

## Doing Our Part • Acts 9-11

The fanatics of the al-Qaeda network have a guidebook for terrorism. It is the 11-volume Arabic language *Encyclopedia of Jihad*. The 6000 pages of print are prefaced by lavish praise for Osama bin Laden. It is also available on CD-ROM. This huge encyclopedia details everything from the basics of traditional car bombings to chemical and biological warfare and high tech cyber terrorism. According to TIME magazine, the objective of the instructions is to “traumatize civilian populations in order to put governments under unprecedented, unsustainable pressure capable of bringing them down.”

The leaders of Al-Qaeda distinguish between two types of terrorists. Type 1 is the “classic” terrorist who is described as psychologically and intellectually weak. This is the person who is assigned car bombings, hijackings and kidnappings. The other, stronger profile is of those terrorists who are invited to become part of “God’s Brigade”. They are specially trained in Afghanistan and are assigned to suicide attacks and bioterrorism. For those committed to the cause of Jihad there is something for everyone to do. Each does his part.

As Christians, we have a very different approach. We are a people of love, not of hate. Our book is the Bible, not the *Encyclopedia of Jihad*. Our praise goes to Jesus Christ, not to Osama bin Laden. But there is one thing that we do have in common, and that is that we, too, believe that each one of us must do our part for our cause. Jesus’ final instructions to us before he returned to heaven are found in Acts 1:8: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

What do witnesses do? We do our part wherever we can. Let me share with you some examples from both real life and from literature.

On the island of Madagascar young Christian women were given a choice between sacrificing their virginity and sacrificing their lives. In surprising numbers they were martyred by being thrown off high cliffs onto the rocks and the sea surf below.

In John Grisham’s novel, *The Testament*, a multi-billionaire leaves his entire estate to a single missionary woman in Brazil named Rachel Lane. She lives

alone in a distant and primitive part of Brazil’s Pantanal region. It takes an attorney a great deal of effort to go to South America and track her down in this obscure place where no other tourist would ever go. When he finally finds her and tells her that she has received the richest inheritance in all of American history she immediately and spontaneously says, “No.” She chooses to stay there in primitive conditions as a representative of Jesus Christ.

Last year in Brisbane, Australia, I sat at the breakfast table with a student pastor and his wife. He told me about one of his parishioners who was riding his bicycle home from work one evening down a residential street when a car rapidly drove out of a driveway and hit him. Then the driver backed up and rode over the bike before getting out of the car to attack the young man. Although he was injured, he ran as hard and as fast as he could to escape his attacker.

It turned out that the attacker had been waiting and the assault was intentional. However, it was a case of mistaken identity. He thought he was running into his neighbor with whom he had a conflict. The young man on the bike asked his pastor to go with him to his assailant’s house the next week to tell him that he forgave him and wasn’t going to press charges.

What do the Madagascar virgins, the missionary in Brazil and the man in Brisbane all have in common? They are all Christians doing their part, all witnesses for Jesus Christ.

You may argue that they made wrong choices. Those young women should have valued life more than anything else. What good could they do when

they were dead? The missionary should have taken her billions. She could have underwritten 10,000 missionaries. The young Australian man should have pressed charges to stop the assailant from assaulting again. Perhaps, but we weren’t there. These were

not and are not our choices to make. But we do have our own choices and the question is whether we will choose to do our part for Jesus Christ in our places in our generation.

Listen again to Jesus’ farewell words from Acts 1:8: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusa-

*...it is often the calamities of life that cause us to do the things we would not otherwise have done.*

lem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Jesus came from heaven for them. He died on the cross for them. He rose from the dead for them. He gave to them the power of God through the Holy Spirit. And then he asked them to do one thing—to tell other people. Most didn’t do it. They just went on with life in Jerusalem pretty much as life had always been.

Then came a day of great calamity for the Christians. One of their most promising young leaders, Stephen, was murdered by an angry mob. On the day of his death, persecution spread all over the city of Jerusalem and the Christians were forced out. It was a terrible day for them. They lost their homes and their families and their jobs. It’s interesting, but in an irony of numbers, Acts 1:8 says that they were to be witnesses to Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth and Acts 8:1 says that they finally did it when calamity struck and they were forced out of their homes to the places where God had asked them to go in the first place.

There is a point here that we must not miss. The point is that it is often the calamities of life that cause us to do the things we would not otherwise have done. For the Jerusalem Christians it was a day when persecution began. For us it may be the day that terrorism struck America. This is not to say that something terribly bad is actually wonderfully good. It is to say that something terribly bad can lead us to do that which is wonderfully good.

I believe that much has changed since September 11, 2001. There is a spiritual openness in America did not exist on September 10<sup>th</sup>. There is a fresh new concern for the rest of the world. There is a growing awareness of the differences between Christianity and Islam. There is a great new opportunity for us to do our part in reaching our generation for Jesus Christ.

The New Testament book of Acts is the history of what those first Christians did and what happened in the church of Jesus Christ. Following the calamity of persecution in Acts 8 there are three stories I would like to share with you.

Story Number One is about a key leader of the persecution against Christians. His name was Saul. In Acts 9:1-2 we read:

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogue in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them

as prisoners to Jerusalem.

Saul was “Christian Enemy Number One”. He hated Christians. He persecuted Christians. He arrested Christians. And he murdered Christians. To my knowledge, there is not a single hint anywhere in the New Testament or anywhere in first century history that any Christians ever prayed that Saul would become a Christian. That was unimaginable to them.

To those Christians, Saul was the Osama bin Laden of his generation. Not in anyone’s wildest imagination would he ever become a follower of Jesus and become a leader of the Christian church. What do you consider to be the odds that sometime within the next year Osama bin Laden will become a Christian? It is so implausible that none of us would ever even think to pray for such a thing to happen.

Then Saul met Jesus. It was a dramatic and traumatic event. Saul was walking down the highway to Damascus and this bright light flashed around him and a voice spoke out loud to him. Jesus talked directly to him and Saul immediately believed and was converted.

It was amazing! Not only did Saul become a Christian, but he also became a missionary. Or at least he wanted to become a missionary, but most Christians didn’t believe him. Saul believed in Jesus, but the Christians didn’t believe Saul. It was too far-fetched. It seemed like a trick. It was more than they could imagine or accept. But fortunately, there were a few who believed that God could perform this great a miracle, and they welcomed Saul.

There is a powerful line in Acts 9:15 of this story. It’s a quote from Jesus himself saying, “This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.” God had chosen him. God changed his name from Saul to Paul. The murderer became a missionary. He took the gospel out of Asia into Europe. He became the author of many of the books of the New Testament. Our capitol city in Minnesota is even named after him.

What does all this tell us? It tells me that God transforms and uses people with a past. God overcomes criminal records and other negative “baggage”. God uses some of the most unlikely people in some of the most magnificent ways!

And therein is encouragement for us all that God can use us! What do you think God would like to do with your life? Let’s not worry about what you have done; let’s think about what you could do. Let’s not focus on what you have been; let’s concentrate on what you could be. Maybe you have thought of yourself as an unlikely candidate to make a difference for Jesus

Christ because you have a criminal record, because you are too old, because you have too many debts, because you have a weak education, because you have a medical history, because . . . please stop! Simply ask God what he wants to do with you. What is your part for Jesus Christ?

Story Number Two comes from the other side of the persecution. It is the story of Peter. Peter belonged to an underground political movement. They called themselves “Zealots”; today we would call them terrorists. Zealots were fanatics. Zealots were profoundly religious Jews. They were fundamentalists. Zealots were fiercely anti-Gentile. They were especially opposed to Romans in general and Roman soldiers in particular. Every Zealot carried a dagger and swore to kill any Roman at every opportunity. They committed that if they came across a Roman soldier who was wounded along the side of the highway they would not assist him. And if ever they came across a Gentile woman who was in childbirth, they would not help her in any way in the hope that she would die and that would be two less Gentiles in the world. They were a terrorist movement that was determined to rid the Holy Land of the pagans who had infiltrated and taken over their territory. But because they didn’t have an army to fight a traditional war, the Zealots went underground. They used terrorist tactics in order to accomplish their purposes. And all of this is extremely well documented in the history of the first century era in the land of Palestine.

Peter was a Zealot, and in Acts 10 God told this Zealot to go to a Roman officer named Cornelius. Peter was flabbergasted. He was cautious. This was contrary to everything he had ever believed. So he ignored what God said. God had to tell him three times before he got the message. When he reluctantly obeyed, he went to the home of Cornelius and asked, “Yeah, what do you want?” He wasn’t going to volunteer any information at all. Peter didn’t want to be there. He didn’t like what Romans looked like, the way they ate, their lifestyle, their language, politics or anything else. It was a very difficult thing for him to enter the home of a Roman and speak to a Roman officer. But he did it because Jesus sent him.

And God did an amazing miracle. Cornelius and everyone in his house became believers in Jesus Christ. They were powerfully converted and baptized and Peter faced this huge dilemma. Suddenly he had to

choose between hating them as Roman enemies and loving them as fellow Christians. He made a courageous decision. He decided to love them even though they looked the same as before, ate food he considered unclean and did not fit his model of what a Christian was supposed to be like.

When Peter went home to the Jerusalem church he was severely criticized for his association with the Romans. Peter courageously spoke in defense of the Roman believers. He became their advocate. He explained that God loved all people. He changed his views.

It is a hard choice to love those against whom we have personal prejudice. I wondered countless times what would be the attitude of American Christians

toward Muslims in the wake of what happened on September 11. I wondered if we would get caught up in prejudice and bigotry and hatred. And I specifically wondered if churches across America would begin to cut back on sending and supporting missionaries to reach Muslims with the love of

Jesus Christ. I don’t see that. I hope we will be biblical. I hope we will be like Peter. I hope we will move from caution and prejudice to courage and proclamation. I hope we will do our part to courageously love Muslims and others in the name of Jesus Christ.

Story Number Three is not about an individual; it’s about a church. It’s about the church of Antioch. We find this story in Acts 11:19-21:

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

You may think this is just a routine line from history, but actually it was quite amazing. These Christians were persecuted and scattered. They lost their homes, their jobs, their families and their security. They lost most of the things we consider valuable and important. You would think that in the midst of that they would draw inward and would be reluctant to be faithful to Jesus Christ. And you would certainly think that they would be reluctant to try to persuade anybody else to become a Christian. But instead they not

***God uses some of the most unlikely people in some of the most magnificent ways!***

only told the message of Jesus where they were forced to go, but they made a special effort to reach out to new areas and new people in Antioch—to Gentiles who spoke Greek. They sought to share Jesus Christ with people in a different place with a different language, culture and ethnicity.

It was amazing what they did. And I'll tell you why I think it's so amazing. In my way of thinking, I'll get around to telling people about Jesus when everything else in my life is perfect. It's not a good time to give when the economy is down and I'm worried about money. It's not a good place to witness when I'm with people who are different. It's too hard to evangelize when I'm not feeling well. It's not a good time to represent Jesus when life is all messed up. Not now. Not here. Not me.

But these first century Christians used the problems of their time as an opportunity to do their part for Jesus Christ. And do you know what happened as a result of what they did? It's one of the great lines in the New Testament and it's found in Acts 11:26: "The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch." In their toughest times they did their part and as a result came the name "Christian" which we still use today.

Of course, this is the twenty-first century, not the first century. But the call to Christians is still the same call. Jesus still says, "You will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth." It is the call for each of us to do our part.

Are you willing to do your part to win our world to Jesus Christ? I don't know what your part is. Maybe you don't know yet what your part is. But are you *willing* to do your part?

Are you willing to become a missionary? If you are choosing a career and thinking about teaching or medicine or business will you consider full-time missionary service? Or are you willing for your son or daughter to become a missionary? There are young adults being called by God to become missionaries who are being blocked by their parents.

Or are you willing to give your part? It may be millions and it may be tens, but are you willing to do your part for Jesus' sake? How much money did you make in the last year? How much of that money went specifically to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ? Do you think that is your fair share? What is your part?

Is your part prayer? Are you willing to pray? I've had missionaries tell me that the main reason for their success overseas is the daily prayers of God's people. Who are you praying for? Which country? Which people? Which missionary? Are you willing to pray your part?

Are you willing to do your part where you work and live? Who are those with whom you could share the gospel? Maybe God wants you to simply serve them in the name of Jesus Christ. Maybe he wants you to invite them to church. They're waiting for you to do your part.

I have often wondered what the Bible would say if it were being written about here and now and us rather than then and there and them. I would love for our Bible to say that we did our part. Even in hard times. Even in economic recession. Even under terrorist attack. We gave. We sent. We went. We prayed. We did our part.

Will you do your part for Jesus?

Father, tell us what you want us to do. Tell us what our part should be. And Lord, because you are our Lord, we will do what you ask us to do. Tell us our part, and we'll do it for Jesus' sake. Amen.

*Faith Matters*® is the Broadcast Ministry of  
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church  
6630 Shady Oak Road  
Eden Prairie MN 55344  
952-944-6300  
[www.wooddale.org](http://www.wooddale.org)  
©Leith Anderson