

THE BENDS IN GOD'S ROADS!  
(Acts 13:29-30)

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One of the little-big words of the Bible is the conjunction, "but." Dr. Strong, in his concordance, mentions nearly four thousand places where it can be found. The word signifies a change of direction, and represents a possibility after a conclusion. A matter may be considered finalized, and then someone either says or writes "but." It represents a bend in a highway where new vistas of beauty come into view. Paul and other writers recognized this fact, and added another word "but God!" This statement frequently expresses an intervention of the grace of God, when seemingly impossible things become possible.

Stephen, the first martyr of the church, provided a glorious example of this fact. Addressing the religious leaders of his generation, he referred to the story of Joseph, and said: "And the patriarchs moved with envy, sold Joseph into Egypt: but God was with him. And delivered him out of all his afflictions.. (Acts 7:9-10). An apparent tragedy was turned into a glorious triumph, for Jehovah overruled in the affairs of nations, and provided help which otherwise would have been denied. Luke also wrote: "And he (the rich man) said... I will pull down my barns, and build greater, and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?" (Luke 12:18-20). At least five examples can be found which suggest the apostle Paul used this method to emphasize truth.

The "But God" of Objection

"But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel" (Acts 9:15). Throughout his ministry, Paul never ceased to be amazed at the miraculous way in which he had been brought to Christ. A persecutor had become a preacher, a murderer had been transformed into a minister.

The key to the miracle of grace was the intervening mercy of

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God when Ananias was reluctant to obey the commandment of the Lord. The evil reputation of Saul of Tarsus had terrorized the entire church and his deadly mission to apprehend the saints in Damascus filled every believer with dread. When Ananias was told to visit the notorious persecutor, he replied: "Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem: And here he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call upon thy name" (Acts 9:13-14).

Paul understood the fear which gripped the soul of Ananias, but if the saint remained in isolation, irreparable harm would have been done. "But God said unto him . . ." The Lord's intervention supplied the necessary courage, and proceeding on his way, Ananias met the persecutor and said: "Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus . . . hath sent me . . ." (Acts 9:17). All Christians agree that without the grace of God, few, if any, would ever have met the Savior.

The "But God" of Opportunity

The early church was established in a world which professed to be exceedingly wise. Grecian culture had penetrated into all countries, and at Athens, philosophers gathered daily on Mars Hill to hear new doctrines. The Jews valued the writings of their ancestors, and claimed their knowledge superseded that of

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all nations. The Romans possessed many skills, and evidence of their prowess can still be seen throughout Europe. They worshiped many gods; the Jews worshiped Jehovah, and the Greeks had so many idols they were fearful of having forgotten one (Acts 17:23).

Paul's message seemed ludicrous; many of his scholarly listeners scoffed when he claimed a Carpenter was the Creator of the world. They were critical when he claimed the blood of a malefactor could wash away guilt. Yet, when Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthian church, he made an important announcement. "But we speak the wisdom of God... Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for

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them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit... Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God" (I Cor. 2:7-12). Paul claimed his doctrines were of more importance than the culture, education and traditions taught throughout his world. God had revealed eternal truth, which enabled foolish people to become extremely wise.

#### The "But God" of Omnipotence

Paul was the greatest preacher in the early church, and it is thought-provoking to discover his theme was always the death and resurrection of Christ. He never deviated from his methods of instruction. If the actions of men could be compared with a highway, then it was evident the road led to nowhere until God performed a miracle. Paul said: "And though they found no cause of death in him (Jesus), yet desired they Pilate that he should be slain. And when they had fulfilled all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree, and laid him in a sepulchre. At that precise moment in time, the faith of the disciples had been shattered; their work was in jeopardy; their future bleak. Plans for an earthly kingdom of God were seemingly destroyed." "But God raised Christ from the dead . . . (Acts 13:28-30). When men believed the Carpenter would never again trouble the nation, the power of the Almighty was manifested, and Jesus was raised from the dead. Never more to die. Paul insisted this was true, and his ministry emphasized the Savior was alive.

#### The "But God" of Outreach

The city of Ephesus was one of the most vile cities in the world. It was the headquarters for demon worship and idolatry, and even today in the remains of that once illustrious city, is an announcement engraved in stone, advertising that prostitution was free within the temple precincts. The missionary had entered that cesspool of iniquity to preach the gospel, and his work had been very successful. A church was established, and Paul was its pastor for a considerable length of time (Acts

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19:10). That assembly became one of the greatest of all churches, but Paul never permitted the members to forget whence they had come.

He wrote: ". . . in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience:

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Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.. ." It was impossible to misunderstand the apostle's message; his words were challenging and destroyed any pride which readers had in their former associations. Paul insisted they were exceptionally guilty. "But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved)" (Eph. 2:2-5). The unconverted people of Ephesus had walked along a road which went deeper into darkness, but suddenly, there had been a bend in the highway, and as the converts proceeded, they saw a sunrise, and a hill upon which stood a cross.

The "But God" of Overcoming

When he wrote to the Philippians, Paul said: "But I trust in the Lord that I also myself shall come shortly. Yet I supposed it necessary to send Epaphroditus, my brother, and companion in labour, and fellow-soldier, but your messenger, and he that ministered to my wants. For he longed after you all, and was full of heaviness, because ye had heard that he had been sick. For indeed he was sick nigh unto death: But God had mercy on him; and not on him only, but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. I sent him therefore the more carefully.. (Phil. 2:24-28).

It is refreshing to read that although many sick people were healed during Paul's ministry, at other times, for reasons unknown, he was unable to heal his dearest friends. It is misleading and erroneous to teach all sickness is the result of sin. Sometimes the Lord permits things to happen to increase our spiritual growth. It had been necessary to leave Trophimus at

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Miletum where he had become gravely ill (2 Tim. 4:20). The apostle recognized it would be unwise to permit the sick member of his party to leave the island, and the brother was probably left in the care of a local Christian.

A similar event happened with Epaphroditus, the courier of the Philippian church. He had become gravely ill and apparently the intercession of Paul had been of no avail. The news of this sickness reached Philippi and caused great concern among the church members. It may therefore be assumed the illness had lasted a considerable time. Paul was worried; it appeared his friend was about to die. "But God had mercy on him." That simple statement is a window through which much may be seen. It is better to pray than to pout; wiser to be grateful than to grumble. Perhaps those words were written to remind all Christians that God knows about our problems, and in His own time will intervene on our behalf.

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