the promise to be fulfilled. But the delay grew too long for him and so he fell into the trap of trying to hurry God's program. He went in to his handmaid and a son was born to her but was never accepted as the fulfillment of God's promise, and Abraham suffered much heartache as a result. It is vital for all of us to learn that God has a time to accomplish what he wants done, as well as the will to have it done.

But now Paul, his heart so moved, so burdened for his people, is so desirous of reaching them, so intent upon bringing about that great day when Israel would be a nation exercising faith in Jesus Christ, knowing and accepting their Messiah, that he seeks to carry out this purpose apart from God's timing. The end result, as the Holy Spirit had warned him, is that he winds up as a prisoner in the hands of the Romans.

He tried to witness, as we saw last week, to an angry mob of Jews who would not hear him, who in fact were so intent upon destroying him that only the intervention of Roman soldiers saved his life. Now, at the end of Chapter 22, he is in the hands of a very puzzled Roman tribune who cannot figure out what to do with this amazing man. He doesn't know what to make of Paul, a civilized, cultured man with the ability to speak in several languages, a Roman citizen from the honored university city of Tarsus -- and yet every time he comes in contact with the Jews there is a bonfire, an explosion.

We can certainly appreciate the bewilderment of this tribune. Like putting steel to a grinder, every time he puts Paul in the presence of these Jews, the sparks begin to fly. He doesn't understand this strange reaction, but he is going to try again.

We see how Luke records this, beginning at Verse 30:

But on the morrow, desiring to know the real reason why the Jews accused him, he [the Roman tribune] unbound him, and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet, and he brought Paul down and set him before them. {Acts 22:30 RSV}

The tribune summons the high priests and the elders, the Sanhedrin, to the Roman Fortress of Antonia,

overlooking the temple courts. Then he brings Paul down, and sets him in their midst. And now Paul has an occasion to address the leaders of the nation, the representatives of the people. We get his introduction at the beginning of Chapter 23:

And Paul, looking intently at the council, said, "Brethren, I have lived before God in all good conscience up to this day." And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. Then Paul said to him, "God shall strike you, you white-washed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?" Those who stood by said, "Would you revile God's high priest?" And Paul said, "I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'" {Acts 23:1-5 RSV}

What a left-footed beginning! There is a noticeable kind of reckless audacity about the apostle in his introduction. He seems to be careless, almost, of the consequences of what he says -- like a man burning his bridges behind him. I rather suspect that he is aware, by now, that he has blundered into a very untenable situation and so he is trying to bull his way through, no matter what.

You will notice that he does not begin with his usual courtesy. The customary address to the Sanhedrin was a standardized form which began, "Rulers of Israel, and elders of the people..." Paul does not employ that, as he normally would, but instead puts himself right on a level with these rulers, doubtless because he once was one of them, and he addresses them simply with the familiar term, "Brethren."

Now that was an offense to these Jews. It was true that Paul once belonged to them. Perhaps he knew many of them personally. But it had been many years since he had ever sat with them. And he well knew, as they did, that a long-standing enmity had arisen between them. And now to have him come and rather brashly address them as his equals was offensive.

In addition to that, he implies that there is no possible ground of complaint against him. He says "I have lived in all good conscience before God up to this day." This was certainly true. Yet it seemed to imply that there was no reason for this meeting at all, that it was absurd, ridiculous, to have called this council together.

So, for this seeming impudence and impertinence, the high priest commands that he be slapped across the mouth. That was an unusually degrading form of insult to an Israelite. The law commanded that no Israelite should ever be struck in the face, and so this was certainly wrong. We Gentiles don't appreciate it very much either.

You notice that Paul's anger flashes out at this offense. He whips back this sharp, caustic retort: "God shall strike you, you whitewashed wall!" That was a typically Judaistic way of calling him a bloody hypocrite -- a very bare-faced hypocrite. The only white-washed walls in Israel were tombs. Jesus used this figure when he said to the Pharisees, "You are like tombs, white-washed on the outside, but within full of dead men's bones," {cf, Matt 23:27}. So the apostle is calling him a stinking hypocrite, and this is not lost upon the high priest. It certainly is not the most tactful way for a prisoner to address a judge.

It is very likely that Paul recognized who Ananias was, but not what his position was. Paul knew that he had a reputation as a glutton, a thief, and a stool-pigeon to the Romans. So Paul is offended by the fact that this notorious hypocrite would command him to be struck like this, contrary to the law. But what he did not know was that Ananias had recently been appointed high priest. The council probably had been summoned rather summarily and the priest had not had time to dress in his robes, so Paul did not recognize him as such.

The moment it is pointed out to him that Ananias is indeed the high priest, Paul is instantly repentant, for he recognizes that he is in the wrong. He apologizes, for the law says that the office deserves respect, even if the man does not. But it is too late; he has already blown his chance. We are accustomed to seeing Peter with his foot in his mouth, but it is rather unusual to find Paul in this condition. But here he is. He has insulted the ruler of the tribunal, making it impossible for himself to receive anything approaching a fair trial.

And yet, as we have traced through the entire circumstance leading up to this event, it is only what we might have expected. For we must bear in mind through this whole study that the apostle has gone to Jerusalem in direct disobedience of a command of the Holy Spirit. He is thereby a man who has put himself in the position of being mastered and controlled by the flesh, that principle of evil inherent in every one of us. Remember that the Apostle Paul himself is the one who tells us, in his letter to the Romans, that if we yield ourselves as servants to the flesh, we become the servant of that which we obey (cf, Rom 6:16).

In other words, if we give way to our insistence on our own stubborn will, as opposed to something God has made clear, no matter in what area, we have fallen victim to the flesh, and the flesh rules. Then, even when we want to walk in the Spirit in other areas and relationships of our life, we cannot. As a result, the manifestations of the flesh come out, unbidden and against our will. It always carries us farther than we want to go. It sits at the controls of our life and rules us, whether we like it or not. As Paul says in another place, we thereby give Satan an advantage over us {cf, 2 Cor 2:11}. And then, no matter what we try to do, it all comes out fleshly.

That is what is happening here. Though Paul is trying to walk in the Spirit he cannot, because the flesh is in command. There are certain unmistakable marks of fleshliness which you see right here in this account. One is a certain prideful disdain of others. Paul is usually the most sensitive of men to the requirement for normal courtesies. But here he sets that roughly aside as he addresses the Sanhedrin. Ordinarily, recognizing that their position was given by God, he would have used the courteous address their office demanded, as Jesus always did when he spoke to them. But now, with that little touch of disdain, in which he obviously thinks of himself as the equal of these men, he addresses them as brethren -- much to the offense of these officials who regard him as a prisoner standing there ready to be judged.

And there is his obvious testiness, his irritability and quickness of temper, the flash of anger with which he retorts. His reply is not that of a man in control of his emotions.

I well know from my own experience how this is a mark of the flesh in control. There are times when I am resistant to the will of God but try to walk in the Spirit without settling the matter. And I find myself quick of temper, impatient, and caustic in remark. I do not want to be, but I am. That is how Paul is here.

Then you notice that he relies now upon his own wits to get out of this dilemma. Instead of resting upon the wisdom of God to solve it for him he immediately falls back upon his own natural cleverness:

But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead I am on trial." And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. Then a great clamor arose; and some of the scribes of the Pharisees' party stood up and contended, "We find nothing wrong in this man. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him?" And when the dissension became violent, the tribune, afraid that Paul would be torn in pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him by force from among them and bring him into the barracks. {Acts 23:6-10 RSV}

I do not think that this attempt to divert the subject was a deliberate trick by the apostle. It was not some cunning stratagem that he employed to get himself off the hook by dividing the assembly. He didn't premeditate it or know what the results would be. He simply realized that he was in deeper than he intended and saw that his cause was lost. So, hoping for some support by the Pharisees, he cried out this way, identifying himself with them.

They were the party which represented at least some adherence to the letter and teaching of the Law. The Sadducees were what today we would call modernists, liberals. They denied the supernatural. They refused to recognize the existence of angels or spirits, and certainly not the resurrection from the dead, while the Pharisees were more fundamental in their understanding, recognizing that these things were realities. So they were ready to defend Paul on the ground that, in his conversion, it may have been that a spirit spoke to him, or an angel. They were not ready to acknowledge that it was indeed the Lord Jesus, but they were at least willing

to take his part and contend that perhaps something supernatural had occurred.

Paul is simply trying his best, using his wits to get out of this circumstance as best he can. But when the flesh is in control, things always work out wrongly. We try to take advantage of the situation as we see it. But we always get deeper and deeper into trouble. Paul succeeds only in polarizing the council so that his hopes for a testimony before the leaders of the nation fly out the window. He finds himself in the midst of another screaming squabble of Jews. They are yelling theological arguments at one another and threatening to tear Paul apart as they literally pull and tug at him like a bone of contention between these two quarreling parties.

And once again this puzzled Roman tribune must rescue Paul. Three times now he has pulled him out of the fire. He is getting to be an expert at it. But it completely baffles him. What is it about this man that every time he gets in the midst of the Jews it precipitates a terrible explosion?

And poor Paul! Out of friendship for him, I think Luke hides some of the painful details from us here, leaving them to our imaginations. But you can imagine how Paul must have felt. He had his chance, and he blew it! Now he sits in his cell -- utterly humiliated, dejected, defeated, deflated, disenchanted. All his dreams of testimony to the Jews are in ashes around his feet. His hopes that this was the time when his nation would turn back to God at last and recognize its Messiah, would enter that golden era of peace and prosperity when all God's desires and plans for this amazing people would be fulfilled as set forth by the prophets, are all dashed to the ground. Paul is simply utterly discouraged.

Now, that is always God's hour. God waits for a man to arrive at that place. This is the way he heals us when we move forward in the self-sufficiency of the flesh. He always brings us to this place. He lets it all run its course until, broken and defeated and deflated and discouraged and dejected, we sit utterly bankrupt of any resources in ourselves. That is God's hour.

Remember how Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount. He said, "Happy are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," {cf, Matt 5:3}. Happy are you when you arrive at utter bankruptcy, when you do not have any resources left, do not have anything to count on, when you have come to the end of yourself. You have spent it all and are ready to quit. You do not know what else to do.

I have been there, have you? I have said to God, "Lord, I quit! I'm not going to be a Christian anymore. I can't make it. I've tried. I've done everything I know how, and I just can't make it. I'm going to quit." I did not realize it at the time, but the Lord was standing there saying, "Great! That's just where I wanted you to come, just what I've been waiting for. Now it's my time."

That is what happens here. We have seen Paul before the council. Now we see him before the Lord:

The following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Take courage, for as you have testified about me at Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also at Rome." {Acts 23:11 RSV}

Literally, what the Lord Jesus says as he appears to him is, "Be of good cheer. Cheer up, Paul." That is certainly a revelation of the state of Paul's heart at this time. He is anything but of good cheer. He is defeated and discouraged, wallowing in an awful sense of shame and failure, but he is not abandoned. Isn't it wonderful that the Lord comes now to restore him to his ministry?

I am sure that, as in other places, Luke does not give us the full account of what transpired between Paul and his Lord on that night. But there is enough here that we can see what our Lord is after. He restores Paul to usefulness. He says to him, "As you have testified about me at Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also at Rome." Thus he promises Paul success in the desire of his heart which was second only to his desire to win his kinsmen, i.e., that he might bear witness for Christ at the heart of the empire, the capital of the Gentile world itself. You remember that Paul had announced that, after he went to Jerusalem, he must go to Rome. And his prayer as he wrote to the Roman Christians was that he might be allowed to come to them. The Lord Jesus now gives that back to him.

And yet the very form which he employs contains a hint of the limitation which Paul had made necessary when he disobeyed the Spirit of God. The Lord Jesus puts it this way: "As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also in Rome." In other words, the emphasis here is upon the manner in which this witness will go forth. "In the way that you bore witness to me in Jerusalem, in that same way you must bear witness in Rome."

And how had he testified in Jerusalem? It was as a prisoner -- chained, bound, limited. It needn't have been so. Had Paul obeyed, he would yet have been free to travel around the Roman world, preaching the gospel. But he disobeyed, so he was permitted to bear witness, but only as a prisoner.

This encounter with the Lord Jesus must have been a wonderful moment in the apostle's experience. The Lord restored him to spiritual health, as he often must do with us.

Have you ever been in this circumstance? Have you ever disobeyed God, knowing that you shouldn't have but wanting something so badly that you've gone ahead anyway? How wonderful to have the Lord ready to restore us. I have been there too, so I know how God can patiently, tenderly deal with us and bring us back to the place of yieldedness.

After this Paul is his usual self again -- and yet he is bound. Ahead of him, before he even came to Rome, lay two years of confinement in Caesarea. And after he arrived at Rome he was a prisoner there at least another three years. And yet, in this moment, the power of his ministry is given back to him. From here on, the things he says, and does, have that same wonderful infusion of the Spirit's power which makes unusual things happen. And from Rome he is to write some of his greatest letters -- letters filled with power, which are still changing the history of the world. The joy of the Lord is back in his heart. The glory returns to his ministry. The love of Jesus Christ is filling him and flooding him, empowering him and enriching him.

But ahead there are two lonely years of waiting in Caesarea, during which nothing is recorded of his ministry. I am sure he had a ministry during that time, but there is no account of it in the Scriptures. And then there are three more years ahead in Rome, as a prisoner of the Lord.

This limitation is what I have called in another message, "The Scars of Sin," (Catalog No. 279). Oftentimes I find that young Christians feel that there is no great problem involved when they deliberately do something wrong. They feel that they can simply confess and come back, and the Lord will forgive them and everything will be fine again. It is true; they can be forgiven. They can come back immediately. God does not hold it against them. He does not deprive them of their power or of the love and joy, the fellowship and glory of their Christian life. He never wants us to look back upon our past with guilt, in self-abnegation and shame. He wants us to accept the forgiving hand he offers us in the moment of restoration.

That is the glory of being a Christian. You can be forgiven. You do not have to wait. And you do not have to pay for anything. You do not have to go back and try to placate God in some way because of what you have done. You must make it right, as far as you can, with any people you have wronged -- but you can be forgiven and all the glory of your relationship with the Lord restored.

But there is one thing you cannot do: You cannot take away -- and God does not take away -- the natural results which follow evil. There are certain limitations and weakness that you can never escape from. They are there, and you must work within them from then on. But you need not have had them. And that is what Paul experiences here.

You can see this also in the story of Moses, for instance. Moses lost his temper in front of the children of Israel and spoke out hastily. As a result, God's cause was greatly damaged. And God said to him, "Because you have done this, you cannot enter the land," {cf, Num 20:8-12}. Moses was forgiven. His heart was made strong in the Lord again, and the power of his ministry was given back to him. But he was never permitted to enter the land. And even though Moses longed to do so, and asked God to take that restriction away, yet God never rescinded that limitation.

The same kind of thing happened to David. David committed the twin sins of murder and adultery. He was

awfully torn by this himself, and he even damaged the whole nation by this behavior. God came to him, and forgave him, and restored him. He allowed him to keep his throne, and gave back his power, his joy, his peace, and his love. But he said to him, "David, because you have done this, you will never again have peace in your household," {cf, 2 Sam 12:10}. And he never did. His family was fragmented from that moment and there was unending trouble in the palace from then on -- because of David's evil.

You see, there are scars that sin leaves with us. Paul's situation is one of them. His disobedience means that he must be a prisoner. And though he can exercise power and love and joy and peace again, with all the fullness he ever had, it will be within the limitation of being bound to a Roman soldier day and night for the next five years or more.

Luke resumes the account and shows us how God's hand now starts to work out his purposes for his restored apostle. A plot begins to develop:

When it was day, the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. There were more than forty who made this conspiracy. And they went to the chief priests and elders, and said, "We have strictly bound ourselves by an oath to taste no food till we have killed Paul. You therefore, along with the council, give notice now to the tribune to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case more exactly. And we are ready to kill him before he comes near." {Acts 23:12-15 RSV}

This certainly underscores the hopelessness of Paul's attempt to witness to these Jews. They are not only unwilling to listen, they are intent upon killing him. So they concoct a plot by which they can get Paul away from the protection of the Roman guardhouse and down into the streets of Jerusalem on his way to the high priest's palace. There, in the narrow, tortuous alleyways of that old city, they have a band of forty men who have vowed never to eat or drink until they have overpowered his guards and put him to death. It looks as if the plot might work. But in the next section you see God's protection of his apostle, first in private:

Now the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush; so he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. And Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Bring this young man to the tribune; for he has something to tell him." So he took him and brought him to the tribune and said, "Paul the prisoner called me and asked me to bring this young man to you, as he has something to say to you." The tribune took him by the hand, and going aside asked him privately, "What is that you have to tell me?" And he said, "The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more closely about him. But do not yield to them; for more than forty of their men lie in ambush for him, having bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they have killed him; and now they are ready, waiting for the promise from you." So the tribune dismissed the young man, charging him, "Tell no one that you have informed me of this." {Acts 23:16-22 RSV}

Notice that Paul knows nothing about this. There is nothing he can do about it. But that is all right; there is no need for him to be concerned. The Lord Jesus is watching over him and he has his man in the right place. It happens to be Paul's nephew and "by accident," we might say, he is right there. "Coincidentally" he is at the right spot to overhear the plans being laid, and so he comes to the tribune with the story. And then you see how the protection of God extends even into an open, public display:

Then he called two of the centurions and said, "At the third hour of the night get ready two hundred soldiers with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go as far as Caesarea. Also provide mounts for Paul to ride, and bring him safely to Felix the governor." {Acts 23:23-24 RSV}

Two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen -- that is four hundred seventy armed men to protect one Christian. That is a small army, and no band of Jewish zealots is going to attack any force like that. When the plot was laid God relied upon Paul's relative, his nephew, to help him. (If you will permit a very bad pun, he was "relatively" safe.) But now he is absolutely secure in the midst of this force as he goes down to the coastline.

Now notice the preparation for Paul's appearance before the governor, again part of the protection of the Lord, which is provided by the letter that the tribune wrote:

And he wrote a letter to this effect:

"Claudius Lysias to his Excellency the governor Felix, greeting. This man was seized by the Jews, and was about to be killed by them, when I came upon them with the soldiers and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman citizen. And desiring to know the charge on which they accused him, I brought him down to their council. I found that he was accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment. And when it was disclosed to me that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, ordering his accusers also to state before you what they have against him." {Acts 23:25-30 RSV}

It is obvious that this tribune wrote a letter that would make himself look as good as possible in the eyes of the governor. He handles the truth rather loosely. He implies that he rescued Paul because he learned that he was a Roman citizen. This would certainly look good on his record. But actually, as we know, he rescued him because he was in danger, and then learned that he was a citizen just before he was about to beat and scourge him unlawfully. But he did not put that detail in. This is a politician's letter.

But it is also virtually a letter of acquittal for any serious charge against the apostle. The garrison commander goes on record in black and white that as far as he can determine Paul has done nothing that is worthy of death or even imprisonment. And so he prepares the way for Paul to appear before the governor, laying the groundwork for careful handling of his case. This is evidence of that marvelous, amazing hand of God, which can work through non-Christians, non-believers, anyone, to accomplish his will and purpose without their even being aware that they are being used in any way. He simply works through the normal reactions and feelings of the persons involved.

Finally we have Paul's presentation before the governor:

So the soldiers, according to their instructions, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris. And on the morrow they returned to the barracks, leaving the horsemen to go on with him. When they came to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they presented Paul also before him. When he learned that he was from Cilicia he said, "I will hear you when your accusers arrive." And he commanded him to be guarded in Herod's praetorium. {Acts 23:31-35 RSV}

It was sixty miles from Jerusalem to Caesarea. They covered the first forty by a rapid forced march. Fortunately it was downhill almost all the way. But nevertheless it was a hard night's march to travel the forty miles to the fortress of Antipatris. The next morning the horsemen brought Paul the remaining twenty miles to the governor's palace in Caesarea.

Felix was a successor to Pilate as governor of Judea. He had been in office several years by now. We will see more of his character in our next study together. When he reads the letter he is obviously affected by it and is kindly disposed toward Paul. And all he asks, literally, is, "What kind of province does he come from?"

There were two kinds of provinces in the Roman Empire: There were those under the control of the Roman senate, and those which reported to the emperor -- the imperial provinces. He learns that Paul is from Cilicia which, like Judea, is an imperial province under the direct control of the emperor himself, responsible to him. And so the steps are being laid, as God is operating behind the scenes to pave the way, for bringing Paul and the emperor, Nero, face to face. God is going to accomplish it his way.

These are his wheels within wheels {cf, Ezek 1:15-21} by which he manipulates human history. It might not look as if God were involved at all, and yet all these incidents are occurring at his command, accomplishing his purposes. The striking thing from this part of the story is that God has no trouble handling history. That is no problem. He can work out his will through human events without any difficulty whatsoever. Even stubborn,

obstinate, resistant, rebellious people can be used by God to bring people to where he wants them and to do what he wants done.

But what gives him grief and heartache is when his own people resist his will and stubbornly determine to have something which God has said it is not time for yet. They are the ones who halt and limit the program of God. As long as the hearts of his people are right, before him, he has no difficulty. It is only when, because of an overwhelming desire for our own way, we step out of his purposes that we find ourselves in conflict with the movement of history and, like the apostle, suffer hurt and limitation as a result.

And, you know, since I have been studying this through, I have to tell you that every day I must say to myself, "Look, Stedman, you can fall, too. You can miss God's will. You can get so intent on something that you think is right, and press and push for it so hard, that you too can miss the will of God." My heart's cry is that God will keep me from that.

And I hope that you are praying that way, too. Be alert, be sensitive to the warning of the Holy Spirit, so that you may always walk in his purposes.

Prayer:

Father, we are sobered by this sight of the great apostle who, by the hunger of his heart, and the desire to do what was perfectly right, nevertheless was deluded and found himself acting in ways that he did not want to act, found himself in the grip of the flesh within, which made him testy and caustic and self-centered. And, Lord, we fall in this way so many times. Thank you for your restoring love, for the fact that you have never abandoned us, that you keep us and bring us back. We may bear upon our lives the scars of our sin, but you give us back our ministry and our power and our joy. We can only give thanks, in Jesus name, Amen.

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